# Transcript: Helping Heros

*The following transcript is a verbatim account of the video or audio file accompanying this transcript.*

Speaker #1 (Narrator):

WGU's IT audio series, flexible, portable, profound.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Hello and welcome to the WGU Helping Heroes podcast. We're thrilled that you found us today and hope that the information that we share will be helpful to you on your quest in completing your bachelor's or master's degree here at WGU. You're doing that all while serving our country. We sincerely thank you for your service and wish you well on your military and academic journeys. My name is Jeff Burton and I have the privilege of hosting this podcast in this episode as we share tips, information as well as successes from others who have gone before, that might be helpful to you. Joining me on today's podcast are two amazing WGU Program mentors from the College of Information Technology. They are all about helping their students succeed. They've also served in the military and have unique perspectives helping this important audience. It is a thrill for me to introduce Kirk Wallace and Tanya Smith. Hello to you both.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Hey Jeff. It's great to be here and looking forward to talking about some military students today.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Hi Jeff.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Well, welcome to you both. We've talked about doing this podcast for, what's it been, a couple of months now, we've had some good conversations and today is the day we're recording episode 1. How exciting, right?

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Awesome.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Right, it's great.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Yeah, it's going to be a lot of fun. I'm really excited for this podcast series. I think it's important that the subject matter that we're talking about because it's all about helping WGU students succeed with the tools and the tips that they need. But before we get started, I want the audience to get to know you a little bit better. Maybe some of your students are tuning in, I hope that's the case. But for those that aren't familiar with you and your background, I thought we could maybe start with a couple of questions to help us get to know you a little bit better. Tanya, if you don't mind starting and then we'll go to Kirk, tell us where you're from, tell us a little bit about your military service and background also, how long you've been at WGU and what you enjoy most as your role as a program mentor.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Sure, I'm from a small town off the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, but I currently reside in Charlotte, North Carolina. I am an Army veteran and was part of the Army Signal Corps. I worked as a Systems Analyst, Systems Engineer in support of the armies initiative to digitize the battlefield. Armor training and work experience has led me to WGU where I currently work as a program mentor for the Network and Security Operations Program for about two years. It'll be two years in December. What I love most about the role is being able to share my knowledge and experience to help students overcome challenges as well as realize their goal of earning a degree.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Awesome. I'm sure that your students love to just pick your brain and learn from your background and get those insights.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Definitely and I love talking to them about it.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

That's awesome. Two years, congratulations. I'm sure time goes fast when you're having fun, right?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

It does. It really does.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Well, that's excellent. Well, thank you for being here. I look forward to hearing a little bit more about your expertise and background and how we can help military students. Welcome. Kirk, how about for you? Same question, where you're from, a little bit about your military service, how long you've been at WGU and what you enjoy most about your role?

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Sure, Jeff. I was actually born overseas in Germany as a military dependent and now I reside in Round Rock, Texas, just outside of Austin. I was in the army for 25 years as an Infantry Officer. I was fortunate military paid for my undergraduate and my master's programs. I have a strong commitment for really serving and supporting military students at WGU who are trying to do the same thing. Then a program mentor for six years and what I really enjoy most is just the teamwork with each student and the joy and satisfaction when they get to the finish line and graduate. That's really cool.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

That is awesome. It's got to feel very rewarding to know that you have a small part, and encouraging hand if you will to help them get to that point.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Definitely.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Excellent. Well, I sincerely thank you both for your service to our country being veterans. We're just coming off the 4th of July weekend and it's always just such a great time, whether it's parades, whether it's celebrations or whatnot that we live in this beautiful country. Thanks to the two of you and to all of those in this audience listening for their service to keep us safe here at home and abroad. So sincerely, thank you. I've got to say too, two of my favorite cities, Charlotte and Austin, both have really good barbecue, wouldn't you agree?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

I do agree. I lived in Texas for 8 years though. Wehen you said Round Rock though, I was like, "Oh."

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Round Rock, yeah. Just short of Austin there.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

I have a lot more friends and relatives visiting than normally would visit.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

I tell you, and I always say this. My big trouble with Austin is there's just not enough meals in the day whenever I go there. It's a real problem. Anyway, we can talk barbecue all day long, but that's not why we're here. Let's jump into our topic today. Again, that is if you're tuning and what do active duty military students at WGU need to do to be successful in obtaining their degrees? We recognize active duty. There are some challenges there from a scheduling perspective, from a time zone perspective, you could be really anywhere in the world. WGU is a military-friendly institution, that has done a lot of things to really provide a pathway to success and we wanted to get into that today. Kirk, why don't we start with you and Tanya chime in as well. What's the first thing that students need to do to be successful at WGU?

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Thanks, Jeff. It's key for each and military student they already have the skillset for strategy and planning. But as a program mentor, planning that term with your students putting together the academic plan, the strategy of how they're going to negotiate those six months. Since the active-duty students are using tuition assistance, it's key that you put together the courses and ensure they're covered by tuition assistance and leverage all resources, those course instructors, different resources to make sure that that student is successful those entire six minutes because that tuition assistance needs to be used and if it's not used, the student will have to pay that money back.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Kirk, thank you. Really good information, Tanya, how about an example is there's something that you might be able to shed some light on here.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Make sure students have completed their TA required courses and they can accelerate at no additional charge. I do stress that military students try to start with the 12 CUs and accelerate courses and that start out with a heavy workload in regards to courses. Some military students like to do 18 CUs at a time and it can be very challenging, especially for a first term. Definitely keep that in mind.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Gotcha, so it's important to get in and to work hard but also to, I don't want to say pace yourself.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Pace Yourself.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Treat this almost as a marathon where it's like, baby steps get started generally speaking, and then from there, work with your mentor to see if you can take on more. But you don't need to accomplish it all in the first term. Is that what I'm hearing?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Correct.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Okay. That's really great information. At my time at WGU, I have learned that no matter how large the university grows, each student is always meant to feel like they are the only student. It's in large part because of the model that WGU is created with these mentors, you both being mentors, which is awesome that we're speaking. Because you're talking with your students every week or every other week and it's very personalized to their experience and the needs that they have.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

That's a good point, Jeff, because I think as students come to WGU, they're looking for that additional support and I call it the tripod because you need the student, the program mentor, and the course instructor to all work together to support that student. If one of those pieces aren't synchronized and you're not going to have full support for the student.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Got you. To make sure that I'm clear on this and that those that are tuning in because we may have some prospective students as well listening and we welcome them to this audience. Every student is given a program mentor, and that is like yourself, Tanya, and Kirk, where you work individually one-on-one with the student through their journey. Is that correct?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

That's correct.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Then how does a course instructor differ from a program mentor?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

The course instructor is going to help the student with course-specific questions and drill down into that course material that they're studying to help them understand a little bit better and provide them with resources that may help them achieve their objectives in the course.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Awesome. The program mentor works with the student the whole time and a course instructor remains with the particular course and helps in your words. I like that drilling down with needs or concerns with the subject matter that they're studying. Did I get that right?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

That's correct.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Awesome. Well, excellent. Yeah. I like, Kirk, how you say that it's the tripod. It's all three of them working together to help the student, and in this case, the military student be successful. Good information the next question I wanted to ask and talk a little bit more about specifically for this audience and military and that is the financial plans needed to be successful. Tanya, do you want to start on this. What do students need to do to work things out financially to be successful?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Sure. There are few things military students should do for financial planning. First, they should verify how much TAs are available for their academic year.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

TA stands for Tuition Assistance?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

That's correct.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

What does that look like for military students? What is tuition assistance exactly?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Most active-duty military, they have a set of funding that they have for that year or that they can take part in and use towards their education.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Okay, Excellent. I cut you off, so continue on.

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

It's fine. After verifying how much tuition assistance is available, then you want to consult with your TA rep at WGU on how to use the funding effectively during the academic year. Because for military students, there can be many variables involved in each student's situations must be reviewed and addressed individually. Your TA rep will be able to address those situations and give you the best guidance. Also, depending on how much TA is available, military students should also pursue other financial aid options to help them with funding if the tuition assistance does not cover all of their tuition. This can be done by submitting the FASFA each year, applying for grants and scholarships with WGU as well as outside scholarships, for example, with organizations in their local community, or apply for state and federal funded grants and scholarships. Then lastly, military students will need to verify their TA status with the WGU's, VA office by the 15th day in their term to confirm the payment.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

I heard and I want one of you to confirm this for me that about, I want to say it's 10 percent of WGU current students are active-duty veterans, or family of military. Is that correct?

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

I don't know. I would say higher than that. With everything you just said there, I would think it would be higher than that. Because I have more than 10 percent of my 100, it would fall into those categories.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Well, maybe I have an outdated number which is the case. I guess my point is, that is a large number considering that WGU's current enrollment is about 130,000. So safe to say that probably 20,000, somewhere in that range, probably 20,000-30,000 have some military status. My understanding, the university has, and that's what we're talking about here today. But they have a lot of resources dedicated to helping military students and I think first among them is the financial aid and the tuition assistance benefits. Is that right?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Yes.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

If you look at the tuition assistances our military active duty get, it's not going to cover a whole year, so we already know that up-front. You have to begin the planning process early, as Tanya talked about with submitting your FAFSA and going after some scholarships outside and WGU type scholarships to supplement what they're not going to have or else that student's going to have to pay out of pocket.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Okay.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Another critical thing is that TA funding is normally slow. The PM needs to make sure that the communication between the TA office at WGU and the student and the PM are continually working and also with the financial service office. Because occasionally notes will come to the students and they will be confused on why their payment is not in place. That funding is slow and good communication prevents any kind of frustration with the student as they move through their courses.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

That's a really good call out and again, to work with the various teams to make sure that everything is in place because it is a slow process. You might feel like, "Oh, my word did I not do something? Are they waiting on me?" But being able to make sure that all the boxes are checked, so to speak, can make sure that everything is in place to receive the funding, so that's a really good call out. Now I want to ask when a student is deployed or finds other circumstances that maybe takes them away from their home, how would you advise that they stay connected with others and with the university?

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Really, this is tough for students and this is where, as a program mentor, you've got to show some flexibility because when a student deploys, automatically they're going to be focusing on some real-world missions, they're going to pull them away from their study. Not only do you have to have them do some research ahead of time on what kind of connectivity is going to be there, but you've got to also plan appropriate courses that are going to allow them to maybe be in a course for a few days and then be out of

that course for a week or two and still be able to retain the knowledge. I always have my students research connectivity wherever they're going, internet options. Most military base or posts have education centers, where they're deploying, so they can use those centers potentially take in sit assessments. They can also use those centers for some strong WiFi or internet to be able to complete courses. Once you find out what connectivity package the student's going to have when they deploy, then you can lay out the courses for success. I tend to stay away from certifications because those are heavy-duty courses that require intense work, day after day, and normally just lay out a light package. You can also have some flexibility to maybe even go to part-time status. But all this will take some prior planning so that's why it's key that you're always talking to your students, aware of any kind of deployments they're going to have as you move through their journey.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Got you. Students working with their mentors, if they know of circumstances or things, be very open about it, be very vocal about it, so that the program mentor might be able to, again tap into some of these resources or make adjustments to help them be successful.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Correct.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

We covered the three sections. I do want to give you guys a final word here, I'm going to summarize. But were there any other areas you wanted to spend a little bit more time on?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

I do want to just expound on the deploying thing and I've said this because I do have a few students that are deployed to Africa and they let me know, it's very important to, as you said before, notify your program mentor when you're having deployments or exercises. Sometimes there are exercises that take a student away for 30 days, 60 days, and in order to make the most of making progress in your term or not being withdrawn from the school because of no progress, is communicating with their program mentor.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Really good call out as well. Thank you, Tanya, for sharing that.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Jeff, one more point, and Tanya covered this. If you're deployed to a foreign country, you're going to have some time zone issues, so you've got to look for flexibility with how you're going to communicate with your student. It may have to be by email or text. Or you may have to make a unique call late at night or early in the morning to take care of that student, so that's where a PM has to be flexible.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Got you. That is a good point because it is a 24-hour world and yeah if you're on the other side of the world, that certainly could impact your studies. Well, Tanya and Kirk, this has been very good information. It's been great connecting with you. I think we're going to record another couple of episodes with some additional resources, with some additional information and I'm excited about that because I said, in the beginning, this is important stuff. We want to make sure that these students have all the resources available to them to be successful for whatever the degree they're seeking, whatever their career path looks like. Really quick just to summarize the three key points that were made today.

First, it's important to create and review an academic plan with your WGU team, the tripod that we talked about. Program mentor, the course instructors as well, and then obviously the student. Secondly, to develop a sound financial plan with the VA team and taking tuition assistance, whether it's financial aid, scholarships, other things like that. Then, third is again to communicate if there is going to be a deployment or any circumstance that's going to impact connectivity. We want to make sure that students are able to stay connected both literally and figuratively. Stay connected with the mentor, makes sure that everybody is on the same page in terms of where you're at, what you're facing and then also that the Internet connection and making sure that you have the ability to take assessments, to get in and to engage with your coursework. Again, really good information.

Kirk and Tanya, I'd love to give each of you the final words. Tanya, do you mind if we just start with you and finish with Kirk?

Speaker #4 (Tanya Smith):

Sure. Thanks, everybody for listening. I hope the information that we provided helped. As well as to perspective students definitely, welcome. I hope you join us.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Thank you, Tanya. Kirk.

Speaker #3 (Kirk Wallace):

Awesome. I would just say for all students military and beyond, just lean on your program mentor and course instructor. That's our job, is to serve selfless service, just like you do in the military. Lean on us because we have the experiences and the resources to make the students successful.

Speaker #2 (Jeff Burton):

Excellent. Well, Kirk and Tanya, thank you again for the insight, we'll have you on a future episode. Everybody stay safe out there. Happy learning, all the best as you work hard to complete your degree. For Kirk and Tanya, this is Jeff and we'll sign off for today. See you.

Speaker #1 (Narrator):

WGU, a new kind of you.