As Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) enters its 44th year, AASCU and its member institutions should mark this occasion with pride, as vital contributors to SOC’s endurance and success. SOC’s formation in 1972 grew out of tenuous relations between the Department of Defense (DoD) and several higher education associations. As these discussions progressed, AASCU’s chief executive officer, Allan Ostar, was approached to consider expanding the SOC program to include four-year degrees, many involving AASCU schools. Ostar’s positioning was fortuitous, both as AASCU’s CEO, and as a WWII infantry veteran and former correspondence course writer for United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI). SOC’s Clint Anderson called this period “politically awkward” in...
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SOC’s early development, with Carnegie Corporation funding two-year programs and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and DoD (through USAFI) funding four-year programs, while AASCU, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) sought common ground (Anderson, p. 13).

The most significant measurement of SOC’s impact on the military and higher education communities (and by extension, on the nation), resides in SOC’s capacity to help make college access and degree completion a reality for thousands of servicemembers. Within the SOC Degree Network System¹, member institutions reported more than 15,400 program graduates in 2015. Since the inception of the Degree Network System reporting requirement in 1998, more than 337,000 servicemembers and family members have earned a college degree. SOC’s true contribution is best seen through its beneficiaries’ advancement within the military and afterward, as civilians, through education. By multiplying these following few examples by tens of thousands over SOC’s history, one might get a more accurate picture of SOC’s legacy.³

Consider Master Sergeant (MSG) William Boley’s story. He admitted to joining the Army as a “17-year-old delinquent, high school dropout,” as a means to “escape from [his] troubled youth.” That he would use a SOCAD student agreement to one day achieve his bachelor’s degree might sound far-fetched, since he sometimes completed classwork (online and face-to-face) between Special Forces combat missions in places like Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. At times, his story reads more like an adventure novel, but he did complete his bachelor’s degree.

Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Jimmy Pegues fulfilled “his life’s goal to become a teacher,” by joining the Army in 1981 upon high school graduation. Earning his first degree, an Associate of Arts from Austin Peay State University (Tenn.), he went on to get a Bachelor of Arts in General Studies and a Masters of Business Administration, which would finally lead to achieving his goal: teaching business management on-post for the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in 2010, while at the same time “overseeing more than 1,200 troops in the 2nd Heavy Brigade Combat Team.”

MSG Evelyn Holly realized one of her dreams by completing her Bachelor of Science in Computer Studies in 2006 from UMUC, after “20 years of sheer determination and perseverance.” Holly, who served in both Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm, credits her great-grandmother as her primary inspiration to persist toward a degree. That great-grandmother was once a sharecropper who made learning to read and write a top priority. Thanks to that inspiration, Holly showed academic promise early, participating in the Upward Bound Program at Grambling State University in Louisiana, her home state. As might be expected, MSG Holly’s success trickles down to her unit, where she serves soldiers as a mentor, a motivator and an education advocate.

SGT Sergio Romero-Canas entered the U.S. Army already holding a Bachelor’s degree from the Military Academy of El

²The SOC Degree Network System (DNS) consists of degree-granting colleges and universities that help servicemembers and their adult family members earn college degrees. Many courses offered by DNS institutions have two-way guaranteed transferability, making it easier for servicemembers to complete associate and bachelor’s degrees no matter where they move during their military careers. http://www.soc.aascu.org/socdns/Default.html
³Many of these narrative stories were collected and published in The Military Educator, a newsletter published on behalf of the now-defunct Commission of Military Educators and Trainers, affiliated with the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education. They were provided to the author for inclusion in this article by Dr. Clinton (“Andy”) Anderson, senior consultant for Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges.
Salvador; however, he was unable to get his transcripts due to political unrest in El Salvador at the time of enrolling at the University of Alaska-Anchorage (UAA) once he got settled at Fort Richardson in 2002. With the assistance of his Army Education Counselor and professors at the university, who accommodated the military’s demands on his time, SGT Romero-Canas completed coursework in the evenings and on-post; by the time the university in El Salvador could release his transcripts, he had enough credits to apply for Officer Candidate School in the Army. Not stopping there, SGT Romero-Canas took the necessary classes and became a U.S. citizen, and continued pursuing studies at UAA while deployed to Afghanistan with his unit. In the end, he earned his first U.S. degree (Associate of Arts) from UAA and served as student speaker during graduation ceremonies at the Army Education Center at Fort Richardson.

Success stories abound among servicemembers in the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, as well, such as Navy Petty Officer Joshua Hight, who, upon finishing his last two classes in March 2011 toward an Associate of Arts degree in Supervision and Management, would become the first person in his family to obtain a college degree.

Juan Loja’s story seems even more incredible. Growing up in the Andes Mountains, in Cuenca, Ecuador, Loja came to the U.S. at his mother’s urging to have greater opportunities for success. Arriving in the U.S. at the age of 14, Loja spoke no English and took ESL classes upon entering school. While graduating from high school after significant struggle, Loja worked for two years as a parking attendant until a friend suggested he join the Navy. While in the Navy, he discovered a desire for education that he hadn’t realized before, taking classes at Florida Community College (now Florida State College at Jacksonville), where he completed his Associate of Arts. At the time of this story, he planned to apply that two-year degree toward a bachelor’s degree at Florida State University. Loja says that among the highlights of his life since leaving Ecuador were “becoming a U.S. citizen, serving my adopted country, and bringing my father to the U.S.”

Finally, another success story came to SOC’s attention in December 2015. When SOC’s director, Kathy Snead, attended a meeting with representatives of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), she met Ricky Godbolt, who excitedly praised SOC and sent a biographical sketch as his own “testament.”

Dr. Godbolt, currently an Apprenticeship and Training Representative at DOL, began his journey from Bruckner, Arkansas (pop. 289) with two dreams—to become a diesel mechanic and attend college. Neither dream seemed achievable in Bruckner in 1977, so Godbolt joined the Army. By 1982, he began taking college courses in basic electricity from Western Kentucky University and enrolled in the Army Apprenticeship Program (now defunct); his next college class was completed in 1985 while stationed in South Korea. He became a certified diesel mechanic while taking classes through UMUC. During his second tour in Korea, then-SGT Godbolt set a goal to become a warrant officer, which he fulfilled while attaining his first college degree (Associate of Science in General Studies). He credited his SOCAD student agreement for making that achievement possible. By 1993, he had completed his Bachelor of Science in Social Psychology, a Masters in Adult Education and Distance Learning, and a Doctorate of Education.

These are just a sampling of the tens of thousands of stories that highlight the valuable role SOC plays in higher education, a role it shares with AASCU and all of its member institutions.