

Articulation of Military Earned College Credit into the University of North Carolina University System

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Abstract

The University of North Carolina System (UNC System) includes seventeen campuses. In response to an increasing interest in enrolling military service members and veterans, faculty and staff at individual campuses and also at the state level have been in collaboration to determine the best practices to integrate American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations into an easy to follow guide which academic advisors may use to advise military students and veterans. The difficulty in generating a standard articulation lies in the extensive variety of training the military provides and an equally varied set of regionally accredited university academic programs. The amount of credit service members receive varies widely with time in service and occupational area. When service members pursue a degree, they may choose academic programs not related to their service occupations. Additionally, university program administrators must maintain regional accreditation standards and often professional accreditation standards such as those promulgated by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) for engineering and technology.

This paper examines the potential to create a waiver of liberal studies requirements for military students and veterans with particular emphasis on credit earned at the senior noncommissioned officer (NCO) rank levels. A variation of the liberal studies waiver currently granted to graduates of certain associate degree programs offers a promising model for a statewide, standard articulation. A review of the process that any transfer student undergoes to transfer to a program at a campus of the UNC System is also discussed.

Introduction

There are seventeen campuses in the University of North Carolina System (UNC System), including Western Carolina University. Declining state funding has placed campuses under pressure to increase enrollment, with a concurrent focus on retention and graduation rates. In effect, UNC System campuses are seeking to produce more graduates while spending less money per student. One way to accomplish this goal is to increase the number of transfer students enrolled in the university's programs. Western Carolina University has strong ties to community colleges, and a statewide articulation agreement provides a pathway for numerous community college students to obtain their four year degrees. A key component of the articulation agreement is a waiver of liberal studies requirements.

Western Carolina University requires a core of liberal studies (formerly known as "general education") courses in all undergraduate degree programs (Western Carolina University, p.3, 2016). Like other UNC System institutions, Western Carolina University articulates credit with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The liberal studies core is waived for

all NCCCS graduates from associate of arts (AA) or associate of science (AS) degree programs, which are typically aligned with four year curricula. NCCCS graduates from associate of applied sciences (AAS) or associate of fine arts (AFA) programs, which include occupational or vocational programs, do not receive the same waiver. However, to the extent that the articulation program identifies NCCCS courses with Western Carolina University equivalencies, AAS and AFA graduates may receive credit for those courses. While not a complete waiver of the liberal studies program, these credits reduce the number of courses that AAS and AFA graduates must complete to satisfy the liberal studies requirement (Western Carolina University, pp. 16-17, 2016).

A similar articulation program for military students may provide the dual benefits of producing more graduates for the university and serving the military community. Several factors provide the impetus for developing such a program. The military organizations of the United States are currently on a reduction in force due to declining defense spending (Shanker & Cooper, 2014). Members of the military receive training which often contains coursework similar to university level educational programs, and they are supported in their educational pursuits by the GI Bill. The UNC System, like higher education systems in other states, has identified the integration of members of the military into the educational programs of its institutions as a priority. In 2015 a system-wide Military Credit Advisory Council (MCAC) was established to facilitate the development of a coherent process for “reviewing and awarding academic credit based on military training and experience” (University of North Carolina, n.d.).

The groundwork for an articulation program already exists in large part. The American Council on Education (ACE), among other things, independently evaluates military training to determine whether it warrants academic credit and if so, in what subject, at what level, and how many hours. Reviews include examination of the training objectives, materials, student evaluation instruments, and contact hours. “All recommendations are based on ACE reviews conducted by college and university faculty members who are actively teaching in the areas they review” (ACE, Military Guide, n.d.). ACE credit recommendations are compiled in the Military Guide, which is available online and updated regularly. A service member or veteran wishing to enroll at Western Carolina University or another educational institution may request from his service branch a Joint Services Transcript (JST), which provides information concerning that member’s branch, rank, length of service, occupational specialty, and, importantly a list of training experiences and ACE credit recommendations. Colleges and universities use the JST to determine the appropriate academic credit to be awarded. (Ford & Ford, 2016).

The UNC System’s MCAC, in its effort to develop a consistent method of articulating military credit into their programs at the seventeen campuses, has teamed up with the NCCCS. Both systems have selected faculty representatives to serve on discipline-based panels to evaluate ACE credit recommendations for application to UNC or NCCCS programs. In October 2016, these faculty representatives met and attended a presentation from a team of ACE staff and reviewers, who explained the ACE review and recommendation process. Faculty and staff from six career fields (Criminal Justice, Allied Health, Business, English, Computer Science, and Foreign Languages) then met in breakout sessions facilitated by the ACE team to experiment

with interpreting JST and ACE recommendation exhibits. Session participants discussed ACE credit recommendations for their specific career field, noted common themes, identified questions and potential barriers to awarding credit, and attempted to apply the credit recommendations to their own specific programs. The faculty panels returned to their home institutions and later received a list of common military occupational specialties and accompanying ACE credit recommendations. Members of the panels were asked to evaluate those specialties for potential credit at their home institutions. The panels then met again by discipline at the end of January and beginning of February 2017 to discuss and try to harmonize the recommendations made by the individual participants. The results of the early 2017 meetings will be compiled and reviewed again before being submitted to the UNC and NCCCS administrations. While much progress was made, there is much work remaining, and the process of articulating military credit into community and university educational programs will be an ongoing one, as both military training and academic programs evolve.

The primary barriers to translating military training to academic credit are based upon the number of specialized individual programs in both of the state systems and the lack detailed course descriptions from ACE. Only general academic subjects or topics of courses, such as management or leadership, are provided as recommendations by ACE on JSTs. The course descriptions on courses already articulated between the NCCCS and the UNC System are sufficient for transfer between the two, but vetting the courses in all branches of the military would entail a detailed examination of over 25,000 recorded military courses. The five branches of the United States military offer twenty-two career fields which, in turn, contain hundreds of occupational specialties that require specific training (Ford & Ford, 2015). The career fields are:

1. Accounting, Budget & Finance
2. Arts, Communications, Media & Design
3. Aviation
4. Business Administration & Operations
5. Combat Operations
6. Communications Equipment Technologists & Technicians
7. Construction, Building & Extraction
8. Counseling, Social Work & Human Services
9. Engineering & Scientific Research
10. Environmental Health & Safety
11. Health Care Practitioners
12. Human Resources Management & Services
13. Information Technology, Computer Science & Mathematics
14. Intelligence
15. International Relations, Linguistics & Other Social Sciences
16. Law Enforcement, Security & Protective Services
17. Legal Professions & Support Services
18. Mechanic & Repair Technologists & Technicians
19. Medical & Clinical Technologists & Technicians
20. Naval & Maritime Operations
21. Personal & Culinary Services
22. Transportation, Supply & Logistics

A comprehensive articulation guidance document is needed to fully integrate military training into the post-secondary educational programs in the state of North Carolina. Eventually, a system may be developed and maintained to allow a uniform statewide articulation, but as noted above, much work is still needed. A more direct approach may be to articulate credit based upon rank for enlisted military personnel and veterans. ACE performs occupational reviews, similar to program accreditation reviews, which recommends credit based upon rank. Ford, et al (Ford & Ford, 2015) described the disparity in the number of credit recommendations for the enlisted ranks.

“The amount of credit recommended by ACE increased with rank. Many of the JSTs for senior NCOs reflected work in multiple occupational fields during their military enlistment. JSTs of senior NCOs in the sample contained substantial hours of credit recommendations: averaging over 150 semester hours. Much of this credit was recommended in military specific areas such as Military Science, Marksmanship, or Military Operations, which are of limited relevance in most academic programs.

Almost all of the credit recommendations were for lower division, freshman or sophomore level credit. This fact is relevant when considering general studies coursework, which is often a substantial portion of a 120 semester hour, four year program. General studies programs often contain math, English, science, humanities, and liberal arts courses. Much of the credit recommendations in the JST sample would apply to general studies coursework and perhaps fundamental coursework in specific disciplines.”

Methodology

To consider general studies coursework completed in the military, 60 JSTs were obtained from Western Carolina University’s Director of Military Student Services for senior enlisted service members in ranks E-7 through E-9. Most of the JSTs available were for Army veterans. Seven of the JSTs were from Navy or Marine Corps veterans, so the results of this study may be of limited applicability. Forty-five of the 60 JSTs were for E-7s. There was only one E-9 in the sample. One JST was not used due to duplication error. The average number of ACE-recommended credit hours per JST was 136. The JSTs were evaluated to determine the number of credit hours of liberal studies courses which could potentially be awarded to military veterans based upon rank at Western Carolina University.

The liberal studies program at Western Carolina University includes 42 credit hours of coursework. The subject areas include:

English Composition:	6 credit hours
Mathematics:	3 credit hours
Communication:	3 credit hours
Health and Wellness:	3 credit hours

Physical and Biological Sciences:	6 credit hours
First Year Seminar (FYS)/Liberal Studies elective:	3 credit hours
Social Science:	6 credit hours
History:	3 credit hours
Humanities:	3 credit hours
Fine Arts:	3 credit hours
<u>World Cultures:</u>	<u>3 credit hours</u>
Total:	42 credit hours

The intent of this study is to determine if there is a relationship between military enlisted rank of E-7 and above and the number of liberal studies credit hours which may be applied toward a four-year degree at Western Carolina University or any UNC System institution. A summary of the data is provided below:

Subject	% of JSTs containing this subject
ENGL 101	54.2
ENGL 202	30.5
MATH 101	16.9
COMM 201	67.8
HEAL 123	91.5
1 st SCI w/Lab	10.7
2 nd SCI w/Lab	2.3
FYS/Elective	100.0
1 st Soc Sci	93.8
2 nd Soc Sci	98.3
History	77.4
Humanities	3.4
Fine Arts	0.0
World Cultures	45.8

As may be seen, Math, Science, Humanities and Fine Arts subjects received little to no coverage in the military training listed on the JSTs that were reviewed. At least one course in English Composition was observed in about half of the transcripts reviewed. A Communications or Public Speaking course was recommended on about two-thirds of the JSTs reviewed. Senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) will also typically have on the job training in public speaking as any service member would attest. Nearly all transcripts contained a recommendation of credit in Health and Wellness. History, the FYS/elective course and Social Sciences were noted on a majority of transcripts. World Cultures was observed on nearly half of the transcripts.

resulting mainly from language training at the Special Forces School, which may be over-represented in this sample due to Western Carolina University's proximity to Fort Bragg. A tour of duty in a foreign country would be comparable to a lower division study of a world culture. In summary, service members received credit recommendations for an average of 21 credit hours, which accounts for about half of the liberal studies program at Western Carolina University.

Summary

If all veterans and service members who had achieved the rank of E-7 and above were awarded 21 credit hours of college credit for their service, significant financial cost savings to the state government, federal government and the service member or veteran could be realized, not to mention the personal time savings which would be captured for the service member or veteran. The "well-rounded" education intended through implementation of liberal studies would still be achieved, and the likelihood of failure in other coursework would be negligible. The results of the early 2017 UNC and NCCCS credit recommendations, once finalized, may validate the initial analysis of this study and further bolster this proposal, as it is expected that a number of liberal studies credits will be recognized. Prior to implementation of a program to provide waivers for enlisted service members, a more extensive study of JSTs at several of the campuses in the UNC System should be done to verify the preliminary findings of this study.

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