

Military OneSource Podcast — Continuing Your Education While Deployed

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit MilitaryOneSource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. My guest today is Laura Dean. Laura is with the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support, otherwise known as DANTES. And Laura, welcome to the podcast.

Laura Dean:

Thank you. It's very nice to be here.

Bruce Moody:

It's good to have you with us. So we're going to talk about education in contingency locations. Just in order to get started, let's learn a little bit about you. Tell us a little about what you do and where you work.

Laura Dean:

Oh, sure. So I work for DANTES. You mentioned that they're the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support, and I sit in the role of the program manager for Contingency Education Support. My biggest hat that I wear in that role is as the contracting officer's representative for contracts that the government has with universities that provide classes and testing services at contingency bases in the Middle East, southwest Asia and also in Africa.

Bruce Moody:

So this will be very interesting to get into. So let's begin by defining what is contingency education program support?

Laura Dean:

Okay. So we have a program for Contingency Education Support, and the whole reason behind this program is to help service members access education while they're deployed. And those deployments usually happen in the U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command. Like I said, that was in the Middle East, southwest Asia and Africa. And the DOD has written an instruction for voluntary education programs in overseas locations that basically says that no matter where a service member is, where they're assigned, they should have access to education programs. And so what DANTES does, they lead that effort to ensure that there is education for students, and DANTES does this by procuring and maintaining contracts with universities. Now, in the contingency locations, DANTES doesn't do the work. It's actually the colleges that come down and perform the testing services. And then DANTES, they just make sure that the university is providing a quality program. Now, [00:03:00] currently in Central Command and Africa Command, we have on-site education programs in 13 contingency locations in eight different countries, and those countries are Bahrain, there's Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Djibouti and programs in Sinai, Egypt.

Bruce Moody:

All right, very interesting. So what sort of education support can service members expect when they either deploy or PCS to an overseas foreign location?

Laura Dean:

The level of support really depends on the location and what kind of base it is. Before, you were talking about definitions, so let's just make a distinction about the kinds of bases that are in those overseas locations. I put them in three different categories. You have enduring bases, you have contingency bases and then remote bases. Now, the enduring bases are like permanent bases where the military has had a presence for a really long time, and more than likely, they're going to be there for a while longer. And the folks who are listening to the podcast, they may think of our bases that are in Japan, Korea, Germany, Italy, in the United Kingdom, we've been there for a while. Now, at those enduring bases, there's usually an education office that has permanent structures. They're in an actual hardened building, and they have classrooms and office space, and more than likely, there are several government education personnel. And those folks are usually civilians, and they're providing the on-site counseling. And there's also

several universities that have space in those facilities, and they teach classes on the base, they have testing services.

Now, contingency bases or locations that the military really thinks that these are going to be temporary bases, and at those locations, you're going to have kind of a scaled-down support. You may only have one civilian education person who's sitting at that base running the education office, or it might be a military education technician. Now, if that site, that contingency location is listed in our CENTCOM contract with the university, the service member will have access to actual classes on base that are being offered by University of Maryland Global Campus. They'll also have access to a National Test Center where they can take CLEP and DSST exams.

Now, if the service member happens to be at a remote location, that's one of those locations where maybe the military is moving around a lot or they're working out of tents, there isn't much education support there. What the service member has to do is reach back to their home station to get the support. The service member may have access to maybe periodic, MWR services and maybe a little bit of internet, but most of their support is actually being provided from home station back in the States. So you have those three different kinds of bases, and the level of support really depends on what kind of base it is. But what I would say that although the support may differ, service members still can work on their education goals while they're in overseas locations or if they're deployed.

Bruce Moody:

Right. And appreciate you going through all of that. So how can a service member who wants to continue their education goals while overseas best prepare for their deployment or PCS to an overseas location?

Laura Dean:

The first thing they should do is make an appointment to visit a counselor at their education office. And while they're at the education office, they can ensure their education records are up to date. One thing the counselor is going to do with them is verify that their annual tuition assistance training is current, and then they can also review their education degree plan. One thing a student should remember, that is if they are already taking courses with a college, they should meet with their college counselor too. The college counselor is different from their military government education counselor, so they have a lot of support, and they should meet with all of these people before they deploy. One thing that they could do is share with their counselor if they can. I know some of those deployments, they might be secret missions, but if they can share with their counselor where they're going and how long they're going to be deployed, then the two of them can get together and determine what's realistic for them to accomplish while they're deployed.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. And you mentioned realistic goals, which is interesting because it varies, right? So what would you consider realistic goals for someone who is about to deploy?

Laura Dean:

It's funny because I get this question quite a bit. Every student is different and everybody can handle different workloads. So you really need to look at yourself and then think about what's coming. Deployment times vary, some service members only deploy for like four months. And so if it's going to be a short deployment, it may be very challenging to try to take a class during that time. So what I would tell those individuals, maybe it's time for them to just take that time to study for a CLEP or a DSST. They may even be able to, at the deployed location, go to the National Test Center and take the test while they're at the deployed location. But that comes back to before they deployed, they should have seen their academic counselor because the counselor can look at their degree plan and say, "Hey, while you're at the deployed location, I know you're only going to be there for a little while, but this CLEP over here will transfer into your degree plan."

So the two of them can determine which test will work towards their degree because the last thing we want anybody to do is spend a whole lot of time studying and taking the wrong test. So it's key for them to talk to each other and look at that degree plan.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. So I think what you're describing as somebody who's on a rather short deployment, if someone's going to be deployed for a longer period of time, what would their options be, what would your recommendations be?

Laura Dean:

Sure. That's a great question. If a service member is at the deployed location for a longer period time, he may want to consider taking a course. If he's already enrolled with a school and has a degree plan, he may be able to continue with an online course with that home school or he can check with his home school, and he may want to take a face-to-face class with our contracted university that's on location and then transfer that course back to his home school if it applies towards his degree plan. Again, that's where it's key that he talks to his counselor before he deploys so he can see which classes he needs to take and what he should be working on while he is deployed.

Bruce Moody:

So what about service members who have not yet begun working toward their education goals, have never really taken a college course, but now they think they want to start and it's during a deployment, what should they do? What are their options? What do you recommend?

Laura Dean:

While a person is deployed, there's no reason why they can't work on their education. And again, I'm going to go back to definitely make that appointment with the education office prior to the deployment to set up their education records. That also will give them the opportunity to complete their initial tuition assistance briefing so that they know all the rules of how to use military tuition assistance before they deploy. Now, brand new students who are assigned to overseas locations who have never completed a college class before and they want to use military tuition assistance, they have to enroll in their first class with a contracted university on the base.

Now, the course could be face-to-face or it could be online, it doesn't matter, but it has to be with a contracted university. And the purpose behind that, the government has said, "We want to protect our students and we want to ensure that they have the best support possible." So we want them to enroll in a course with the contracted school who has representatives on the base at that deployed location so that the student has on-site support from the university so they can walk into the office at any time. Just in case they need a little extra assistance, it's a first-time class, or if they run into any issues, the support is right there on the base.

Bruce Moody:

Got it. So where can a service member learn more about what they can expect when they arrive at their deployed installation or overseas base?

Laura Dean:

Many people, it might be their first deployment, and they have no idea what to expect when they get there. And so I'd recommend a couple of things. First of all, you should check out the DANTES website. In our overseas support section on the website, a service member can learn which schools are located at the overseas and deployed areas. We have links to the contracted university websites where students can view the upcoming terms. They can connect with university advisors, and they can learn whether there's a National Test Center on the base and find out what days and times they can go in and test and take a CLEP or a DSST exam. Another thing that they can do is they can send me an email. I'm the DANTES' Europe liaison, and I'm the contracting officer's representative for the contracted schools in CENTCOM and AFRICOM.

So if they send me an email to the org box, which is also on the DANTES website, I can link them to the education service officer at the base that they're headed to or the military education technician who's running the learning resource center, and then they can ask all kinds of questions about what is available when they get there. For instance, is there internet? Will I be able to access my school if I'm taking online classes with my homeschool? Those are all really good questions to ask the education officer at the deployed location. Another thing that they could do is connect with their unit deployment monitor and reach out to the unit that they will be joining or that they'll be replacing and find out from those individuals who are already at the deployed location, what their experiences have been with the education on-site.

Bruce Moody:

Well, this has been a lot of really great information, and I should note that what we're going to do is put a bunch of links in the program notes to the DANTES website and to your social media accounts, so there will be multiple ways to reach out for education support. Laura, any final words that you'd like to share with us?

Laura Dean:

I just want to thank you for giving me the chance to share this information, and I would encourage all service members to take advantage of the education opportunities no matter where they're assigned.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Well, again, we appreciate you being with us. We hope to have you back, and we appreciate what you offer our folks in uniform. Thank you so much for joining us.

Laura Dean:

Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

Laura Dean is with the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support. Thank you very much. And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we want to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can click on it and send us a question, or a comment or an idea for our future episode. And be sure to subscribe to our podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics that help military families adapt to

military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.