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Delivery to the Sharp End of the Spear: Responding to the Need for Library Support to the Deployed and Downrange Military Community

Edward Murphy
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, murphd8b@erau.edu

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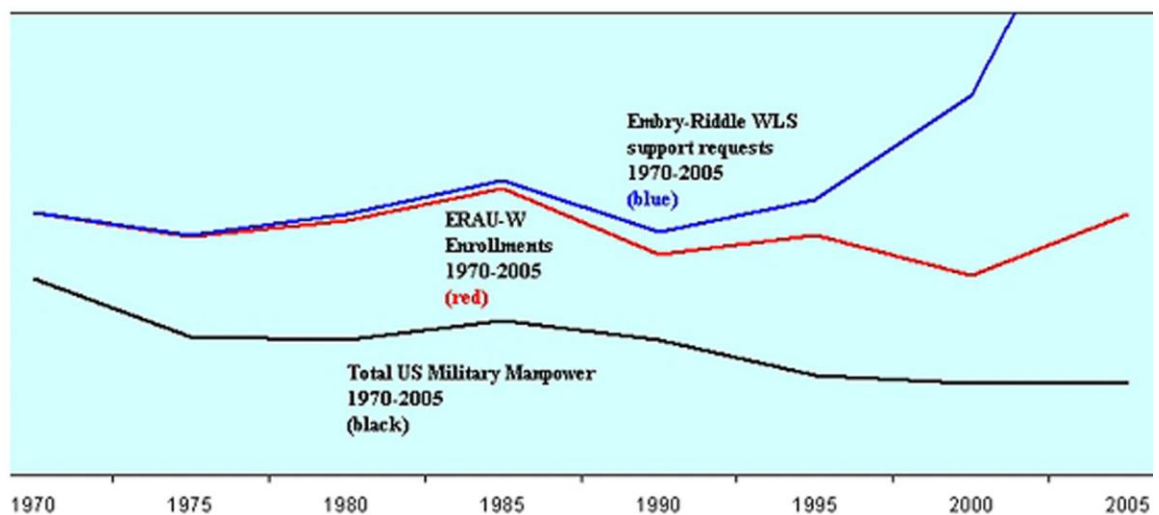**Edward W. Murphy**
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Abstract

Libraries that support military patrons often face unique challenges. One of the most traumatic is the temporary transfer, or sudden deployment of members of the university community, often in the middle of an academic term, sometimes without notice or adequate preparation time. Not too long ago such an event would almost certainly have interrupted, if not altogether halted students' academic progress until they could return to the parent institution. Technology now in place has allowed many of these students to continue their education regardless of their physical locations, and libraries will have to improvise with regards to the delivery of resources and materials to the "sharp end of the spear."

Introduction

Whether it's training World War II aviators, Vietnam-era helicopter pilots, or current Air Force Cadets, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has a long, established history of military partnerships. With such strong ties to the military community it is in ERAU's interest to monitor and to respond to any issues regarding its student-soldiers. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Worldwide Library Services (ERAU-WLS) department has recorded a surge in distance education patron requests (see Figure 1); and within this surge are increasing numbers of requests from deployed, downrange military personnel. This paper discusses possible variables contributing to the recent increase in ERAU-WLS military traffic, and predicts that the levels of student-soldiers will continue to increase in the next few years. The paper also reports on the responses from a focus group assembled to give a snapshot of the educational technology resources available to deployed military personnel.

Embry-Riddle WLS
support requests
1970-2005
(blue)

ERAU-W
Enrollments
1970-2005
(red)

Total US Military Manpower
1970-2005
(black)

1970   1975   1980   1985   1990   1995   2000   2005

(Source: ERAU Facts & Figures; Department of Defense Military manpower reports; ERAU-WLS reports)

Figure 1. Longitudinal trend lines 1970-2005.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Worldwide operations were created in 1970 as the direct result of an agreement between the United States Army and Embry-Riddle Worldwide (ERAU-W) to award college credit to army aviators for their technical training.

Since 1970, ERAU-W has partnered with many of the Department of Defense (DoD) education initiatives, including the DoD's Voluntary Education Program, the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), the Army Continuing Education Services (ACES), the Navy College Program Distance Learning Partnerships (NCPDLP), and the recent re-launch of the GoArmyEd (formerly eArmyU) portal.

ERAU-W has been recognized as a leader in the development and delivery of distance learning education programs. By choosing to partner with so many military sponsored educational initiatives Embry-Riddle Worldwide has worked hard to establish a presence in the Education Service Offices (ESO's) of U.S. military installations throughout the world. ERAU-W is committed to supporting the members of the military community and has been recognized as having high quality educational programs that are attractive to service members and that are relevant to their professional development (Richardson, 2005).

The mobilization of the U.S. military over the last few years has had global consequences (Kane, 2006). Strategic positioning of DoD forces now has 27% of its total manpower stationed overseas (Kane, 2006). The surge in the troop levels has been reflected in the growing number of student-soldiers as active duty personnel, reservists and guardsmen all become eligible for military education benefits (Padilla & Shapiro, 2003). Embry-Riddle Worldwide Campus enrollments have always been closely tied to the build-ups and draw-downs of the United States military (McCollister & Davis, 1996; ERAU, 2005). This troop mobilization is no exception; of the 28,000 currently enrolled worldwide campus students, 65% are active duty soldiers, sailors, or airmen.

Literature Review

It is too early for much relevant literature on the impact that the latest build-up of military forces has had on academic life, and even less on how libraries are dealing with the rise of the student-soldier population, however:

Calling the current military education benefit packages a "proliferation of opportunity" A.J. McMurray (2007) noted that the current use of military education benefits and the increase in the number of benefit eligible students…

> …and the modernizations of the G.I. Bill have all served to enact an unparalleled era in the history of higher education. Now, more than ever, servicemen and servicewomen have both the financial resources and the technological resources to pursue higher learning while actively deployed in remote regions of the world. (p. 146)

J.P. Lorenzetti (2004) agreed with McMurray, and noted that the current military online education successes have not only increased the numbers of distance learning students, but they have also changed the way distance education is now delivered. She goes on to recommend an ultra-flexible service model, up to and including the "bending" of traditional academic policies to accommodate active duty student-soldiers.

Lombardo and Fairbanks (2002) also reported that higher education should take notice of the popularity and success of the eArmyU program (now GoArmyEd). Originally designed to help soldiers attain personal academic goals, the program has grown so quickly, and proved so popular that it has turned the Army into one of the power players of distance education in just the past few years. Lombardo's and Fairbank's research is also unique since it was one of the first studies to attempt to describe who the soldier on the other side of the computer screen actually was:

> The median and mean age of the eArmyU soldier-students is 30; currently about 75% of the eArmyU population is male, roughly consistent with the enlisted soldier population. The eArmyU population also reflects the ethnic diversity of the army with about 25%

identifying themselves as African-American, 10% as Hispanic or Latino, 2% as Native-American, or native Hawaiian and just over 1% as Asian. Two-thirds of eArmyU students are married. (p. 8-9)

There is plenty of literature to suggest that the military's educational benefit programs are one of the main reasons why men and women continue to enlist in the armed forces (Covert, 2002) and are one of the main force retention incentives (Griffith & Perry, 1993). J.L. Polich's (1982) study of enlistment rates and educational benefits simply concluded that "the tests have demonstrated that educational benefits did bring about substantial increases in enlistments" (p. 85-86).

Buddin's (2002) National Defense Research Institute Report on the use of military sponsored tuition assistance (TA) programs, and Griffith's (1993) study of enlistment motivations before and after Operation Desert Storm, and Brauchle's (1998) AAACE Report all reiterated and expanded on Polich's findings that regardless of the existing military-political climates education benefits have been and will continue to be one of the top motivations for joining the armed forces.

There are also increasing numbers of reports in both the popular press and in the academic press indicating an increase in the numbers of student-soldiers that are electing to begin or continue their academic careers while deployed overseas (Blumenstyk, 2006; Arnone, 2002; Carnevale, 2006; Eskey, 2002). This is in direct contrast to the First Gulf War's troop mobilization where students called to active duty had few options beyond withdrawal from the university community (Griffith & Perry, 1993).

Discussion

The student-soldier who opts to continue with his coursework post-deployment has become the remotest of the remote library patrons. From Korea to Kyrgyzstan he packs up his gear and textbooks and crosses his fingers hoping for a reliable Internet connection at the next post, or at least enough electricity to power everything back up. Even at the best of times students can expect limited bandwidth, long lines at the Internet cafés and time limits forcing tough choices while at the computer. If a soldier only has 15 minutes of computer access every few days decisions regarding e-mail and information retrieval become anything but trivial (Hoover, 2003). Deployed students who will face enough obstacles trying to complete their educations do not need additional problems with downloading documents or emailing the Worldwide Services Librarian.

As a library unit supporting this globally distributed campus network, the ERAU-WLS department freely borrows from and employs many logistical practices to keep the flow of information moving from the Hunt Library in Daytona Beach, Florida, to wherever it needs to be delivered downstream, and when necessary, to retrieve it and return it to Daytona Beach. From pre-positioning items, to mapping out and testing supply chains, institutions that support large distance education populations should familiarize themselves with basic logistical management principles. Distance education librarians may also be interested in the flow of information logistics, defined by the Information Logistics Competency Center (2007) as the routing of the "right information, at the right time, to the right location, in the right format, to the right recipient" (p. 1). That sounds very familiar: Who is borrowing from whom?

Identifying exactly who our remotely located patrons are has always been problematic; now we are attempting not only to predict who they are, but where they will be in the future (Marchionini, 2000). In an effort to create a snapshot of the conditions our downrange students face, we created a focus group of 22 students who had already utilized Hunt Library resources and services while deployed overseas and 8 instructors who had agreed to participate. Through phone interviews and e-mails we began to compile data (see a sample in Table 1) and to get an idea of the types of educational technology available to our students. We were particularly interested in the availability and quality of the Internet connections. Were soldiers and sailors allowed personal computers, phones, PDAs, or any other personal communication devices; were there fax and copying facilities; and is there a dedicated Education Office, staffed, with regular hours?

Table 1

Types of Educational Technology Available to Embry-Riddle Students

Location	Internet Access	Education Office	Notes
FOB Tillman – Bagram, Afghanistan	Y	Y	Cybercafe @ Bagram
Camp Liberty, Bagdad, Iraq	Y	N	Internet Cafe
FOB Kalsu, Iskandariah, Iraq	Y	N	15 – 30 minute limits
Amundsen-Scott Polar Rsrch Inst, Antarctica	Y	N	Very low bandwidth/Satcom
Camp Doha, Kuwait	Y	Y	30 min limits
Kandahar, Afghanistan	Y	Y	
Camp Bondsteel, Serbia-Kosovo	Y	Y	
Ganci Air Base, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	Y	Y	15 minute limits
Incirlik, Turkey	Y	Y	
Diego Garcia Atoll, Indian Ocean	Y	Y	15 minute limits
Camp Eagle, Korea	Y	N	
USS Ronald Reagan, CVN 76, East Atlantic	Y	Y	Probably better connected
Keflavik, Iceland	Y	Y	Closed (ERAU)
Thule Air Base, Greenland	Y	Y	
USS Mt. Whitney, LCC 20, Mediterranean	Y	Y	

Source: Embry-Riddle Worldwide Library Services Downrange Survey – 2007

Conclusions

The feedback from the focus group was encouraging. It did seem possible to complete coursework while deployed, and to expect that course support materials could be reliably delivered. Almost half of the focus group respondents were on second or third tours overseas and reported that conditions had improved "considerably" in Iraq and Afghanistan with regards to personal communications and information transmittal.

As long as all of the variables noted above remain valid, ERAU-WLS can probably expect the numbers of requests and transactions to continue to surge. Embry-Riddle will continue to partner with the Department of Defense Voluntary Education Programs as the numbers of individuals eligible for military education benefits continue to rise. The partnership will continue on even after the stand down of the armed forces, as technology continues to become more convenient and reliable and the communication networks continue to improve downrange. All of these factors would seem to support the hypothesis that the surge of distance education requests will continue.

The worldwide services librarian is a logistician. Well, not quite, but distance education librarians can certainly learn from and borrow from this discipline.

Logistically speaking, the "sharp end of the spear" refers to the very last link in the supply chain, the absolute furthest point that can be reliably supported or re-supplied (Waters, 2007). Logisticians refer to the "sharp end" because of the downrange challenges that force them to adapt and improvise in a fluid environment. The military connotation of the "sharp end of the spear" is something altogether different. It describes a tactical position, at or near the front lines of a troop deployment or conflict. Here, the "sharp end" is about as far downrange as a soldier can get from a reliable source of support or resupply often forcing them to overcome obstacles in order to complete their missions.

Likewise, universities and the academic libraries that support active duty military students will also have to overcome institutional challenges and downrange obstacles as they respond to the future needs of this growing student-soldier population.

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