Military Service Members Transitioning to Become Career and Technical Education Teachers: Piloting a *DOD SkillBridge* Program

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[Abstract] An emerging trend eliminating the bachelor's degree requirement for hiring and promotion will have a positive effect for service members entering public sector jobs. For example, the governor of Maryland recently removed the bachelor's degree requirement for promotion into professional job classifications, and approved advancement and promotion through demonstrable knowledge and skill sets (Hudson, 2022; Lederman, 2022,). In Arizona and Florida, the state legislatures removed the bachelor's degree requirement for teaching in their public schools (Kyaw, 2022). Service members without undergraduate degrees are now eligible to apply their relevant military knowledge, skills, and abilities that directly correlate to job duties for hiring and promotion. The rationale for this new trend is, at least in part, pragmatic--there is a shortage or critical need for skilled employees, regardless of formal education credentials. Government agencies, education districts, and other organizations that apply a *competency-based* approach will be well-positioned to adapt to this advancement opportunity for non-degreed candidates and expand organizational access to this untapped pool of skilled talent. To take advantage of this talent pool in addressing its teacher shortage, the Hampton City Schools Career and Technical division's competency-based program will partner with the Hampton Roads Workforce Council to train service members through the Skillbridge program to become career and technical education teachers.

[Keywords] competency-based evaluation & instruction, DoD SkillBridge, HyFlex, Metagogy

Introduction

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan announced the launch of a multi-pronged, first-in-the-nation workforce development initiative to formally eliminate the four-year college degree requirement from thousands of state jobs. Spearheaded by the Maryland Department of Labor and the Maryland Department of Budget and Management (DBM), the state will work with partners to recruit and market these roles to job seekers who are *Skilled Through Alternative Routes* (*STARs).*

(Hudson, 2022)

To better serve our transitioning service members and veterans, and for the Hampton Roads communities to take advantage of the potential skills and knowledge service members can transfer into the career and technical programs of the area's career academies, the Hampton Roads Workforce Council (HRWC) and the Hampton City Schools (HCS) are partnering to offer transitioning service members internship opportunities to become high school career and technical

education teachers (CTE) through the Department of Defense (DoD) SkillBridge program. The DoD SkillBridge program offers

> […] an opportunity for Service members to gain valuable civilian work experience through specific industry training, apprenticeships, or internships during the last 180 days of service. SkillBridge connects Service members with industry partners in real-world job experiences.   (https://skillbridge.osd.mil/)

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services is the resource for service members to engage in SkillBridge opportunities offered through the Military Education and Workforce Initiative (MEWI). MEWI enhances employment opportunities for Virginians, who have served in the United States Military and their spouses, by providing a pathway to education, training, certifications, and technology. One of these initiatives is to partner with institutions in creating internship opportunities for active duty and veteran military individuals. These efforts are focused on the education and training and assisting students who are service members or military-connected with their transition from active duty to civilian life (The CTW Resource Center, 2022).

The internship partners are cognizant that service members returning to school will likely face obstacles in conventional programming that traditional students often do not. Therefore, one strategy adopted by the partnership focuses by providing them with HyFlex and competency-based learning opportunities (Parkes, Reading, & Stein, 2013) to meet their academic and career aspirations. The fact that the state of Virginia mandates that all high school CTE programs are delivered through a competency-based approach undergirds the theoretical justification and rationale for service members enrolled in the HRWC-HCS internships to be trained in such HyFlex and competency-based instructional methods.

Why Service Members are Ideal Candidates for Career and Technical Education Teachers
Civilian employers increasingly recognize the value of the years of education, training, technical and on-the-job experience gained by service members that can have an immediate impact in their organizations. In addition to their military occupation specialty skill sets, service members engage in on-going development of leadership traits, skills, principles, teamwork; and the ability to make decisions in stressful, even chaotic environments, in a firm and fair manner. Although the terminology and workplace may differ somewhat from the career and technical education classroom, the essential processes and roles shared by the two groups are nearly identical.

According to American Community Survey data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), service members across all military populations and certification and degree levels sought out degrees in security and protective services. This is likely because these programs do not represent an entirely new field or discipline compared to their military background, and as students they could incorporate many skills acquired during their tours of duty as service members. For those seeking graduate-level programs, Business Management and Marketing, Master of Business Administration, and Information Technology and Cyber Security programs were most attractive to candidates.

Service members with a baccalaureate degree or higher may be eligible to begin the traditional teaching certification process; however, those without a degree may also qualify to become a vocational/technical teacher. Service members need only the equivalent of one year of college courses (i.e., 24 college credits) and six years of experience in a vocational or technical

field to begin the certification process. Teacher certification programs may also offer the opportunity to take courses online. (U.S. Army, 2022).

So, what are some of the characteristics to consider when serving the needs of transitioning service members into CTE? Hart Research Associates (2015) describes these as follows,

> According to the American Community Survey and data from the Department of Defense, it is important to understand which sub-populations are the most prevalent in your service area. Also, the branches of the military vary in degree attainment as well as degree value, but in all branches, you need a bachelor's degree for commission as an officer. The Air Force is the most educated branch, and still 70% of their members don't hold a bachelor's degree. Both the Army and Navy have about three quarters of their members without bachelor's degrees, and in the Marine Corps, 87% of members don't have a bachelor's. So, all branches have need for personnel with bachelor's level educations and an incentive to complete that education for advancement. The Air Force, however, places a greater emphasis on graduate and advanced education with 57% of officers holding advanced degrees. No other branch even has 10% of their officers holding advanced degrees.

These transitioning service members represent a growing pipeline of talent to Hampton Roads employers. However, many of these active service members face obstacles that traditional students may not, which can impede their ability to complete degrees and certifications in traditional programs. This raises questions for the type of programs and instruction that best assist the education and training of military-connected students to provide them with the supports to meet their academic and career aspirations.

In this article, we suggest that for education and training providers to qualify for these new opportunities and serve this population effectively, working in partnership other providers that utilize a competency-based instruction and evaluation approach to determine job readiness of these potential students. Programs that offer such direct and job-relevant approaches are more beneficial than traditional, time-bound programs, because they enhance the skill sets efficiently to ready military members to qualify for available employment and continuing education opportunities.

Moreover, a competency-based evaluation of a candidate's abilities (knowledge-attitudes-skills-habits: KASH) to perform requisite job duties provides an accurate assessment of job readiness much as the need for specific additional training or development. Competency-based education and training and review of job performance promotions are free of inherently biased assumptions that are found in traditional degree requirements. We offer these premises as a solid rationale to support the emerging trend of eliminating the bachelor's degree requirement for hiring and promotion, which will positively impact service members entering public sector jobs.

Competency-based Instruction

Competency-based instruction is targeted to specific outcomes; it is application-based, oriented toward mastery of a specific set of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and habits that encompass the major areas of human endeavor. Competency-based instruction, in its essence, can be applied irrespective of the setting (e.g., higher education, business and industry, healthcare, military, etc.) where mastery is the intended outcome.

The epistemological assumptions underlying a competency-based approach are grounded in what is known about *adult learning* (i.e., andragogy). Research on adult learning indicates that

it is known how adults think, receive, interpret, and apply information (Knowles, 1973; Kolb, 1984; Bandura, 1991; Tomlinson, 1997). Since behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism serve as conceptual underpinnings in the traditional approaches to education, it is important to briefly address the long-standing concern over the appropriateness of applying various pedagogical models to adults in traditional education settings.

Pedagogy and Andragogy

The term pedagogy generally refers to the skill and science of teaching children (Samaroo, Cooper, & Green, 2013). Thus, the pedagogical model assumes that the learner needs to know only what the teacher communicates. This positions the learner into a submissive role in the classroom and thus excludes the various learning needs and preferences of an adult learner. In this pedagogical approach to instruction, the learner is mostly a passive observer, whereas in andragogy the learner becomes an active participant.

Andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005) provides a framework based on a set of assumptions on how adults learn. The theory of andragogy emerged out of a need for a more integrated method for educating adults. The andragogical model makes six assumptions. First, adults need to know the purpose of learning. Second, the adult learner needs to have some control of the process. Third, the adult learner has a wealth of experience. Fourth, adults are eager to learn. Fifth, an adult is inclined to want to learn. Lastly, adults are motivated to learn (Knowles et al., 2005). However, Bandura (1991) states that intention and desire are not enough if the individual lacks the competences to influence their own learning behaviors. In the pedagogical model, the learner is dependent upon the teacher; in an andragogical model the roles of learner and teacher are interdependent. The self-directed learner assumes responsibility for both roles, interchangeably.

From this perspective, the service member's learning is the active process of acquiring knowledge and skill through the interchange of life and work experiences. The SkillBridge partners value the service member's acquired knowledge and experience as interdependent and intertwined; not as isolated, separate learning events. This concept is imbedded in self-directed, adult learning as a continuous self-improvement process, similar with that of Six Sigma, Kaizen, and Kanban concepts (Smith, 2003), and in continuous quality improvement methods, whereby quality controls are built into processes rather than measured at the end. Similarly, adults are partners in providing feedback on their efforts when monitoring performance, measuring progress, and evaluating their results; all interchangeably with an instructor.

A major feature of this andragogical framework recognizes that a student's experience plays an important part in the process of learning. Promoting active participation in any given task is fundamental as opposed to a sedentary, passive approach of *sage on the stage* lessons. The literature is replete with examples that focus on developing competence that respects active incorporation of experience into the adult learning environment (Bonesso, Gerli, & Pizzi, 2015; Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim, 2016; McKinney, Evans, & McKay, 2016).

Competency-based Education and Training

Competency-based approaches to workforce education programs are typically seen as alternatives to the more traditional instructional approaches. Education programs transitioning to a competency-based instructional (CBE) approach require a significant realignment of the given program's education philosophy, epistemological assumptions and teaching culture, curriculum and assessment, and administrative operations. Competency-based educational approaches affect

everything from evaluating instructional methods, assessing prior learning/credits, transcripts/grading scales, and Carnegie units/matriculation requirements.

Education and training institutions that adopt a competency-based approach will be well-positioned to partner with governmental agencies and organizations offering this advancement opportunity for non-degreed candidates. In addition, blending a competency-based approach with HyFlex delivery strategies better serves the military population that currently falters in traditional, time and place-based, pedagogical approaches and programming. Education and training institutions have an opportunity to directly advantage service members by offering competency-based *upskilling* opportunities to enhance and align their military learning applicable to their new job duties.

Competency-based instructional programming and performance evaluation is best suited for satisfying this trend (Elazier, 2019). Why? Because it is not based solely upon traditional time and location-bound, formal learning events. *Every-where* and *every-time* learning occurs when competency is *attained* informally (e.g., on-the-job). Thus, competency can be rated to set criteria (e.g., job performance records and appraisals, certifications, performance tests, etc.). Competency is *achieved* through formal learning events and can be formally documented and authentically assessed, as well. *Achievement* is commonly attributed to formal learning events (e.g., in-the-classroom) and *attainment* attributed to informal learning events (e.g., on-the-job). In either event, the learning can be easily evaluated through authentic, performance-based assessments to certify competency. Some competency sets are generic and transferable across job categories; others are specialized and transferable only to a specific set of job duties.

The employing agency and the education and training institution (i.e., the partners) are responsible for ordering and aligning the selected job competency sets required for individual evaluation and assessment, providing supplemental, substitution, or deficient competencies, and providing instruction for new, refreshing, or missing competencies. This requires a *metagogical* approach (Strohschen & Elazier, 2019) to instructional programming and evaluation. By its very nature (i.e., job performance) instruction will be individualized and free of traditional time and location restrictions.

Metagogy

So, what is a *metagogical* approach? In brief, *Metagogy* integrates particular aspects of education philosophy with the art and skill leading to the acquisition and application of scientific, biological, economic, psychological, social, and practical knowledge. It provides a framework within which to analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate instructional processes, technologies, personnel, materials, structures, machines, devices, systems, and strategies for instruction (Strohschen, 2016). In some ways, it is similar to doctrine in the military. Doctrine provides the military with an authoritative body of statements on how military forces conduct operations and provides a common lexicon for use by military planners and leaders. Doctrine links theory, history, experimentation, and practice. One major objective is to foster initiative and creative action (Hoiback, 2013).

An in-depth discussion of the philosophical and attitudinal assumptions that undergird a *metagogical-based* approach to instructional programming is beyond the scope of this article. The literature is replete with content analyses of the major learning theories such as, constructivism, behaviorism, structuralism, functionalism, and humanism that have influenced educational practices. For a review of the literature on *metagogy* and a detailed discussion of the underlying

conceptual frameworks that are encompassed in high-level decision-making and program design, spanning fifty years of research in the knowledge base about educating adults, see Knowles (1973), Kolb (1984), Bandura (1991), Vrasidas (2000), Ertmer and Newby (2013), Elander and Cronje (2016), Rücker (2017), Stanage (1987), Strohschen and Elazier, (2019), and Strohschen (2016) to name but a few.

HyFlex

Service members share many of the characteristics with any other adult learner when returning to school. They too, have career and family obligations to fulfill while attending school, with the additional burden of duty commitments. Yet, few academic institutions that recruit the service member offer non-traditional options for learning. With institutional rigidity, institutions that maintain traditional policies and schedules, for instance, greatly hinder or handicap service members from achieving their educational goals. The HyFlex approach is one strategy that institutions can adopt for service members requiring more flexible options for completion.

HyFlex (Beatty, 2010, 2014; Black & Elazier, 2022) is an instructional approach designed to give learners greater control over their learning and course engagement modes. HyFlex allows learners to choose in-person instruction or online instruction in real-time from a remote location. HyFlex combines the terms *hybri*d and *flexible*. Hybrid learning refers to learning that integrates complementary face-to-face (synchronous) and online learning (asynchronous) experiences in service of intended learning objectives. All learners in a Hyflex course are given the choice in how they participate in the course and engage with material in the mode that works best for them over the course, and from session to session. An added benefit is the ability to offer learning style options and preferences to a greater degree than traditional modes. In HyFlex courses, students can choose from among three participation paths:

1. Participate in face-to-face synchronous class sessions in-person.
2. Participate in face-to-face class sessions fully synchronously.
3. Participate fully asynchronously.

When combined with a competency-based instructional approach, HyFlex options can mitigate or even eliminate the *time-bound* and *place-bound* constraints imposed by traditional course programming.

Competency-Based Evaluation and Equity in Hiring and Promotion

In practice, the bachelor's degree requirement is used as a non-performance prerequisite for hiring and promotion. The degree-granting institutions validate the candidate's competency to perform the job duties that are subsumed within the degree, which will not have been required to be demonstrated prior to hiring and promotion. The non-degreed candidate, however, is excluded from equal consideration for hiring or promotion despite having demonstrated competence to perform the job duties. The degree requirement intended to aid in selection of qualified candidates, by default, creates bias for the degreed and discriminates against the non-degreed candidates.

The potential for discrimination increases as the entry barrier of the Bachelor degree is removed. The default becomes a two-tiered evaluation system created as the result of the degree requirement's removal. For instance:

Q. What standards, criteria, and credentials will be used to award hiring or promotion to non-degreed candidates that degreed candidates are assumed to have attained by the degree conferral, but are not required to demonstrate before hiring or promotion?

Q. Will the degreed candidate for hiring or promotion be required to meet the new standard by which the non-degreed candidate must demonstrate despite their degreed status? Are they automatically granted exemption?

Q. What mechanisms would need to be in-place to aid decision-makers on hiring and promotion between the degreed/non-degreed candidate categories?

Preventing Discrimination

A competency-based evaluation (CBEv) approach would take the guesswork out of hiring and promotion decision-making between degreed and non-degreed candidate selection. This approach lessens doubts about job competency and concerns of bias and discrimination based on otherwise subjective factors. In addition, competency-based evaluation minimizes perceptions of *being gifted* a position through veteran preference, affirmative action, or other non-performance measures. Promotion is then warranted through merit and evaluated by objective measures and proven competency to perform the job tasks. Entitlement, nepotism, or other subjective influencers are minimized. A competitive and non-discriminatory process emerges through application of a CBEv approach to hiring and promotion.

A strong case can be made for a competency-based evaluation approach (CBEv) to rate a non-degreed candidate's job readiness, within a traditional degreed hiring and promotion path. This alternative degree approach creates a need among evaluators (e.g., supervisors, managers, employers, institutions, agencies, peers, etc.) to be able to rate the qualifying performance of non-degreed candidates for credentialing, classification, and promotion into jobs that formerly required a degree standard. The criteria for hiring and promotion that is subsumed in a bachelor degree credential must now be clearly articulated and demonstrable to all candidates: degreed and non-degreed. In the attempt to hire and promote the more qualified candidates, utilizing a CBEv approach, the non-degreed candidates are positioned on an equitable footing with degreed candidates by pre-hiring and promotion demonstrations of their ability to perform the job duties, when qualifying for the same position.

Additionally, CBEv will be a useful tool for screening, hiring, and placing a service member candidate in the *SkillBridge* pilot program as a CTE teaching intern. Career and technical education divisions offer many program areas across the 17 Career Clusters of Virginia; and often times these align with the service members' military experience and licensure endorsement areas that span across the various clusters (The National Career Clusters ® Framework). CBEv can provide a profile of candidates, and the areas of strengths and weaknesses and match them with the best licensure endorsement and program and course offerings. Proper background and placement will become more and more critical as training providers specialize in specific industry and workforce demand signals. Also, CBEv will allow training and further education to be focused specifically on the areas of need, which maximizes the instructional time for the HyFlex service member learner.

Summary and Conclusion

Clearly, the workplace is changing rapidly, and organizations need skilled workers for these changing conditions. Traditionally, the pipeline connects workers from training providers to

employers. Employers must change who is considered training providers and understand that a qualified candidate does not need to come from an institute of higher education. CBEv can prove that military and job experience can produce a candidate of equal competence. The ultimate goals of competency-based programming such as the HRWC-HCS partnership are to develop more effective workers; to help them develop relevant and competitive knowledge and skill sets in demand by industry; to qualify for higher wages; and to position the workforce to take advantage of job opportunities down the road.

In addition, this pilot may be of significance by contributing to the current base of knowledge for competency-based, teacher-training programs. It addresses the recurring theme in literature that focuses on the need for identifying and developing competences for successful teaching of adults (Athanassiou, McNett, & Harvey, 2003).

The HRWC-HCS partnership will help the local Hampton Roads community retain the valuable knowledge and skills that service members have accumulated during their active-duty, and transfer that knowledge and skill to the next generation of students, thereby capturing and increasing the return on the tremendous training investment by the Armed Forces; and pay those dividends forward to the communities to which they will return in the form of human capital and civic development that might otherwise be lost or under-appreciated.

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