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## Distance Education: A University's Pioneering Master of Social Work Program Partnership with the U.S. Army

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# Distance Education

## A University's Pioneering Master of Social Work Program Partnership with the U.S. Army

*Learn how a partnership between Fayetteville State University and the US Army planned for and implemented tailored MSW degrees.*

by **Terri Moore Brown and Dexter Freeman**

### Introduction

Since 1918, public universities have assumed a central role in educating and equipping social workers with the initial qualifications needed to provide behavioral health support to military service members and their families (Freeman and Bicknell 2008). However, the physical and emotional toll that the War on Terror has taken on soldiers, coupled with the specific licensure requirements for practicing social work in the army, has created the need to develop competent and committed social workers well-versed in military culture. As a result, in 2006 the army and the army surgeon general decided to modify a process that had been in place for nearly a century by establishing a partnership with an accredited university that would allow the army to develop social workers from within the army system. Soon afterward, in June 2007, Colonel Elspeth Ritchie informed CBS News that the army planned to hire at least 25 percent more psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers (DeVries 2007).

The need for additional behavioral health providers was recognized following research that revealed that 17 (Hoge et al. 2004) to 20 percent (DeVries 2007) of the soldiers returning home were traumatized. Furthermore, the RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research estimated that the military health care system would receive up to 300,000 new cases involving service members with

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mental health problems related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Tanielian and Jaycox 2008). The RAND study also discovered that there was a severe shortage of behavioral health providers in the military system.

This article describes the relevance of an army-university partnership in view of the cultures of both public higher education and the military graduate education system. The article also outlines the planning model used to navigate through the various issues that should be considered when a university partners with a federal or military agency to deliver an educational program. The intention is to share the experience of forming a partnership with the army rather than to discuss how such a partnership should be formed.

### **The Culture of Higher Education: Economic Efficiency and Shrinking Resources**

Today, many universities and colleges are feeling the effects of high inflation. Tuition costs and student fees are increasing, certain academic programs are faced with lower student enrollments and smaller budgets, federal and state appropriations are dwindling, and private giving is declining. These problems often result in faculty and staff cutbacks, the termination of academic programs, and even more tightly controlled university spending.

The situation is compounded by the higher expectations that today's students and employers have of what universities should offer them. Students are shopping not only for quality academic programs, excellent faculty, and university prestige, but also for convenience, affordability, and accessibility. Employers expect higher education institutions to produce graduates who have the necessary qualifications and skills to do their jobs. However, in certain industries and federal and state organizations, the required employee qualifications and skills are rapidly changing. As a result, employers have discovered that it is often less costly to train their employees on site using distance education than it is to send those employees to university campuses.

In this environment of economic change and higher costs, students and employers are making more sophisticated and informed choices about which educational models are most appropriate (Eoyang 2004). In response, higher education administrators are changing their view from the university as an ivory tower, in which students learn through the traditional face-to-face classroom lecture, to one of higher education as intellectual entrepreneurship.

This type of entrepreneurship is defined as bringing together academic disciplines and intellectuals from both on and off campus as well as the public and private sectors to promote the integration of intellectual energy and talent. As they compete for students, universities and colleges are beginning to look at corporations, industries, and government as potential training grounds where employees can pursue degrees (Johnson and Kasarda 2008). Distance education helps colleges and universities market and provide educational opportunities beyond their service regions, across state lines, and around the world. Examples of institutions leading the way in distance education include Strayer University, University of Phoenix, and Capella University.

Universities are looking at corporations, industries, and government as potential training grounds.

### **The Military Educational Culture: A Return on Investment**

Only a few decades ago, the majority of college students were full-time students; however, in today's economy, more college students are going to school full- or part-time while also working full- or part-time. For years, the army has offered educational benefits to active duty soldiers who wanted to further their education, often in a medical specialty, in exchange for an extended service commitment. Since 1972, the military has offered service members the opportunity to pursue graduate degrees in health care professions through the Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship and the Financial Assistance Program. Studies by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2008) show that 99 percent of those attending graduate programs fulfill their military service obligation.

Simmons and DeCoster (2007) surveyed military social workers to identify the extent to which they felt their graduate social work education adequately prepared them to practice in a military environment. A majority of the social workers surveyed reported that they learned very little about how to practice social work in the military community, and most of them had to rely on their military organization to equip them with the knowledge needed to appropriately practice social work in the military environment.

## **Distance Education: A University's Pioneering Master of Social Work Program Partnership with the U.S. Army**

The army must ensure that it receives an adequate return on its investment when it seeks to educate social workers to meet the challenges of today's service members. Since World War I, the military has used civilian public universities to recruit, train, and equip social workers; however, the Simmons and DeCoster (2007) survey raises the question of whether this approach actually provides the military with an appropriate rate of return. Ideally, social workers who have been recruited and educated in a civilian university system should be able to leave the classroom and effectively apply their knowledge and skills in a military setting. However, since 1945, the army has augmented the training of civilian psychiatric social workers with additional training by behavioral health professionals with a knowledge of and appreciation for practicing social work in the military environment (Camp 1948). Over the years, the military has successfully used its service academies to train health care professionals to practice in the military. This approach allows the military to recruit, assess, educate, and return to duty those service members in a shorter period of time than if they had left the military to attend a public university.

As university administrators seek to partner with the military to meet the need for adequately trained health care providers, they must remember that the military requires an effective return on its investment. One way to ensure that universities maintain a quality educational experience for service members is to use distance education to market and deliver academic programs (Johnson and Kasarda 2008; Pescosolido and Aminzade 1999).

### **Distance Education and the Role of Technology**

In addition to enhancing the quality of the curricula and helping to meet the needs of today's students, advances in technology are also affecting distance education. There are several distance learning models, including correspondence study, audio conferencing, teleconferencing, broadcast/cable television, and satellite communication (Caffarella 1994); another model involves universities offering courses at locations outside the main campus. More recently, higher education institutions have used the Internet to offer distance education in the form of online courses and video teleconferencing (Eoyang 2004). Using the Internet, faculty can develop courses that combine text, videos, audio, and images. Students can use the Internet to communicate with faculty asynchronously through chat rooms, discussion

boards, and video teleconferencing. This is a significant change from the days when students communicated with their professors face-to-face and the classroom lecture style was the primary form of education (Ruhleder 2004).

The U.S. military has a long history of bringing education and training to soldiers by providing distance education opportunities and contracting educational services (Anderson and Kime 1996; Curda and Curda 2003). At the end of World War II, the military encouraged uniformed service members seeking promotion to take correspondence courses. These paper-based courses were an early form of distance education. As technology advanced, those paper-based courses became CD-ROM courses and are now video teleconferencing and online courses (Curda and Curda 2003).

**The military has a long history of bringing training to soldiers through distance education.**

### **The Need for Army Social Workers**

Zoroya (2007) reports that the number of army mental health providers has not kept pace with the number of additional U.S. troops deployed to fight the war in Iraq. As a result, navy and air force counselors have had to help the army treat its soldiers. Currently, the army has approximately 139 active duty social workers, which represents only 86 percent of the total number authorized (Y. Tucker-Harris, pers. comm.).

This shortage increases the likelihood that military social workers will feel the strain of higher caseloads in addition to the stress already inherent in the job of helping military families and injured soldiers suffering from the psychological effects of war and extreme environments (Zoroya 2007). Further, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) predicts a 22 percent increase in the number of civilian social work positions by 2016. Many of these relatively better paying and less stressful positions may be filled by military social workers, who have an attrition rate of 10 percent a year (Freeman and Bicknell 2008).

### **The Army: In Search of a Partnership**

To address the shortage of social workers, in 2006 the army conceived of partnering with a university to establish

a distance education Master of Social Work (MSW) program at the Army Medical Department Center and School (AMEDDC&S) at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. To meet the army's licensure requirements, the program had to be accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). While the AMEDDC&S houses other graduate programs in partnership with universities from across the United States in fields such as health administration, occupational therapy, physical therapy, business administration, nutrition, and anesthesia nursing, this was the army's first degreed program in social work.

The United States Army Medical Command solicited proposals for this project from accredited graduate social work education programs with the goal of adding 60 to 80 social workers to the army's total over the next four years (Freeman and Bicknell 2008). Because the social workers trained in this program would already know and understand military culture, the army believed they would both be more effective in the field and more likely to remain in the military beyond their service commitment, thus meeting the army's need for a return on its investment. Fayetteville State University (FSU) responded to the U.S. Army's request for proposals and in February 2008 was awarded a four-year contract to establish a distance education MSW program to prepare future social work officers by affording soldiers the opportunity to receive graduate social work degrees. The inaugural U.S. Army-FSU MSW cohort consisted of 18 students.

### **Fayetteville State University: Fulfilling its Mission**

Fayetteville State University is located in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which is also home to Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base and near Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. One of the 17 constituent institutions of the University of North Carolina General Administration, FSU has a growing student body of over 6,600 students and offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs and a doctoral program. A portion of FSU's institutional mission states, "Committed to excellence in teaching, research, scholarship, and service, the university extends its services and programs to the community, including the military, and other educational institutions throughout North Carolina, the nation, and the world" (Fayetteville State University 2010, ¶ 1). The mission of FSU's MSW program "is to prepare students for advanced social work practice and leadership with a focus

on issues concerning children, families, the military, mental health and substance abuse...in rural, urban and military settings" (Fayetteville State University Department of Social Work 2010, ¶ 1). After receiving the army's request to develop an off-campus MSW program, FSU's Department of Social Work had to evaluate whether the solicitation was consistent with both the university's and the department's missions. It was determined that the program site at Fort Sam Houston would expand FSU's ability to attract prospective MSW students and that the program fit well with both missions.

Several factors worked to the department's advantage in acquiring institutional support for the proposed partnership. First, the military culture is already interwoven through the fabric of FSU as a result of the university's proximity to the military and its existing contracts with Fort Bragg and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. Second, a number of soldiers and their families already take classes and pursue both undergraduate and graduate degrees at FSU. Finally, the partnership clearly supports the institutional mission and thus was unanimously approved by university administration.

### **The Entrepreneurial Perspective of the Partnership**

From an entrepreneurial perspective, this innovative partnership benefits FSU, faculty, students, and the army in several ways. The partnership increases FSU's enrollment, expands its budget, and helps the university meet its civic responsibility to promote global access for students who will in turn apply their knowledge and skills throughout the world. The partnership is also a significant business investment with long-term economic and social returns for both FSU and the military. Off-site MSW program students complete the requirements for their degree in one year rather than two, thereby reducing the length of time they are required to commit to the program. This is economical (Scott 2005) for both the army and the students because it allows students to begin working as military social workers that much sooner. Students also benefit from the fact that the army not only pays their tuition and fees but also their salary while they are in the program.

The increased graduate student enrollment creates opportunities for cross-training, cross-fertilization of teaching perspectives, and the sharing of scholarly pursuits. Faculty members teaching in the off-site MSW program have years of experience in military social work practice and education,

which strengthens the existing departmental social work faculty pool. Throughout the course of this partnership, faculty from both sites have joined together to present at local and national conferences and publish in areas of mutual interest. Program faculty also benefit from teaching students who are already in the military because these students are able to give them immediate feedback on the perceived relevance and appropriateness of social work theory, principles, values, and skills within the military community. Moreover, the faculty's ongoing involvement with soldiers opens up opportunities for future scholarly research and activity in an area of practice—military social work—that has received little attention. Faculty also benefit by not having to spend time helping these students understand military culture; as active duty soldiers, the students are already well acclimated.

**The partnership has long-term economic and social returns for both parties.**

### **The Off-Site Program: An Appreciation of Both Cultures**

Students in the off-site MSW program are taught by full-time faculty members who are paid by the army, which saves FSU additional costs. Although they are paid by the army, faculty must follow FSU academic, hiring, evaluation, and promotion guidelines. Faculty members in the off-site program attend FSU faculty department, committee, and college meetings through video conferencing. Both on- and off-campus faculty are expected to conduct research, publish, and engage in community and university service. In addition, off-campus faculty and students have the same privileges as those on campus. Unlike students participating in other FSU distance education programs, students in the off-site MSW program are full-time active duty service members who are paid to pursue their degree six hours a day, five days a week.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

The research describes numerous models of program planning for adult learners (Boone 1985; Boyle 1981; Caffarella 1994; Cervero and Wilson 1994; Knowles 1970; Sork 1990; Yamagata-Lynch and Smaldino 2007). Caffarella

(1994) defines planning models as the generation of ideas on how programs should be designed and the identification of factors that are necessary to meet program goals and objectives. Examples of such models include the adult education program planning model (Boone 1985), the interactive model (Caffarella 1994), the logic model (Millar, Simeone, and Carnevale 2001), chaos theory (Cutright 1999), and the question-based approach (Sork 1997).

Boone's (1985) theoretical framework for adult education program planning was used at FSU prior to this partnership and again to plan the off-site MSW program. This framework was selected because it resembles a generalist problem-solving model used in micro and macro social work practice. Boone's (1985) framework describes program development in adult education as a proactive process with five important steps: (1) planning, (2) designing, (3) implementation, (4) evaluation, and (5) program renewal. Although the verbiage may be different and/or explained in more detail, Boone's planning model resembles many other planning models.

### **Planning and Designing**

In the case of the off-site MSW program, the Department of Social Work had already developed the program's vision, mission, goals, and student learning outcomes before submitting its response to the army's solicitation (Boone 1985; Gmelch and Miskin 1993; Settoon and Wyld 2004). This is an example of planning, the first step in Boone's (1985) theoretical framework. Before seeking the contract, the department had to assess the university's infrastructure to ensure sufficient resources, technology, and staff members were available. It was important to confirm that the university's Business and Finance Office had staff with the skills necessary to process contracts in a timely manner, maintain good records, and understand the contractor's invoicing system (Parvey and Alston 2008).

After the solicitation was circulated, the social work department chair contacted FSU's Sponsored Research and Programs Office to inform it that a proposal was being prepared. The university had two weeks to meet the proposal deadline. As a result, all persons who needed to review and approve the proposal, including the provost and vice chancellor of academic affairs and the university legal counsel, were contacted to determine their interest, availability, and the length of time needed to review, make recommendations, and approve the proposal.

Once FSU was awarded the contract, the first task was to ensure that faculty, students, and administrators understood the unique demands of developing the off-site MSW program and the expectations of the two partnering institutions. A number of faculty and administrator meetings were held both at Fort Sam Houston and on the FSU campus, which gave both groups the opportunity to visit each site, get to know one another, and develop a plan for the program. Discussion topics included the course delivery process, faculty hires, administrative support, accreditation issues and expectations, student recruitment and admissions standards, curriculum, the field practicum, program evaluation, student and faculty research collaborations, and the policies and procedures of both FSU and the AMEDDC&S. Also discussed was how the faculties of the two institutions would collaborate on course syllabi preparation, course evaluations, departmental evaluations, program renewal, and faculty exchange.

In the subsequent design stage (the second step of Boone's framework), it was determined how the off-site MSW program would actually operate. The program is designed to teach students how to provide social work services to military personnel and their families, thus enabling service members to receive the behavioral health assistance they need to cope with the emotional and psychological effects of protecting and defending our nation. There are seven AMEDDC&S MSW faculty positions, which have teaching at the AMEDDC&S as their sole responsibility. Both the off- and on-campus sites have full-time secretarial support. Students and faculty members use teleconference meeting rooms for faculty meetings, student association meetings, distance learning, workshops, and faculty and student research collaborations. Off-site MSW program students take two classes per day and attend classes from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. five days per week. It takes 14 months for students to complete the program.

## Implementation

During program implementation (Boone's [1985] third step), FSU and the army worked to ensure collaboration, teamwork, and open communication. Frequent meetings were held with FSU administration and staff from the registrar's office to discuss class schedules and offerings. Because students in the off-site MSW program have an accelerated class schedule, new policies had to be formulated regarding time slots for class offerings, time periods for dropping and

adding classes, schedules for spring and fall breaks, and the university calendar.

To ensure that rigor and quality were not sacrificed, both on- and off-campus social work faculty worked collaboratively to design, implement, and evaluate the program's curriculum. These collaborations occurred through teleconferencing, e-mail, telephone, and in-person meetings. Off-campus faculty members served on departmental academic committees and the off-site MSW program director, social work department chair, and all social work faculty members discussed, negotiated, and made decisions concerning the program.

### **Complying with accreditation and university policies.**

After receiving the army contract, FSU's Department of Social Work contacted its accrediting bodies to tell them about the new program. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) required the department to submit a Proposed Notification of Change Report. The same protocol was followed in notifying FSU's accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The social work department chair worked closely with the FSU SACS liaison to communicate the proposed changes to SACS. SACS required the department to submit a Substantive Change Prospectus and sent a team to AMEDDC&S to conduct a site visit. FSU also notified the University of North Carolina General Administration, which asked the social work department to submit a Request for Authorization to Establish a New Distance Education Program.

**Faculty appointments.** Faculty positions were established and faculty members were hired to teach at the off-campus site. Faculty credentials at both sites are consistent with CSWE and SACS accreditation standards. All full-time graduate faculty members have teaching loads of nine semester hours. Both on- and off-campus social work faculty members follow FSU's policies and procedures in matters of retention, promotion, and tenure; however, because off-site program faculty members are paid by the army they are ineligible for tenure. Off-campus faculty members serve in the rank of clinical assistant professor, clinical associate professor, or clinical professor and are required to participate in teaching, research, publishing, presenting, and university and community service to maintain their teaching appointment in the program.

**Resources.** According to the Military Installation Voluntary Education Review project (American Council on Education 2008), military installations and their higher education partners share responsibility for ensuring that

crucial instructional, physical, and financial resources are readily accessible to students and faculty. Adequate planning, budgeting, and allocation of financial resources are essential to the success of these partnerships. In the case of the off-site MSW program, students and faculty both on and off campus have access to the same resources, including library services, university e-mail, graduate catalogs, and information technology consultation. Off-campus MSW faculty members participate in faculty social work department meetings and committee meetings with faculty members on campus through teleconferencing.

The university's technology infrastructure is essential to the success of this partnership. Technology is strategically used to prevent the on- and off-campus programs from becoming separate program silos. On FSU's campus, a teleconference meeting room is assigned to the Department of Social Work so FSU program faculty and students can communicate with off-site program faculty and students. The room is equipped with the necessary technology, including monitors, video cameras, a speaker telephone, and an LCD projector. The room is also used for committee and faculty meetings, student association meetings, distance-learning MSW classes, workshops, and collaborations between faculty members and student researchers. The MSW program also has access to teleconference classrooms used for faculty professional development and workshops.

At the AMEDDC&S, off-site MSW program faculty and students have access to several distance-learning classrooms. Students also have access to computer laboratories and research facilities, as the army provides two classrooms specifically committed to the program. Both of these classrooms are equipped with SmartBoard capabilities, and one is equipped to allow distance-learning activities between the two campuses. Staff from FSU's Chestnut Library and the AMEDDC&S Stimson Library work collaboratively to provide student services and support. Students and faculty obtain library instruction, resources, references, and research both face-to-face and through teleconferences with librarians. The army also provides each MSW student with a laptop to use at home and in the classroom.

## **Program Evaluation and Renewal**

A variety of assessment tools already used on the FSU campus will be used in the off-site program to evaluate

student learning competencies. The results will be used in the process of program evaluation and renewal, the fourth and fifth steps of Boone's (1985) program planning model. These tools include course evaluations, students' evaluations of faculty, field instructor orientation evaluations, field instructor placement evaluations, student focus groups, student exit surveys, faculty peer evaluations, alumni evaluations, alumni employer surveys, and national- and state-level social work assessments used to compare student and alumni progress with that of other universities' social work graduates.

As part of the team involved in establishing the off-site MSW program, we learned a number of valuable lessons. During the development of our proposal, we needed to work more closely with the FSU Information Technology and Telecommunications Services (ITTS) and the FSU Business and Finance Office. There were some in-kind salaries and services issues that we did not consider. For example, we did not understand the amount of time required for ITTS employees to install and set up video telecommunication equipment for off- and on-site faculty, students, and orientation meetings; or the effort it took ITTS to enable the FSU computer system to allow off-site students access to admission and class registration; or the time it took to ensure that FSU equipment was compatible with AMEDDC&S equipment. As faculty, we take advantage of ITTS resources, but often we do not understand the complexities of technology or realize the efforts made by ITTS to ensure that the infrastructure and technology needs of the university are met.

We also learned that university business and finance offices may prefer to work with faculty during the post-contract stage rather than the pre-contract stage. This is understandable because while a university may submit hundreds of contracts and grants every year, most likely only a fraction will actually be won. It could be a hardship for university budget administrators if their personnel were required to spend time reviewing proposals that may never be awarded. However, it would behoove proposal writers to have someone with university budget experience review their proposal before submission.

In conclusion, the establishment of the off-campus FSU-U.S. Army MSW Program was successful. All accrediting bodies and the University of North Carolina General Administration gave their approval and the program welcomed an inaugural class of 18 students. Of the initial 18 students who entered the program, 15 graduated and



are currently in a 24-month post-graduate internship program seeking to fulfill the requirements to become independent social work practitioners. Prior to beginning this post-graduate internship, all graduates took the national exam to become licensed MSW practitioners. Eighty-seven percent of the class passed this exam on their initial attempt; the national average for first-timers taking this exam is 78 percent.

Today, faculty and administrators from both off- and on-campus continue to successfully collaborate with one another in regard to teaching, research, service, and program administration. The program also continues to expand and now enrolls Department of the Army civilian employees and Army National Guard and Reserve personnel. In addition, other military services have expressed an interest in equipping their personnel to become military social workers by educating and training them in this historic program established as a result of a partnership between FSU and the military. 📧

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