

Six Tips from the Trenches:

Military spouses talk about how they are making college work for them

By Janine Boldrin

When it comes to talking about military spouses and college, education-funding programs may take center stage. But considering issues including moving and deployments are just as important in planning your college path.

Read on for tips from military spouses who are working toward their degrees or who have already earned them while being married to a service member. And see how they are achieving their academic goals.

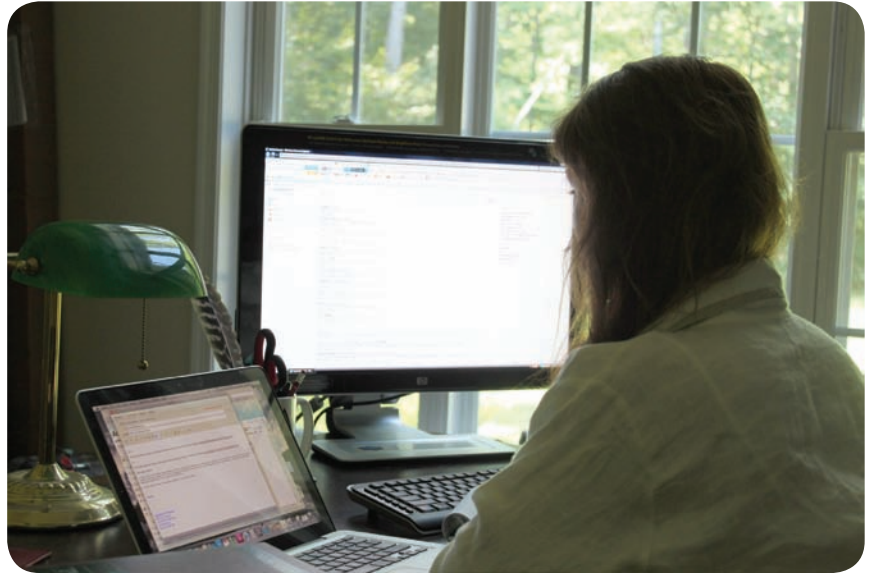


photo by Katherine Williams

Tip 1: Be committed to achieving your dreams

“No degree will be worth it if you choose a field you hate simply because it is easy or available at the time,” says Charity Lander, a military spouse in the process of earning her Ph.D. in Biogeochemistry from the University of Kansas. “Stay the course and pursue what you love.”

Lander, whose husband is in the Navy, has had to make sacrifices to earn her degrees — including her husband living as a geobachachlor so

she could attend the university where her degree program is offered. She has also had moments when she thought her career aspirations may not be achievable but she now feels things are coming together.

“You have to have faith in yourself and in your dreams,” says Lander. “You have to be willing to keep going when everyone tells you the cause is lost. Ironically, military spouses are set up for success in this regard. We don’t know how to quit.”

Tip 2: Be organized

“Keep good records. For example, keep textbooks and copies of each class syllabus,” recommends Marna Krajkeski, author of *Household Baggage: The Moving Life of a Military Wife* who earned her Master’s in

English with a specialty in Creative Writing as a military spouse.

Krajkeski says to maintain a file of names and contact information for the schools and departments where you attended classes. Also keep copies of your transcripts.

“This documentation will help when you have to transfer credits,” says Krajkeski.

Tip 3: Stay focused and flexible

The military can throw unexpected and untimely obstacles in the way of a spouse completing his or her degree. In order to complete coursework, couples may have to take courses as they can, live apart, travel significant distances or put their education on hold.

“Keep your eyes on your goal and make progress a little at a time,” says Krajewski, who took one or two classes a semester at a total of three different universities to complete her degree. “I accumulated credits a little at a time. They were all from accredited universities so they transferred with no problem.”

And, for some students, moving may mean having to make difficult decisions in order to complete their degree.

“There is the possibility that my husband may have to PCS to a new assignment before I finish school. If this happens, we will most likely be separated for about a year, while I stay behind to complete my degree,” says Susan Vishneski, a military spouse who is studying to be a physician

SMART Scholarships/ Careers

The Science, Mathematics and Research for Transformation (SMART) Scholarship for Service Program is aimed at students pursuing an undergraduate or graduate degree in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. The program participants receive a full scholarship and employment upon degree completion. The Department of Defense (DoD) is one of the sponsoring facilities for this program with unique job opportunities available across the United States at military facilities after completion of your degree.

at Eastern Virginia Medical School. “While this is not an ideal situation, we both are prepared to face this challenge if it comes our way, and we feel confident in our ability to overcome it.”

Tip 4: Communicate and support each other

“I probably drive my husband a little crazy with the number of discussions we have regarding our plans for the future,” says Vishneski. “However, by talking everything out I know that we are both on the same page.”

In order for each spouse to make career decisions, they both need to sit down to talk about each other’s goals and come to decisions on how they can best achieve them. And each person needs to be committed to supporting each other even in two very demanding fields.

“I’m proud of my husband and his career in the military, and I believe that he feels the same way about me as I pursue a career as a physician,” adds Vishneski. “I love being a part of the military family, and hope to be more involved when I finish my education.”

Tip 5: Network. Network. Network.

Find other military spouses who are in the same situation and connect with them to find support and resources for your

Networking and the online student

If you chose to do only online coursework for completion of your degree, it is very important to network with people within your field via such things as professional organizations, internships, and social networking in order to gain insight into your chosen career and, eventually, to obtain a job.

“After finding my first job, establishing a network and using headhunters, I often had a job offer on the table before my husband and I PCSed,” says Lander. “The network is key.”

academic journey. Make sure to link up with a community of individuals within your academic field and future career.

“Part of the perks of a traditional university is the networks you build with your professional community. These are more difficult to establish in an online environment,” says Lander. “Social media can be judiciously used to assist in overcoming this, as can involvement in professional meetings and organizations.”

In their book, *Help! I’m a Military Spouse — I Get a Life Too!*, authors Holly Scherer and Kathie Hightower suggest mobile career strategies that include seeking out a mentor and building networking skills to make and keep great connections to land a job in your field.

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Tip 6: Think ahead

“It might seem tempting to only look at careers that seem more mobile: teaching, healthcare, and financial planning,” says Hightower. “If you love those fields and that’s where your skills lie, great. The reality, however, is that any career field will take creativity and flexibility on your part as you move.”

When choosing the field and university at which you would like to study, consider how they fit with the inevitable moves and possible deployments that come with military life. Determine what sacrifices you would be willing to make if you would like to attend a traditional university or if an online program would still meet your career goals.

Hightower suggests looking into programs like Servicemembers Opportunities Colleges (SOC) which works to help mitigate the impact of moving on degree completion.

“We would certainly check into those schools first if we were starting today. So much more is available these days with things like this, with online programs, with ‘low residency’ graduate programs,” says Hightower.

Research Your Options

There are several programs available to military service members and their spouses both to help populate certain fields and pay for school. Be sure to check with an education counselor familiar with the military to understand all your options. One example is the DoD’s popular Military Spouse Career Advancement Accounts program (MyCAA). MyCAA offers up to \$4,000 in financial assistance to military spouses—including those of Guard and Reserve Personnel, but with certain parameters and time limits. Visit <https://aiportal.acc.af.mil/mycaa> for more information.

She advises meeting with a counselor at the on post or base education center to find out about things like special discounts for military families at a school and transferring credits.

Also consider what courses or cross-training you can take to make yourself marketable in a chosen profession as you relocate. And get experience along the way as you continue to earn your degree, even if it is in profession you may not have considered.

“While I was in graduate school, the department chair asked if I wanted to be a teaching assistant and teach freshman English. This not only paid for three courses, but gave me some valuable experience,” says Krajewski, who originally intended on working in marketing and public relations for non-profit organizations. “At our next duty station, I contacted the local university and they hired me to teach some freshman writing courses. Although I hadn’t planned on a teaching career, I discovered I liked it and found it very rewarding.” ●

Janine Boldrin is a freelance writer and military spouse living in Tennessee near Fort Campbell.

