

Keeping College Within Reach: Supporting Higher Education Opportunities for America's Servicemembers and Veterans

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Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Hinojosa, and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate having the opportunity to appear today to discuss programs that assist our nation's servicemembers and veterans in obtaining a higher education. I am Art Kirk, president of Saint Leo University.

Saint Leo University is an independent Catholic university founded in 1889. The University offers over 40 undergraduate and graduate degree programs on its residential campus in Florida, and to adult students on 16 military bases in Florida, Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Texas, California, and Georgia; to students in all states and overseas through our center for online learning; on 15 Florida community college campuses; and at several other locations near military bases.

Saint Leo is ranked among the nation's most military-friendly institutions by *G.I. Jobs* and *Military Advanced Education* magazines. It is one of only 10 institutions nationwide to be approved by the U.S. Coast Guard for participation in its new Maritime Law Enforcement College Partnership Program. But we understand that we must be more than just military and veteran friendly, we must be military and veteran supportive.

We are currently in a year-long celebration of 40 years of serving those who serve. The University began offering full degree programs on military bases in 1973, and became the first college or university in the nation to grant the bachelor's degree on an Air Force base. We started with 176 students at the Avon Park Bombing Range and 13 at MacDill Air Force Base.

This was at the height of the Vietnam War. At the time, many members of the armed forces found it difficult to complete their education while on active duty. Some were stationed in conflict zones. Some served at military installations in isolated areas. Many performed shift work and could not attend regular daytime classes. Often servicemembers were transferred before they could complete their degree programs. My University's mission, to provide opportunities for people of good character regardless of their religion, compelled us to respond to these needs.

We were an early adopter, in 1997, of online offerings for the military. In efforts designed to fit the mobile lifestyle of military personnel worldwide, we partner with:

- GoArmyEd
- eArmyU
- Navy College Program Distance Learning Partnership (CPDLP)
- The Air Force Academic Institution (AI) Portal
- Air University Associate to Baccalaureate Cooperative Program
- The Marine Corps Lifelong Learning Program's Academic Explorer (AeX)
- Servicemembers' Opportunity Colleges program and its Degree Networking System

Saint Leo also offers our students credit for prior learning experiences and maintains a partnership with University of South Florida that allows University Campus students to participate in Air Force and Army ROTC programs at USF. ROTC provides the tools, training and experiences for students to become officers in the United State military, while earning money toward their college education. This year seven Saint Leo ROTC candidates are from the Army Green to Gold program for veteran non-commission officers who can choose any ROTC program to complete their BA degree and receive their commission.

Saint Leo University enrolled 5,697 veterans during the past academic year, 4,477 (78.5%) of whom were Chapter 33 or Post-9/11 veterans. The University also educated 4,886 active duty military and reservists during the course of the last academic year. All told, this equals nearly 39% of the students who took at least one course with us during the year.

The University is proud of its military students and is committed to providing them with outstanding academic programs and personal attention in small classes. I might add that these are qualities that characterize the member institutions of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, which I am also representing today. With more than 1,000 members nationwide, NAICU reflects the diversity of private, non-profit higher education in the United States. Over half of our nation's private, non-profit colleges have fewer than 5,000 students, and a quarter have fewer than 2,000. Many veterans choose to attend these smaller institutions.

To further support our military and veterans mission, the Saint Leo University Office of Veteran Student Services opened in 2011. The Office works collaboratively with all university departments and community organizations to best meet the needs of our student veterans in order to ensure them every opportunity to accomplish individual goals.

This office is headed up by Jose Coll, who came to the United States as a young boy when his parents fled Cuba. The first American Coll encountered in Key West was a Marine, a meeting that triggered his own desire to join the Marine Corps. Coll served with the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company at Camp Pendleton where he supervised combat parachuting operations and training. Due to the positive experience and mentorship he received at Saint Leo, Coll decided to enter academia. Commenting on the role that all departments at Saint Leo University have played in supporting veteran education, Coll noted "It takes the entire university to do what we do so well."

Our efforts to create a proactive "veteran-supportive environment" at Saint Leo include relevant training for faculty, staff, and students. In particular, our 52 veteran certifying officials (VCOs) (up from 20 a few years ago), academic advisors, many faculty and staff receive extensive training in identifying and addressing issues that veterans are likely to face in pursuing their education. These training programs take them through a series of "what-if" scenarios to assure

that our staff know where students can be referred to to receive the support they need—both on- and off-campus. Our faculty and staff are also trained to identify signs of post-traumatic stress and how to respond to it on the spot.

This training is conducted by our Office of Veteran Student Services, which also offers training in nearby public schools and to our education majors and faculty in dealing with the particular issues faced by children of veterans. Likewise, the office conducts training sessions with law enforcement agencies and criminal justice students and faculty regarding issues they may encounter with veterans in their communities.

We believe that social support is also critical and continue to look for new ways for veteran students to connect on campus and at our education centers. We recognize the critical role that faculty and staff veterans can play in mentoring veteran students and have encouraged these interactions. We also look for ways to educate the Saint Leo University community about military culture and veterans' issues. The sense of community that these efforts build on campus benefits our entire student body—veterans and non-veterans alike.

There are a number of things we're doing that offer important academic support. For example, we provide all our military and veterans students with what I think of as a "road map to graduation." Essentially, at the outset, we determine what credits the student is already bringing to college and then develop a clear sequence of courses towards the degree of their choosing. This plan is updated each term so that the student clearly understands what is needed to graduate.

Saint Leo also has a retention alert system so that advisors can take a closer look when a student misses classes or receives failing grades and see that appropriate remediation is provided.

This is by no means a one-way street. Our veteran students, who now comprise just under 5% of our campus residential students, have had a tremendously positive influence on campus.

In addition, veterans and servicemembers attending Saint Leo receive critical financial support from a variety of sources—including the financial aid programs under the jurisdiction of this committee as well as programs supported by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs (VA). Those of us involved with military and veterans' education are grateful for the commitment and support the federal government has provided in offering opportunities for those who serve our nation.

We work to do our share as well, through participation in the Yellow Ribbon program and support for private scholarships. At Saint Leo, we have also initiated a two-step certification process for VA benefits that has made the process much quicker and more manageable for the veteran. It does involve extra work on the part of our staff, but the improved help to veterans is well worth the investment.

All of this support results in success. The University awarded 311 associate degrees, 884 bachelors, and 290 graduate degrees to veterans last year (1,485 total: more than double than two years ago). Our veterans maintained a grade point average of 3.31 in their undergraduate studies.

At the center of our campus, stands a 30 foot bronze sculpture by artist Dexter Benedict of a soldier, sailor, airman, marine and guardsmen upholding lady liberty as a tribute to all of our military and veteran students and graduates and a daily reminder to all of us on campus that their service allow us the freedom to live, learn and teach in peace and security. We take great pride in serving those who serve.
