

12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Kreimeyer, Joshua and Huntington, Jody (2018) "Jesuit-Infused Online Training to Work with Military Couples & Families;" *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol7/iss2/9>

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Jesuit-Infused Online Training to Work with Military Couples & Families: The Unacknowledged and Parallel Missions

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Abstract

In this paper we will detail the online certificate in Counseling Military Families (CMF) offered at Regis University, along with its relevance to the Jesuit mission and the service ethos of the military. Additionally, we explain how the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm is infused within the certificate courses. Lastly, the hope of providing a much-needed opportunity to prepare students to be effectually therapeutic with service members and their families, in a way that is accessible to all, is shared.

Introduction

To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.

—Abraham Lincoln

Mental health clinicians, regardless of location and specialty, encounter clients who have been impacted by the military. Unfortunately, not all are aware of the key dynamics of military life and how significantly these undercurrents can impact families that serve. Regis University offers a completely online certificate in Counseling Military Families (CMF). Our goal is to help break down barriers between civilians and service members by making this certificate available to post-master's-level mental health clinicians from anywhere in the world. Factors such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs having significant issues with increasing appointment wait times belie an ever more significant imperative to have certificates such as CMF offered as broadly as possible.¹

Service members and their families experience unique challenges, and understanding how to work with them in a culturally sensitive and therapeutically skillful way is critical to providing effective and impactful care.² Creators of the CMF courses include the authors, a combat veteran and

a former military spouse respectively, as well as others with various military backgrounds and affiliations. We all have also worked in and around the military community of Colorado Springs, Colorado. As such, we bring with us considerable, relevant clinical experience with this population. Stories from the trenches provide rich cultural learning experiences, which we can share with students. In fact, many of these stories are what fueled us, Regis faculty, to mobilize and create this certificate. Online learning has reached a level that enables the delivery of high quality education and training opportunities. Software platforms such as Voicethread allow for synchronous and asynchronous opportunities to interact with and review presentations, development of skills, and classroom interactions.³ In the creation of the CMF certificate, the benefits as well as the challenges of on-line learning were considered.⁴ From this cultural and logistical foundation, the CMF certificate moves beyond traditional learning approaches to include both online and experiential opportunities.

Through the additional lens of Jesuit pedagogy, students in the CMF certificate learn through active and reflective participation, application of a whole-person perspective to real world case studies, and applied service-learning opportunities. Through this paradigm, students learn to identify key cultural perspectives of military families, to

distinguish and effectively work with military specific life-cycle dynamics, and how life in the military impacts these stages.⁵ The values-infused and service-promoting military culture has a strong parallel to the undergirding premises of a Jesuit-based education. Thus, we posit that such a marriage of culture and pedagogy are a perfect fit for answering the great need to train culturally competent mental health providers to work effectively with military families.

Regis University's Post-Graduate Certificate in Counseling Military Families

Regis University's Counseling Military Families Certificate provides students with the following educational opportunities: develop the ability to identify key dynamics of military couples and families and conceptualize associated clinical adjustments necessary to ensure ethical, appropriate, and well-received care for this population; distinguish key life cycle issues and how life in the military uniquely and significantly impacts life stages; and critique and develop strategies to address the effects of trauma, attachment injuries, grief and loss, and substance abuse on military couples and families.

Regis University's CMF courses, rooted in Jesuit values, contribute to an educational experience that complements the service member's mindset of service to others. Having the CMF certificate available online demonstrates our commitment to support populations in need of services. From the depths of our experiences working with military families, we know service members and their families need support, and we want to increase the number of military-informed clinicians to provide quality, world-class service to those who have served. Some of the key factors that enhance the effectiveness of this certificate and its delivery include:

1) Online delivery makes these courses accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

2) With the program based out of Colorado Springs, we offer access to and integration of military resources and opportunities to participate in established services. There are five military installations in or near Colorado Springs, home to over 80,000 veterans.⁶ Drawing

from this population, we offer post-certificate, real world experiences working with military families through offerings such as Strengthening Family Coping Resources⁷ and Welcome Home Warrior,⁸ a weekend retreat for military-affiliated families.

3) Post-graduate certificates augment a master's or doctoral degree in mental health and increases overall marketability as well as broadens the cultural understanding and skill set needed to work with military populations. Many active duty and military veterans specifically seek out "off-post" or non-governmental resources for their mental health needs for reasons ranging from current unfavorable publicity of a reduced sense of confidentiality to accessibility. We have found, some veterans circumvent VA services and other on-post mental health services because they perceive them to be less confidential. There may be trepidation that their leadership can access their records, which can prevent service members from seeking or continuing services. A clinician with a post-graduate certificate in CMF is likely to be appealing to many who seek care.

4) Just as basic training indoctrinates trainees into the military culture and way of life, so too does this certificate with clinicians in the mental health field. Clinicians are exposed to military culture, the nuances, and the particulars related to providing services to this population. Even those who are already knowledgeable about military culture will benefit from viewing it through a mental health lens.

5) Those who serve in the military endure complexities that may surpass those of average clinical populations. Clinicians seeking to serve those who have served owe it to potential military clients to be informed of and practiced in working with these particular intricacies. Proper training is not only important to bolster

the clinician's ability to offer competent care, but to instill confidence in the student's ability to meet the service members mental health needs.

The Lay of the Land: Counseling Military Family

Educational/Training Opportunities

Several factors highlight how academically robust and accessible the CMF certificate is, as well as how it is infused with Jesuit values. Regis' post-graduate CMF certificate is housed within a Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) accredited program that has name recognition and high national ranking.⁹ The online format makes this certificate more broadly accessible, which suits the scattered nature of military installations and subsequent need to have similarly scattered providers. In fact, some providers are now embedded within units and deploy alongside them, thus making it extremely difficult to obtain education from traditional brick and mortar programs. From a military-based sense of credibility, the CMF certificate is based out of Colorado Springs, with access to five local bases and all of the associated resources at our fingertips. Access to these resources has helped in being able to provide relevant materials and insights into current military mental health processes, which are shared in the courses. In terms of Ignatian pedagogy, Jesuit values are infused in the training, addressing the necessary mind, body and spiritual impact of service and the deployment cycle. For example, in current literature, combat trauma is largely held as a moral injury, thus highlighting the need to have providers competent in understanding and navigation of issues at a deeper level.¹⁰ Additionally, all branches of the military exude their own unique and shared set of values such as honor, leadership, service, and respect, and these values parallel many Jesuit ethos such as service, whole-person development, and striving for "more" (*magis*). This connection and overlap of principles, makes for a wonderful and natural fit to apply Jesuit values.

A brief description of the CMF courses illustrates the focus and depth of the certificate. There are six classes, each designed to cover relevant topics

and provide experiences for real world application of learning and serving the military community local to the CMF certificate student.

CFT 663: Counseling Military Families

This course provides the learner with the knowledge and understanding of the impact of military culture on the family, cycle of deployment, post-deployment, re-deployment, and re-integration into the community. Beginning with an overview of the military lifestyle and the unique circumstances that such a lifestyle poses to military personnel, spouses, and children, the course then focuses on the common concerns of constant relocations and deployment of the military partner/parent and situations faced by the spouse and children who grow up in a military family. Special emphasis is given to counseling the military member, spouse and children in areas including combat stress, Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), secondary trauma, post-traumatic growth, resiliency, grief, loss, substance abuse, domestic violence, attachment, and intimacy. In this course students are required to interview an active duty person or veteran and their family.

CFT 662: Counseling Military Couples

Counseling Military Couples provides the student-clinician with an understanding of relationships within the military culture and stimulates the conversation of the special types of issues that confront military couples. Therapists, both experienced and newly-emerging, will develop a more targeted skill set in theories and techniques addressing issues found in couple relationships that are unique within the military culture. Special emphasis is given to counseling the military couple in areas of depression, PTS, Traumatic Brain Injury, secondary trauma, substance abuse, domestic violence, infidelity, divorce, intimacy and attachment struggles. In this course, students are required to create, implement, and facilitate a service project to an agency or community that serves military populations. Serving as a cultural immersion learning experience, allowing the student to be steeped in the service ethos of both Regis and the military.

CFT 660: Military Substance Abuse Treatment

This course will examine the psychological and behavioral effects of substance abuse and other addictions in military individuals and families. We review assessment techniques and approaches to treatment specific to this population. This course introduces the student to addiction counseling and treatment. It is designed to familiarize students for working with clients impacted by addiction. The course explores various models of addiction as well as specific techniques and modalities involved in working with addiction. The course also requires an experiential component in which students attend an addiction-related support group, students are challenged to look at addiction from the theoretical models introduced, and participate in their own change process.

CFT 673: Approaches to Trauma Therapy

This course addresses specific approaches to treating symptoms of combat stress reaction, Acute Stress Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress, acquired brain injuries, and adjustment disorders in military members and their families. This course provides the student with the knowledge and understanding of many evidence-based therapeutic approaches to the treatment of trauma and stressor-related disorders commonly seen in military personnel and their families. Beginning with a definition of trauma based upon the symptoms of psychological trauma derived from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM-V), the course moves to trauma within the military culture, then focuses on several approaches to relieve the symptoms of trauma.¹¹ Special attention is given to complicating concerns including Acquired/Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), anger and violence responses, sleep disorders, suicidal ideation, substance use, and military sexual trauma. In this course, students are required to interview either a trauma professional or a military veteran (active or veteran status) diagnosed with what have been dubbed the signature injuries of contemporary conflicts, PTS or a TBI. The course concludes with a focus on resiliency and a salutogenic model of treatment and a personal reflection.

CFT 672 Military: Crisis Trauma and Loss

This course focuses on learning about the impact of crisis, trauma, and loss, especially as it occurs within military populations. Students examine a range of diverse crisis situations, including natural disasters, violence, war, and terrorism. Emphasis foci include the counselor's immediate response, assessment, and treatment protocols for recovery, trauma, addiction, post-traumatic stress, suicide assessment, prevention, and intervention. In this course students interview a crisis response professional from within an organization such as the Red Cross or other disaster response group.

CFT 650 Military: Family Origins and Life Cycles

This course provides an in-depth study of military family life cycle, including adult development. Students learn about the impact of transitions such as deployment, career, marriage, divorce, and death at different stages of the family life cycle. Therapeutic understanding is guided and supported through this dynamic framework. Additionally, students learn to recognize contextual and systemic dynamics (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status, culture/race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, spirituality, religion, larger systems, social context). Finally, in this course students interview a military family and create an in-depth case conceptualization through the lens of the family's life cycle.

Jesuit Values

Regis University's courses are rooted in Jesuit values, such as *cura personalis* or care for the whole person, and men and women for and with others.¹² In addition to contributing to a richer learning experience for the student, these attributes contribute to an educational experience that complements the service member's mindset of values-infused living and selfless service to others. Service members and their families need support, and we want to increase the number of military-informed clinicians to provide quality and competent therapeutic services from what we believe to be a parallel paradigm of living and learning. The following is a summary of the Jesuit values and how they related to the CMF certificate.

Cura Personalis

The CMF certificate invites students to look at service members and their families, outside of potential negative perspectives, to focus on a culture in great need of care for the mind, body, and spirit. Infused through all of the courses is attention to the whole person and an integration of the mind, body and spirit. For example, courses have a weekly “cultural corner” that allows for facilitators to share current military specific resources ranging from service animals to more spiritually based counseling. Additionally, the CMF course on life span perspectives in military families embodies care throughout the lifespan, demonstrating the width and depth of the unity of the whole system.

Magis

Like the former military slogan, “Be all that you can be!” all CMF courses integrate and parallel this virtue of excellence and striving for “more.” The contents provide a greater understanding of the intricacies and nuances of military culture and the needs of service members and their families. Students are introduced to a larger context to see the challenges and strengths that come with this population. They are urged throughout the courses to ponder how service in the military really does require much more from the individual and family than most outside of the system realize. Students are then helped to look at how working with military populations requires similar, greater clinical capacity, to more fully understand the depths of service, and how this impacts the family system.

Unity of Mind and Heart

Throughout the courses, students are introduced to self-growth activities. In the substance abuse treatment course, students pick one personal habit to pay attention to and use strategies and skills learned in this course to make changes. Throughout this process they are called to reflect on their growth process, struggles and to connect to all of this using the mind and heart. They are urged to contemplate how these challenges can be amplified in families struggling with addiction. Students not only gain knowledge and skills—they are trained to see with their heart, creating a unity of mind and heart.

Men and Women for and with Others

Those attracted to the CMF certificate seek to serve those who have served. These are helpers who want to do more. By understanding the need to become culturally attuned and sensitive to the unique and complicated needs of military-related clients, these students demonstrate care and compassion for this population. Becoming military and trauma-informed equip them to be competent and supportive of the needs of their military-affiliated clients, and by extension the wider community. Every CMF certificate class has some element of service or experiential project that requires students to go out into the community and associate and serve with the population they are studying. These assignments provide a rich opportunity for application of course learning and to exude this Jesuit value.

Contemplatives in Action

Several of the courses require students to participate in an experiential component outside of “class.” These service learning and action-oriented projects allow the learner to encounter first-hand interactions with people related to their studies. Students also complete reflective assignments across all courses. In asynchronous discussion boards, they are challenged to integrate course materials and think, reflect, and respond deeply with others in the course.

Finding God in All Things

Across the courses, students are challenged to see the goodness and challenges in the military ethos of honor, service, and sacrifice. They are also given prompts to reflect on how they will integrate their own sense of meaning and purpose into their work with military populations. Through robust and engaging facilitated discussion boards, students are invited to discover and share their existential hopes and fears related to their work with military-affiliated clients. Understanding a gamut of perspectives exists, CMF students learn that an inclusive language and broader spiritual perspectives allows for both learning and future therapy to be respectful of differences, as people strive to find the divine or transcendent as it interweaves into work and life. This expanded understanding exceeds that in non-Jesuit based

learning and supports students to find comfort in differences.

Using the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm

In addition to Jesuit values, the CMF courses are rooted in the broader Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP).¹³ This 450-year-old approach to education was adopted from St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and initially formulated the *Ratio Studiorum* of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in 1599. Despite revisions to nuanced details to the overall vision, the primary pedagogical framework remains the rudder steering Jesuit universities around the world.¹⁴ Instructors use the IPP model to further deepen the students' intrapersonal experience and awareness. In the CMF courses, we integrate IPP as follows:

1. **Context**—the student is asked to identify their own context in relation to the military and service members. Their past experiences, beliefs, and attitudes shape their way of understanding and seeing this population. It is important for learners to recognize their context and the context of others as it relates to military-informed care.
2. **Experience**—the courses offer students opportunities to apply and experience their learning working with military related people and issues. Through service learning, experiential activities, engaging with others, and personal reflection, students' knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs expand and coalesce.
3. **Reflection**—reflection is the cornerstone of the coursework. During the courses, students engage in many activities to evoke contemplation about the content they are learning. Combining material, dialogue, and contemplation, students participate in reflective processes to deepen and strengthen their understanding of self and others. An

example of this is melding the military-infused content to a more robust and military-informed understanding and state of knowing.

4. **Action**—by the nature of the certificate and the courses, students are gaining knowledge and experience to serve those who have served. Recognizing the importance of becoming culturally attuned and being military-informed signifies action to create compassionate and caring clinicians to care for service members and their families.
5. **Evaluation**—students are evaluated academically and professionally. Learning, skill development capabilities, and competency are assessed throughout the courses. Evaluation along with self-assessment are key to encouraging students' growth and goals to enhancing their impact on their clients who have been affiliated with the military.¹⁵

Conclusion

Regis University's CMF fills a significant deficit in current educational options. Having the certificate available entirely online allows people from any location to complete the certificate, by removing geographical location barriers to receiving world-class training based in a military mecca. Prior to all of the courses being online, one student moved from Pennsylvania to Colorado just to take the CMF certificate courses. Desire and determination, like that student displayed, is representative of those who seek this specific learning experience. In line with the Jesuit values, Regis University is able to train students who have a servant heart, to serve those who have served our country. Our intention and hope is to connect with, inspire, and educate these students to support a healing mission to often underserved service members and their families who are in current and demonstrated need of appropriately trained, efficacious healers. HJE

Notes

¹ Associated Press, "Wait Times at Colorado VA Facilities Among Worst in the Nation," *The Gazette*, July 27, 2017, <http://gazette.com/wait-times-at-colorado-va-facilities-among-worst-in-nation/article/1607969>; "Stop Soldier

Suicide," Stop Soldier Suicide, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://stopsoldiersuicide.org/>.

² Paul Carrola and Marilyn F. Corbin-Burdick, "Counseling Military Veterans: Advocating for Culturally Competent

and Holistic Interventions,” *Journal Of Mental Health Counseling* 37, no. 1 (2015): 1-14.

³ Voicethread, accessed September 29, 2018, <https://voicethread.com/>.

⁴ Jennifer C. Richardson, Cindy S. York, and Patrick R. Lowenthal, *Online Learning: Common Misconceptions and Benefits and Challenges* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2014).

⁵ Noel A. Ysasi, Irasema Silva, and Alicia D. Becton “Counseling Families of Active Duty Military and Returning Veterans,” in *The Professional Counselor’s Desk Reference*, eds. I. Marini, M. A. Stebnicki, 2nd ed. (New York, NY, US: Springer Publishing Co., 2016), 409-413.

⁶ “Quick Facts: El Paso County, Colorado, Population Estimates, July 1, 2017,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/elpasocounty/colorado/PST045216>.

⁷ Laurel J. Kiser, “Strengthening Family Coping Resources,” accessed May 14, 2018, <http://sfcr.umaryland.edu>.

⁸ “Retreat Information,” Welcome Home Warrior, accessed May 14, 2018, <http://whwarrior.org/>.

⁹ “Regis University Rankings,” Regis University, updated 2018, accessed May 14, 2018,

<https://www.regis.edu/About-Regis-University/Rankings.aspx>.

¹⁰ B. S. Powers, “Moral Injury and Original Sin: The Applicability of Augustinian Moral Psychology in Light of Combat Trauma,” *Theology Today* 73, no. 4 (2017): 325-337. doi:10.1177/0040573616674852

¹¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2013).

¹² “Key Jesuit Values,” Regis University, accessed on May 14, 2018, <https://www.regis.edu/About-Regis-University/JesuitEducated/Key-Jesuit-Values.aspx>

¹³ Sharon J. Korth, “Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach” in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, ed., George W. Traub (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 280-284.

¹⁴ Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA), “Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach, 1993,” reprinted as Appendix B in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum of 1599: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 231-293.

¹⁵ Zheng (Jessica) Lu and Vicki Rosen, “Practicing Ignatian Pedagogy: A Digital Collection of Resources,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 4, no. 2 (2015): 135-152.