

## Troops to Teachers: An Alternative Teacher Resource by Dr. Charles Tita

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The problem of acute teacher shortages in our public schools is worsening, even as educational and political leaders work assiduously to seek solutions for this crippling crisis. And, because high schools, especially those in high-poverty areas, increasingly graduate students who cannot read and write on the grade level, college and university leaders find themselves directly at the epicenter of this dilemma. In order to guarantee a steady stream of well-prepared students from secondary schools, colleges and universities are called upon, more than ever before, to fulfill the professional obligation of meeting the demand of public schools for well-prepared teachers. Therefore, colleges and universities have to work overtime to re-examine and revamp teacher education curricula, in concise realignment with emerging contemporary challenges. Historically, four-year colleges and universities have relied heavily on traditional methods of training students formally in teacher education departments. The prevailing teacher shortage cannot be remedied by relying solely on traditional sources; alternative sources must be sought; Troops to Teachers is one such alternative.

“Troops to Teachers” is a non-traditional, feeder source that can help alleviate teacher shortages, especially in high poverty areas, where the problem is most egregious, and where young teacher graduates are less willing or prepared to serve. Soldiers are trained to serve in environments that require extraordinary tenacity and will, and, at the end of their military service, they tend to do well, as teachers, in these kinds of crisis areas. That is precisely why the Department of Education and the Department of Defense came up with the joint construct, “troops to teachers,” of re-training exiting soldiers to become teachers. What is “Troops to Teachers?” It is a joint program of the Department of Education and the Department of Defense, established in 1994 to aid abate the problem of teacher shortages. Under this program, the Department of Defense provides money to former soldiers, enabling them to train and gain teacher licensure and to begin new careers as public school teachers (<http://www.proudtoserveagain.com/>).

To qualify for Troops to Teachers funding, the candidate must hold a baccalaureate or advanced degree. Here is how the funding piece works: the Department of Education provides money to the Department of Defense, and the money is used to fund Troops to Teachers through the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES). DANTES then works to provide the necessary support structure as well as stipends (up to \$5000) that the students need to prepare for teacher education licensure. In situations when the students make a commitment to teach in high-poverty schools, DANTES can provide bonuses up to \$10,000. Without the commitment of colleges and universities, the funding opportunities extended to soldiers by the Department of Education and the Department of Defense cannot be optimally utilized, as in the case of Troops to Teachers. The good news is that many colleges and Universities have made and continue to make necessary adjustments to accommodate the educational needs of soldiers, and, in effect, are helping transition interested, exiting soldiers to public-school

classrooms. DANTES will help determine funding eligibility for interested soldiers. ([http://www.dantes.doded.mil/Dantes\\_web/DANTESHOME.asp](http://www.dantes.doded.mil/Dantes_web/DANTESHOME.asp))

For soldiers seeking to transition to careers in teaching, it is critically important for them to select a college or university that is military-friendly and has the requisite experience of working with the military. Many institutions of higher education are well positioned to use “Troops to Teachers” as a vehicle for recruiting and training qualified elementary and secondary school teachers. Notwithstanding, there are many challenges that colleges and universities face in working with military students. It is when these challenges are properly negotiated that a college or university earns the designation of *military-friendly*. These challenges include: standard university policies that address drop/add periods, course calendar, course scheduling, refund, tuition and fees. Each year, **Military Advanced Education Magazine** recognizes top 30 colleges and universities in the United States that are military-friendly. This high recognition is extended to colleges and universities that have made significant policy and attitude adjustments, in order to deliver quality programs to our men and women in uniform. Military Advanced Education Magazine is a quarterly publication of Kerrigan Media International, an organization committed to “higher education for the military. It was created to address the growing requirement and desire for advanced education, professional development or additional coursework within the military and qualified Department of Defense civilians.” (<http://www.military-advanced-education.com/>)

It is based on these adjustments, and more, made by colleges and universities to accommodate the educational needs of soldiers that Military Advanced Education that Military Advanced Education (MAE) Magazine makes designates top military institutions in the country. For academic year 2007/2008, the following institutions have been recognized as top 30 military-friendly (alphabetically listed): AIU Online, American Military University, Bellevue University, Capella University, Central Michigan University, Central Texas College, Coastline Community College, Colorado State University-Pueblo, Colorado Technical University, Columbia Southern University, Duquesne University School of Leadership, Excelsior College, Florida Community College, Grantham University, Hawaii Pacific University, Jones International University, Kansas State University, National University, Olympic College, Saint Leo University, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, Strayer University, Thomas Edison University, TUI University, University of Mary, University of Maryland University College, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, University of Oklahoma, Webster University, and Western Governors University.

As Director of Distance Education at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, I can speak proudly to the specific adjustments that our faculty and administrators have made to qualify us as a military-friendly institution. Every faculty member who has taught classes at our Fort Bragg Distance Education site is familiar with the adjustments we must make in order for productive teaching and learning to occur. First, we must adjust a sixteen-week course to fit into a ten- or eight-week term. Next, we must adjust a typical face-to-face course to a hybrid mode, so that soldiers who get deployed a few weeks before end of term can still finish the course. And, the key is to make these

adjustments without compromising quality. Similar adjustments have been made by the Registrar, who has worked in concert with faculty to schedule classes for military terms, which often don't align with our regular academic terms. In effect, the Bursar has had to adjust the standard University Refund Policy to sync with the shorter military terms. By making these kinds of voluntary adjustments, we help make implement-able such a novel program as "Troops to Teachers," and this kind of military friendliness makes all the difference in the lives of soldiers.