

Introduction

- Military-affiliated students (active-duty, veterans, spouses, dependents) remain an understudied population in higher education (Johnson & Appel, 2020).
- Navigating unanticipated military-related disruptions alongside fieldwork and capstone requirements presents challenges that are distinct from those of their civilian peers.
- Studies have shown that military-affiliated students:
 - Have higher non-traditional student stressors (Borsari et al., 2017)
 - Increased financial, family, and mobility-related demands (Dudley-Miller & Radel, 2020)
 - Lower institutional support due to poor understanding of military culture (Barry et al., 2014)
- Within the rigorous demands of an Occupational Therapy Doctoral (OTD) program, the unique circumstances of military-affiliated students require program faculty to have a deeper understanding to provide tailored support to ensure student success.
- **There is a need for enhanced education for program faculty:**
 - To support proactive communication between students and faculty
 - To advocate for flexible Fieldwork and Capstone opportunities
 - To collect data for quality improvement of OTD programs.



Veteran and military spouse during a synchronous zoom class with a sick toddler.

Project Description

- This project focused on developing educational materials and informational resources to enhance capstone educators' understanding of military-affiliated students and the unique demands of military life.
- My community partner, the Hawai'i Pacific University Occupational Therapy Doctoral (OTD) program, offers an accelerated hybrid curriculum that condenses the traditional three-year degree into a two-year format.
- This structure provides students with greater flexibility to balance personal responsibilities and academic demands while allowing participation without geographical limitations.
- Hawai'i's large Pacific military presence and the high proportion of military spouse learners make this community particularly relevant to the project.
- The OTD program's mission naturally supports the needs of military-affiliated students, making hybrid education an especially strong fit.
- This highlights the importance of understanding this unique population and providing responsive support throughout their doctoral training—through **Aloha** (culturally responsive teaching), **Kuleana** (shared responsibility for success), **Pono** (ethical and equitable access to fieldwork and capstones), **Kokua** (support during life transitions, deployments, and caregiving), and **Laulima** (collaboration with DoD, VA, and civilian partners).

References



Purpose/Aims

To identify, describe, and improve the experiences of military-affiliated students enrolled in the hybrid HPU OTD program, with a focus on academic accessibility and fieldwork/capstone continuity, via increasing the knowledge and toolkit of program coordinators.

Primary Purpose of this Capstone Experience and Project:

1. To assess the educational experiences and unmet needs of military-affiliated students.
2. To evaluate barriers to fieldwork and capstone placement access for military-affiliated students.
3. To develop military-inclusive recommendations for the HPU OTD curriculum and clinical education planning.
4. To educate HPU's OTD program faculty and capstone/fieldwork coordinators on the unique experiences of military-affiliated student.
5. To produce an evidence-informed checklist, toolkit, or institutional guide.

Results/Outcomes

4 (non-HPU) military-connected learners/dependents were interviewed with half being full time students and half previously enrolled in higher education.

Themes identified from interviews:

Flexibility in Scheduling

Desire for adjustable fieldwork and capstone schedules

Flexible Clinical Site Options

Preference for a variety of placement locations

Need for the ability to select or switch sites based on military obligations and logistical constraints

“Consideration for pcs and flexible schedules for childcare needs” – Participant 1

“Flexibility in sites and times offered” – Participant 2

Key insights from the military spouse higher education survey and review of military affiliated student research:

- PCS-related interruptions
- Difficulty transferring credits
- Childcare responsibilities
- Faculty awareness/training (Dudley-Miller & Radel, 2020)
- Proactive communication

Capstone data can inform future study of the needs of military-affiliated students

Educator awareness and cultural understanding of military-affiliated learners

Help students prepare for program demands while accounting for military lifestyle

Capstone Project Deliverables

- Military-Dependent Capstone Experience Assessment (MD-CEA)
- Faculty Onboarding Presentation
- Military-Affiliated OTD Student Needs Checklist
- Informational Guide for Military Installation Access
- Military-Affiliated Student Intake Questionnaire

Support fieldwork and capstone placement logistics

Identify needs, strengths, and potential barriers early in program

Explore more accessible and supportive learning environments

Discussion

The HPU's hybrid OTD program can emerge as an innovator in educational models for military-connected learners.

- Military-affiliated students require predictable communication, flexible scheduling, and relocation-resilient clinical placements.
- Early planning, specialized advising, and military-specific education for educators can enhance learning.
- This project fills an educational gap and provides an adjustable model for supporting military-connected learners in hybrid health-professional programs.

Limitations: Small sample size limits, generalizability to all hybrid OT programs; bias may be present in self-reported interview data.

Future Opportunities

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| Explore additional ways to provide flexible Fieldwork and Capstone telehealth opportunities. | Increase formalized DoD/VA partnerships at multiple sites in the U.S. |
| Create a comprehensive military student support handbook for military-affiliated students. | Educate faculty about military cultural competence. |
| Increase advocacy and expansion of OT within the military community in Hawai'i. | Advocate for enhanced hybrid program designs outside of HPU to build clinical placement pipelines for military-affiliated students. |

Personal Talk Story

