



LEARNING WHILE SERVING

Sergeant major urges service members to get educated wherever and whenever they can. Here's how he did it.

IT TOOK KEITH R. WHITCOMB MORE THAN 30 YEARS of active duty service in the Army, including a total of 58 months of combat deployment and four post-secondary degrees, to figure out what he wanted to be when he grew up. Hailing from a long line of U.S. military veterans, that was part of Whitcomb's motivation for enlisting in 1985. "In addition to serving, joining the Army gave me some transition time to 'figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up.' And after 30-plus years I think I might actually know now."

Whitcomb, 48, wants to help train leaders in corporate America, and teach part time at a community college, after he retires in December. But first he's wrapping up a master's degree – his second – and a graduate leadership certificate program at Kansas State University*. Since he recently PCS'd to Joint Base Lewis-McCord, Whitcomb is completing his studies online through K-State's Global Campus.

We asked Whitcomb about his long journey of learning while serving, about the advantages and pitfalls of pursuing a higher education while on active duty, and for his best advice for those still serving. His answers have been edited for brevity.

Where and when did you earn your bachelor's degree?

Whitcomb: As an adult learner and as an enlisted soldier in the U.S. Army, I obtained my bachelor's degree in the spring of 2005 from Excelsior College. I went to five or six different colleges, grabbing a class here and there when possible while bouncing around the world.

What are the challenges in completing a degree while still serving?

Whitcomb: It's always about time constraints and the motivation to study while producing quality assignments/work. It forces you to manage time better and truly identify what is and is not important. It's a constant trade-off of time, and how effort and time are best expended against other demands.

What are some lessons learned that you would share with other military students?

Whitcomb: Manage your time better. Set aside time to focus on studies and hold yourself accountable in doing so. It's easy to ignore (or forgo) study time for other things. At the end of the day, it is all about holding yourself accountable for your education, and subsequent success for yourself and your family.

Why did you decide to earn a master's in adult education?

Whitcomb: Though having a previous master's degree, I found great value in gaining a credential in leadership. This reality motivated me to apply for the Leadership Dynamics graduate certificate. This certificate, along with my job at the pre-command course at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and teaching leadership education, showed me over time the value in completing the M.S. in Adult Education. I wish I would have started it sooner as it has been transformational and has given me new insights on teaching and the challenges that adult learners face every single day. ▶



ACTIVE DUTY & STUDENT

Keith R. Whitcomb

Degree:

Master of Science in Adult and Continuing Education
Kansas State University*, Global Campus
Expected graduation: May 2017

Age: 48

Military Service: Sergeant Major (E-9), Army (1985-Present)

MOS: Senior Combat Engineer (12B/Z)

Deployments:

- Desert Storm/Desert Shield, 1990-1991/93
- Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003-2004, 2005-2007, 2008-2009
- Operation Enduring Freedom, 2011-2012.

Other degrees/credentials:

- 2 associate degrees, Pierce College, Tacoma, Wash.
- Bachelor's degree, administrative management, Excelsior College, 2005
- MBA, Touro University (Now Trident)
- Project Management Professional (PMP) Certification, 2015

Family: I've been married to Regina Whitcomb (Blaess) since November 1990, just prior to Desert Shield/Storm. We have one son who graduates this year from Virginia Tech as a computer engineer, and we are very, very proud of him!

What are your hobbies? I'm looking for a hobby, I need a hobby ... I want to learn to play the guitar.

▶ **What are your goals once you're armed with your new degree?**

Whitcomb: I plan on teaching for a local community college part time. Additionally, this degree, along with my prior experience with facilitation and educational program management, gives me the knowledge and credentials to facilitate and manage corporate educational leadership and developmental programs.

Please describe the graduate certificate in Leadership Dynamics for Adult Learners. What advantage will it give you?

Whitcomb: The Leadership Dynamics certificate focuses on areas that, regardless of sector, play critical roles in everyone's success. This program focuses on communication skills, motivational theories, team and group development and dynamics, and conflict management. In addition to having a credential in leadership, this program has given me a deeper understanding of current and leading theories in leadership, emotional intelligence and the importance of "soft skills" within an organization, which really end up being the most critical - regardless of organization. Simply put, this program significantly expanded my 'leadership toolkit' on top of 30-plus years of leading in the Army. I wish I would have been exposed to this program 20 years ago.

What has been your biggest challenge so far in pursuing a post-military education?

Whitcomb: Time, time, time. As a working professional with a family, time has been the most valuable resource. Once time is

carved out, it then takes discipline to apply yourself and focus on the work.

Are there any blunders you would urge service members transitioning to a post-military education to avoid?

Whitcomb: Make the time in your lives to educate or better yourself in some way. You are not going to wear that uniform forever. Do NOT make excuses that "you don't have the time" or "you're too busy". You have discretionary time, and it's your choice in how you use this time based on where you find value. Planning for retirement or departure from the Army (or any other service) shouldn't start six months before you leave. Play the long game and think ahead, have a strategy in mind and don't wait until the last minute. I was fortunate as I had some good leaders taking care of me along the way that motivated me to better myself. Take care of yourself and help others realize their potential and "pay it forward."

What's your best advice for transitioning service members?

Whitcomb: I am a transitioning service member myself, and while I'm in the midst of transition I would say it's important to gain as many credentials and education as possible while in the service. These along with your "hands-on" and "practical" experience should set you up for future success. I guess I'll find out soon enough, but am absolutely ready for the challenge! 🇺🇸

"Gain as many credentials and education as possible while in the service."