

## WMA series on Transition

Transition from the military is a little different for everyone. Luckily, the DoD transition assistance program (DoDTAP) is working on improving the transition course and processes. Regardless of whether you choose something aviation related or a totally different field, some transition processes can fit any pathway such as researching a new or related field or building your network. There are also several veteran service organizations that can assist in navigating the VA disability process as well as provide advice for school or career transition. Over the next few newsletters, I will share my experiences and provide some well-meaning advice.

My own transition story is still a work in progress. My last tour in the Navy was as the Operations Officer for the Commandant of Midshipmen at the Naval Academy. I fell in love with higher education and thought that the next place I could serve would be at a civilian college or university. At a civilian institution, my billet roughly translated to an assistant dean of student life. I'm still pursuing full-time employment in higher education, but after completing mandatory and optional transition courses and joining professional and mentoring organizations to build my network before my transition, I completed the VA benefits application process for disability and education benefits, and am a doctoral candidate working on my PhD in Education.

Though my story may be unique in some ways, it is typical in others. DoDTAP should now be the norm, and those who bring that to service members are continuing to improve on former versions.

Networking, research, and applying for VA benefits apply to all in transition. If you have been through transition, reach out to help others. If you are considering transition, know that those who have gone before you are here to help.

If you have not been through a transition recently, or plan to transition in the future, it sounds like the current DoDTAP is pretty good. In 2015, when I transitioned, the DoDTAP became mandatory, with individual counseling, an individualized plan, and a mandatory 5-day transition course not more than 2 years prior to transition or less than 90 days before transition. In addition to the 5-day transition course, there were a selection of 2-day optional transition tracks, entrepreneurship, education, vocation, and employment. Currently, there appears to be more homework on developing an individualized plan, but the main part of the transition course is three days and the last two contain a specialized course in one of the previously optional tracks. What has not changed in the three-day course is one day (Transition Day) where you go through a military occupational code crosswalk to translate military skills for resume building and a VA day when the VA provides information on benefits and services. What used to be a three-day workshop by the Bureau of Labor has been condensed into one day. While only one of the two-day tracks is mandatory, more than one can be taken.

I mention the time frame, because when my husband transitioned, 2 years prior to me, I went to his transition course. Spouses are invited to attend (though not all do for all portions), so this seemed like a great way to kill two birds with one stone—both attending as a spouse and attending because I knew that I was going to transition at the conclusion of that particular tour. In addition, there were optional 2-day courses in one of four tracks, entrepreneurship, education, vocation, and employment. Due to lack of interest (not enough people to fill the course), I was unable to get the 2-day education track course that

I was interested in. In addition, depending on your rank, some places have civilian contracted transition courses for more senior personnel. I went to one of those as well.

The next thing that I feel is important no matter the path you take is building a network. It is never too early to start this. Join a professional association for your field of interest. Join a group (like WMA) that has people with shared interests. Find people who are in the field in which you are interested, whether that is aviation, or something else, and schedule informational interviews to find out if the field is a good fit for you, your short- and long-term goals, your family. Find a mentor who can share experiences if they have traveled the same path or let you know what challenges may lie ahead.

I joined a large professional association for student affairs, and sought to learn more about a field that I now had some fairly senior experience in. I met a mentor (a former CO of an Army ROTC unit) who was working on a PhD in Higher Education. He shared his transition process, and like me had degrees in fields that were not relevant to the Higher Education field. He told me that without a degree in one of the fields student affairs professionals were interested in, I would likely not even get an interview. He was right. I did get one interview, and though I classify it as a good learning experience, it was not a good interview. My most recent interview was much better. From the feedback that I received, I was really only beaten by someone with more experience in the particular field and an earned terminal degree. I'm feeling confident about the next one when it comes along.

Other mentoring options may be available through college career services (as a graduate they are usually there for you as well as current students) or through alumni organizations. One that I have been involved with, though more heavily while on active duty, is the AcademyWomen eMentor program. They serve active duty, veterans, and spouses. <https://www.academywomen.org/> or <https://www.ementorprogram.org/>

I started taking classes toward an education program, first in non-degree status. After my first semester, I did get a short-term contract to do an assessment of the UAE's military colleges. I credit that job as being a result of the power of networking. This was the network that I started to build while still on active duty. One of my former colleagues from the Naval Academy, called me out of the blue and asked if I was interested in it. After consulting with my husband and my faculty advisor, I took the job, even though it would delay my degree progress. It was just too good an opportunity to pass up.

Do your homework. Find out what credentialing is required, if any, and whether that means you need to go back to school for a degree or take a course that provides a specific credential. Find out if testing is required, if there are physical requirements, or age limitations. If you are transitioning to the reserve or guard, determine how that will impact family and career aspirations. Determine where you might want to live, if that is not where you currently are. Search for opportunities, even volunteer opportunities, that may help you get experience in your field of interest. There are several non-profit associations that are dedicated to helping veterans navigate the college application process, though improvements in transition programs, hopefully are also helpful. In addition, many colleges have staff or dedicated offices to assist military, veterans, and family members navigate the college application and transition process.

So, I took the plunge, figured out how to access my GI Bill education benefits, and started a Education PhD program. As I previously mentioned, I took a couple of courses in non-degree status (the GI bill does allow for some exploration before either declaring a major as an undergrad or being accepted into a graduate program). I applied to and was accepted to my doctoral program. My non-degree courses transferred into my program (make sure to determine how many credits can transfer and don't go over that). Going to school full time, and working part time on campus, I finished all of my coursework. I am now working on my dissertation.

To get additional experience in a different area of higher education, I served in a graduate professional assistantship, a part-time job in one of the student affairs units on my campus. As I neared the end of my coursework, and after 2 years in my professional assistantship, I shifted to a research assistantship. As a result of my joining my professional association, I volunteered to be a board member for a sub-committee on student veterans. I have served on conference planning committees and met lots of folks in the field who are working with fellow veterans, many who are veterans themselves. Through these associations, I have been asked to work on other boards and have been asked to collaborate on research. I have also done some adjunct teaching.

If you are going to file a disability claim (and you should, regardless of whether you think you have one or not, in case something comes up later in life), start early. Get your copy of your medical records, and if your military treatment facility has a VA counselor make an appointment. A VA counselor will look for obvious or common complaints, but may also think of things that you might not consider. If you have already transitioned, but not filed a VA claim, veteran services organizations (VSO), like the VFW, American Legion, and Disabled American Veterans (DAV) to name a few, may be able to assist in helping you through the process. It is never too late. Other VSO can assist with transition, navigating education processes, and provide community.

One other thing I have noted volunteering for student veterans and reading and conducting research is that many veterans, particularly women, do not immediately identify as a veteran. Some don't feel like they have done anything to deserve that status. Sometimes they have not deployed or served in a combat zone. Let me be clear here. If you served in the armed forces, no matter when or where, you are a veteran. (Without getting into too many specifics, though there are some legal caveats for VA benefits, such as type of discharge and whether or not you served on active duty, by and large, if you serve and get out, you should consider yourself a veteran).

I was lucky that I had one of the VA counselors in an office in my local military medical treatment facility. The VA counselor screened my medical records for possible candidates for review by the VA for disability classification. I had a couple in mind, but she found others that I would not have thought of. Though I didn't use a VSO, this office and VA employee were super helpful. VSO volunteers perform the same kinds of screening. I started the process early enough that I was able to have all of my VA appointments before I retired. Do not despair if this doesn't get done early. You will also get paid retroactively if it is done after transition. This happened to my husband.