

BY [KATHY DEAN](#) / [FEATURES](#) / NOVEMBER 2013

WORTH THE SACRIFICE



Loyalty. Duty. Respect. Selfless Service.
Honor. Integrity. Personal Courage.

These seven core values of the United States Army – known by the acronym LDRSHIP – also correspond to the Christian leadership focus of the University of Mobile, said [Jameron Gatson](#), '07 and '13.

A 2nd lieutenant in the Alabama National Guard, [Gatson](#) said these core values did more than make him a good soldier – they also made him an excellent college student.

Now a children's therapist at AltaPointe Health Services in Mobile, [Gatson](#) said going through basic training during his freshman year, then a year-long deployment to Iraq during his sophomore year, could have derailed his college education plans.

But the faculty and staff went all out to make his college experience mesh with his military service.

"They worked with me, they were supportive. They made it a good transition, both leaving and coming back," he said. As a member of the National Guard, [Gatson](#) was a full-time undergraduate student majoring in sociology, then a graduate student in the master's program in marriage and family counseling.

"I was managing a full-time class load, drilling one weekend a month, and keeping up with all of my National Guard duties and my schoolwork," he said. He had support and encouragement all along the way, from professors to the financial aid office staff.

The financial benefits of military service helped tremendously. As a "Military Friendly School" participating in the Post-9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon Program, the university helps veterans and their dependents navigate through paperwork required to make the most of their education benefits from the Veteran's Administration. Students enrolled in ROTC also have the benefit of personal attention from the school's counselors who make sure they are receiving the most benefits, scholarships and grants possible.

"It's always been a bonus in serving your country that they will pay for our school, or a percentage of it. It's a blessing and privilege to be able to serve, come back home, and reap the benefits of your sacrifice. As a deployed veteran, I was able to see more benefits and was able to earn a master's degree almost for free with the National Guard and VA paying," Gatson said.

Paying for College

Assistant Director of Enrollment Services Rebecca Robinson '05 and Financial Aid Counselor Shelisskia Douggans work one-on-one with students who are eligible for education benefits as a result of their military service. Currently, 64 of the more than 1,600 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at UMobile receive some form of military-related education benefit.

"These families have given so much for our country. It is really rewarding to know that we are playing a small role in helping them make their college dreams a reality," Robinson said.

Douggans said she takes pride in assisting military families with the high level of customer service and personal touch that UMobile is known for providing.

"Military families have made a great sacrifice for our country, and military service can be hard on a family. I find the most rewarding thing about helping our military families is, once I have assisted the family with processing their VA benefits, how the family becomes so comfortable with me and how appreciative they are that I go the extra mile to assist them. I feel this is the least I can do to give back for what they have done for our country," Douggans said.

As a UMobile graduate, Robinson knows the school is a good fit for military families.

"Students who attend UMobile have a different experience than they would at most schools because of the personal attention we strive to give them," Robinson said. "Whether that's through the enrollment process or in the classroom, UMobile has cultivated a place of caring people who love to help others."

As part of cultivating that special place, the university's Development Office is searching for donors to contribute funds that will create an endowed scholarship fund for veterans, service members and their family members. Anyone may donate any amount toward the fund online at www.umobile.edu/giving or call 251.442.2287 for more information.

The College Soldier

Gatson said there is an advantage to being a college student with military experience, and UMobile professors agree.

"The core values I learned in the National Guard helped me to be a more dedicated and committed student," said Gatson. By the time he was finishing graduate school, he was also going through officer candidate school.

He likened the process to putting gold through a refiner's fire.

"The two paths were coinciding with each other. In both places, I would hear terms like 'ethics,' 'values,' and 'integrity.' I heard the word 'integrity' so much in the marriage and family counseling program, and it confirmed that I was where I needed to be in my life," Gatson said.

Sophomore Gary Hamner said growing up in a military family and his current ROTC experience influence how he approaches college.

"If you are going to last in the military, either you already have that goal-oriented mindset, or you have it instilled in you when you go through training," he said.

As a veteran's dependent, Hamner was able to use his father's Post 9-11 GI Bill benefits to pay for his first year of college. By his sophomore year, Hamner had a high grade point average, good PT (physical fitness) scores in ROTC, and received a three-year ROTC scholarship that pays for the remainder of his bachelor's degree.

Hamner plans to make the U.S. Army his career, attend Special Forces school and become an officer in the Green Berets.

In addition to ROTC class and lab, Hamner takes a full class load at UMobile, serves as a Student Government Association senator, and is a member of the Honors Council in the Honors Program. He enjoys talking about the military with Associate Professor of English Dr. Doug Mitchell, who also grew up in a military family and served in the U.S. Coast Guard.

The political science major said he chose to minor in philosophy after taking "Introduction to Philosophy" with Dr. Ted Mashburn, associate dean of the College of Arts & Sciences.

Hamner believes his philosophy minor will help him most in his military career. A philosophy minor, he said, forces you to think about why you believe what you do.

"I will look to the Lord when I am going through something in the military that is really tough," Hamner said. "I will make friends in the military, and I will lose those friends, and that will be difficult. But I have the Lord. When you have Him as your foundation, it makes you stronger."

Enriching Experiences

UMobile professors enjoy having students with military backgrounds in their classrooms, for a variety of reasons.

Mitchell said military students bring a wealth of experience in the wider world back into the classroom.

"A student who has finished a tour as a Marine in Afghanistan looks at issues of ethics, the question of 'just war', the experience on a battlefield, the encounter with different cultures, and political questions differently. They have to grow up fast," Mitchell said.

Mitchell said his own military service gave him a newfound discipline and a desire to apply himself. He sees a similar drive in students like Hamner.

"If there is a military man or woman in class, you've got someone who understands how to lead a team to the completion of a task. They also tend to be more selfless as part of a team; one thing you learn very quickly in the military is that you as an individual don't matter as much as you thought you did. You can, however, work with others to accomplish extraordinary things," Mitchell said.

Athletic Training Program Director Dr. William Carroll is a veteran of the Vietnam conflict who earned two Purple Hearts, a Silver Star Medal and Distinguished Service Cross. He said veterans can be a great attribute to any academic program because their life experiences "breed maturity and a fierce determination to succeed and not waste their time because they have a higher understanding of how precious time can be. One of my favorite sayings is 'For those who fought for it, freedom has a flavor the protected will never know.'"

Dr. Larissa Walker, assistant professor of biology, said veterans bring a sense of sacrifice and selflessness to the classroom.

"They show the younger, traditional students that the world is bigger than themselves and, if something is important enough to you, you will sacrifice whatever it takes to pursue and achieve it," Walker said.

Veterans' families who take advantage of the military's education benefits also benefit from UMobile's personal attention, as well as resources such as the Student Success Center and Chora Godwin Learning Center.

Dr. Doug Wilson, dean of the School of Christian Ministries and director of the Intercultural Studies Program, said one of the challenges that children of military personnel face is that they are "third-culture kids."

Wilson, who has three sons with military connections, has a special understanding of the challenges of students who have grown up in the military life.

"They grow up in one or more cultures, often feeling the same kind of isolation that missionary kids and children of expatriate businessmen and diplomats face. We are trying to meet the needs of these students through our Intercultural Studies Program. Some of our majors are third-culture kids with military connections. By teaching them to analyze various cultural dynamics, they are learning to overcome the barriers that separate them from their peers," Wilson said.

Assistant Professor of Political Science Dr. Julie Biskner said veterans bring an added dimension to political science classes.

"They can talk more knowledgeably about how the military works, dispelling myths, and what it's like working for the government," Biskner said.

Dr. Cassidy Cooper, assistant professor of sociology, said the Air Force reservists and a retired Army veteran in her classes "bring an incredible amount of maturity, thoughtfulness and real-world integration to the classroom."

She said a classroom discussion about the Stanford Prison experiment in which undergraduate "guards" began to abuse "prisoners" after only two days resulted in one of the best learning experiences because of the military students' observations and experiences.

"They understood the psychosocial pressure to conform in an environment perceived as dangerous," she said. "Their ability to connect theoretical and experimental research with personal, practical experience led to one of the best conversations about research ethics, and our roles as Christians, that I have ever had in a college classroom."

Patriotism Runs Deep

Patriotism is a theme that runs deep throughout the UMobile experience. One event in which that value is exhibited is the annual University of Mobile Leadership Banquet. With speakers that have included former U.S. President George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, among other national leaders, the banquet has served as a celebration of service to God and country, while raising funds that enable the university to provide scholarships.

Retired Lt. Col. Oliver North will be the featured speaker at the 9th annual University of Mobile Leadership Banquet on March 27, 2014. The combat-decorated U.S. Marine is a No. 1 best-selling author, founder of a small business, an inventor with three U.S. patents, a syndicated columnist, and host of the award-winning military documentary series "War Stories" on Fox News Channel.

Tickets and sponsorships are available for the gala evening that will be held at the Arthur Outlaw Mobile Convention Center. For tickets and more information, visit www.umobile.edu/banquet2014 or call the UMobile Development Office at 251.442.2598.

A Supportive Campus

Wayne Sirmon, a retired colonel with the Alabama State Defense Force, a volunteer group within the Alabama National Guard, is an adjunct history instructor at UMobile. With a background that includes two years as an active duty Army officer, 12 years in the National Guard and Army Reserves, plus running a small family printing business, Sirmon brings a wealth of experience and insight into teaching Western Civilization, U.S. History and Geography courses.

"Almost every semester I'll have a student who is an Army brat or Air Force kid," Sirmon said. The university "is a warm and caring environment for all faculty, staff and students. Some of it's the size of campus, and some of it is the people. Here there is a wider acceptance of people who have a different background or goals in life, and the fact that my background is different from yours is not a barrier. There's acceptance. You don't have a feeling of necessity to start a club for people who have worn the uniform or combat boots."

Because Sirmon and his wife believe so strongly in the school, they donate his entire adjunct pay to an endowed scholarship they established in memory of Sirmon's father, William Joseph Sirmon Jr.

That recognition of the value of a UMobile education for all students attracts veterans such as Robert J. Williams Jr., a disabled veteran with 23 years of Army service. Williams founded and pastors River's Edge Outreach Ministry in Robertsedale, AL, and chose UMobile in order to pursue a theology degree and more fully use his gift of teaching people how to apply the Word in their everyday life.

"I wanted to get a deeper understanding of what I was teaching, to be able to take it a little bit further," Williams said.

As a disabled veteran, his books and tuition are paid for through the VA. His sons are able to use dependent benefits for college, as will his wife when she enrolls at UMobile in the spring.

Williams said he made the right choice to enroll at UMobile.

"When I visited the campus, it was instantaneous for me. I am thoroughly satisfied with the choice I have made," Williams said.

Professors say they are glad veterans and their dependents are choosing UMobile. They have seen traditional students thank veterans for their service, learn leadership skills from them during team assignments, and gain a broader perspective of the world.

The university celebrated its veteran students, faculty, staff and alumni during its first VA Appreciation Day in early November. The public celebration was in recognition of the sacrifice military personnel and their families make, and a way for the UMobile family to say "thank you."

Dr. Wilson added a personal note.

"I am grateful that we have men and women faithfully serving our country who have chosen to gain an education at the University of Mobile," Wilson said. "From my family to theirs: Thank you for your service!"



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