

Theme Music:

Please listen carefully.

Taylor Pardue:

Welcome to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast, telling the world how we Think and Do through the support of our friends, alumni and more. I'm your host, Taylor Pardue.

On this episode, we're joined by Nick Drake, director of NC State's Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services, to discuss how private support enables our military-affiliated students to Think and Do.

Thanks so much for joining us today, Nick. To kick things off, just tell listeners a little bit about yourself and what brought you to NC State.

Nick Drake:

Yeah, great. Thanks, Taylor, for having me. So, yeah, my name is Nick Drake. I have the privilege of serving as the director of Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services here at NC State. We are now in year seven, so next month we will be seven years new, as we like to say. But I've been here at the university just shy of 10 years. So, I originally came in here with University Recreation, now Wellness and Recreation. Worked in the fitness area for quite a few years, have a sport background.

But prior to that, I mean, I guess even during that time I served in the military. So, got into the U.S. Army Reserves in 2000, right before the Bush-Gore election. Served roughly 10 years. Enlisted, did a couple deployments, Iraq being the culminating one in 2008. And it really led me into the higher education field at that point in time when I came back attending grad school, getting into recreation. And then, ultimately, it led me here in 2014 as the assistant director of Fitness and Wellness. And then, from the end of 2016 till now, I've had the opportunity to work with our nearly 2,400 military-connected students here at State.

Taylor Pardue:

That's great. And it sounds like a perfect blend of your background and expertise coming into the role, too.

Nick Drake:

I think that was the easiest transition, right? So, being here in Fitness and Wellness, they kind of have their fingerprint on a lot of things around campus, especially nowadays with wellness being such an integral part of the success of our student body here at NC State. I had the opportunity to meet a lot of folks here at campus already and start building out those networks. So, it really was a natural transition going from that role here, where a lot of those folks really are involved in helping making sure our students are successful.

Taylor Pardue:

So, what all is involved with your current role?

Nick Drake:

So, as the director, we actually, and I think I can probably get into this story just a little bit later, but we just expanded our staff for the first time. So, we got a full-time coordinator, Lucretia King. She started in August, so right in the hustle and bustle of the start of the semester. But previously, up until that time, our office really was established, and myself being the flagship and the only full-time staff member, was

to ensure that we help students that are transitioning out of military service, help them successfully come into the university. So, part of that is just advising on competitive requirements, whether I apply as a first-year student, whether I come in as a transfer student, and if I'm a transfer, what does that look like?

And then, ultimately, once we get them to the university, it's that transition piece. And I'll probably mention this later on, but the military and civilian culture really do run 180 to one another. So, what I mean by that is, in a military, you're kind of given a right and left limit. You're not told how to do it, but you're given a timeline, and you always have a chain of command and someone that's responsible or you can go to to ask questions. Whereas here on a college campus, especially something as big as NC State, knowing exactly what offices do what and who's in charge of what can be very daunting.

It goes back to, if I don't show up for class and I'm in a 300-person class, does anyone notice? In the military, you notice. Here, it's just move along and kind of figure it out yourself. And then, ultimately, once they're here, we want to help them persist to graduation. So, a lot of different programs, activities throughout the year, community engagement, community-building-type things we'll do. And then, ultimately, what does that transition look like for, specifically, the 850 veterans that we have here at any given semester — in any given year, I should say. Those are the students who we're really trying to help get connected to corporations and mentors and things like that outside of NC State, so that they can start building out that network and finding meaningful careers and employment.

Taylor Pardue:

You mentioned 850, and then a little earlier, 2,400 students. NC State is very proud of its military ties. Talk a little bit about the history of how that all came about and why your unit is so important.

Nick Drake:

Absolutely, Taylor. I'll start there at the 2,400. So, here, currently at the university, we have just shy of 2,400 military-connected students. So, what does that mean? So, 850 roughly, they self-identify through the application process, or later on, once they're here, through MyPack Portal, they will self-identify as either a current service member, meaning they're on active duty, their National Guard or reserve, or they've completely separated from service, meaning they've fulfilled their service obligation or have retired from a service. And then, we have an additional 1,500 that self-identified through that same process as either being a child of a veteran or a spouse of a veteran. So, again, how we serve those populations is going to look quite different.

Now, getting back the history piece of it. I always remember Admiral Suggs, so Benny Suggs, he was a lifelong Wolfpacker. Loves the Wolfpack. If you've ever talked to Benny, you'll know and you'll feel it from him. But he always used to say when he'd give speeches that NC State has graduated more flag and general officers than any four-year institution in the country outside of those that have a core cadets or those service academies. You think of West Point and Annapolis and things like that. So, that's pretty impressive in its own right.

Tying back to World War I, we're one of the few college campuses that have a living memorial on campus. So, again, we have the Memorial Belltower that was dedicated to honor those NC State Wolfpackers that lost their life defending our freedom in World War I. So, the history dates back quite a long ways. And then, lastly, I think I would be remiss if I didn't share. So, I told you I had been here about 10 years. Some really good friends and colleagues, still good friends and colleagues, they tailgate obviously for the games down there at Carter-Finley. And it was my very first game. And I'm an SEC guy. I mean, I came from a lot of SEC schools, so I'll put that out there. But I came here and the band was

going through, and they started playing what I thought was the army song. I mean, it is legitimately the same.

It's the red and white song here at NC State, the same melody and everything. And I later found out through Lieutenant General Bulger here in the history department — he's retired — that it was in fact the same artist that had done that rendition, it's just a sped-up version for NC State compared to the army version. So, I was not wrong, but I was not right either. And then, of course, our ROTC programs are second to none in the country. Just phenomenal output of, I mentioned it earlier, top-notch officers and leaders in our U.S. military, which is quite impressive.

Taylor Pardue:

Yeah. So, Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services, obviously very important in helping support our current military-affiliated students, but, just as the name suggests, it's also supported and helped by our military-affiliated alumni as well. Talk a little bit about the gift that led to that naming, and just the overall support that our alumni provide.

Nick Drake:

Yeah, I mean you nailed it out of the park. Jeff and Kelly are phenomenal, just great people in general. And coming in here as a director, I moved from an assistant director in recreation, where you have the cover and then you're all of a sudden in a director role. And I think it was February timeframe of 2017, I was a brand-new director, I think three months onto the job, was invited to the chancellor's reception for Military Appreciation Day basketball game over At PNC Arena. And this is the moment in time where I had met Jeff and Kelly, and didn't even know it. It's like you're going and you're meeting a lot of people in the room, it can be a little overwhelming.

Taylor Pardue:

No pressure.

Nick Drake:

Yeah. And it's first time being in that environment. And they've worked and had a close relationship with Alan Taylor here at the university. And Alan had reached out to me shortly after that time, talking about or introducing Jeff's background. And a 1991 alum here, naval ROTC program. Very passionate about what we're doing here at the university. And this being a new opportunity, because again, new unit, and it's an opportunity to support military-connected students and their success here at NC State. So, that led to some more in-depth conversations with Jeff and Kelly.

And it led to Veterans Day 2018, Jeff and Kelly had given their first significant gift, which really was the spearhead to what we have today that hopefully we'll get to talk about here in a few minutes. They established a \$250,000 endowment at that time, and they were doing matching gifts to help build up our enhancement fund. And our enhancement fund is what helps us fuel all of our programs and events and things like that for our student population. So, I really do give a lot of credit to Jeff and Kelly because that really is kind of what's gotten us to where we're at today. I don't think we'd be in the same — I know we wouldn't be in the same position if we didn't have them or met them at that point in time.

Taylor Pardue:

Feel free to keep going. How did that original endowment gift lead to the naming gift?

Nick Drake:

Yeah, so we talked about the original one in 2018. In 2021, so, Jeff and Kelly officially named Military and Veteran Services, so it then became named Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services. So, Jeff and Kelly gave a \$1.15 million gift for that naming right. And I mentioned Lucretia King, our new coordinator. Those are the fruits of those gifts. So, right now, I think when that's fully endowed, it's going to kick off enough money that's going to support most of the salary for that. But up until that point, we had used that for orientation-type programs. So, as students, again, transitioned in, we talked about the importance of entering into a college from service. We do a lot of community-building. So, for instance, this November Military Appreciation Day game, we also couple it with a tailgate. The intent there is to not only invite students, but it's faculty and staff, and also alums of the program or veteran alums that are coming back to help build out that network in that community.

And then, throughout the year, we do a lot of different programs where we connect with employers. We just got done with two Whole Vet events, which is a nonprofit working in the career-transition area. So, again, we've had 50-plus turnout for those events, and they're meeting with future employers and those who can help mentor them in specific fields and stuff like that. And then, ultimately, once they graduate, it's getting them reconnected through the Alumni Association, but we'll do a ceremony and a graduation recognition for them and their families and things like that.

And then lastly, I think this is probably a big piece, this year we're actually in the process of finishing up a \$100,000 renovation and upgrade of furniture in the Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services space. So, what this project's allowing us to do, it's allowing us to grow, because not only do we have Lucretia and myself, but under the umbrella of Military and Veteran Services, we have our two colleagues from Registration Records, Kyle Snyder and Elysa Weatherbee, who are going to be joining us in that space so that we can create kind of a one-stop feel for all of our military-connected students.

Taylor Pardue:

OK, great.

Nick Drake:

So, the project's allowing us to fit four professional staff in that space, but also give back over 200 square feet to the students, so we're able to create some pods, and it's kind of cool. Previously, it was kind of an awkward space. It worked very well for us, but it was awkward, with a lot of bulky office space. So, we kind of did something that made a little bit more sense and shortened them up a little bit. And then, we were able to give back some collaborative spaces and things like that to the students.

Taylor Pardue:

I love that. I love how even things like that ultimately come back to benefit the military-affiliated students. And then, also, you mentioned earlier, not just helping with the transition from military life to college life, or even just helping them succeed while they're here in college, but that postgraduate life, too, really making connections between career opportunities for them. I think that's great.

Nick Drake:

Yeah. Well, if you look at the national data, too, especially for the transition out of military service to a university setting or just civilian life in general, career workforce, whatever it may be, there's a lot of research in that area showing the issues and the challenges that specifically veterans face. But what we've found out is that, here at NC State, the uniqueness of our university being a STEM institution, having more competitive transfer requirements, a lot of our veterans who are transitioning in have been

taking either classes while they've been on active duty, so they've been taking one or two a semester for the last couple of years. So, they're at least getting a familiarity with how to succeed or how to be a successful student. Or they're separating and then they're going to a junior-college route, where, again, that's a great stepping stone because the junior colleges, and I always put a plug in for the UNC System community college office in particular, because they're great partners, that they do a phenomenal job teaching to the 16-year-old pre-college student that's still in high school to the 80-year-old lifelong learner and everywhere in between, that a lot of times that's just a natural transition for our veterans, too, who are older, not even tend to be older, but are. Our average age veteran here is 31.

A lot of them tend to be married or have partners, some of them have children. They have part-time jobs that they're still doing. So, for instance, a lot of our folks are still living in the Fayetteville area. So, at Fort Liberty, they transition out of service, they already have a mortgage and a house, they're married, they have kids, kids are in school. So, it's easier for them to kind of suck it up and make the travel down here to NC State. So, you can see that non-traditional piece really poking through. How we would program for these students is going to be much different than we would program for our, maybe, let's call it our children of veterans who are traditional age, living on campus that are here all the time. It's going to look much different how we do programs for those different groups.

But what we found here at NC State, getting back to the original part of the question, was that transition piece, once they're here, "How do I get into the career field that I want to be in?" Because a lot of veterans, they're very ... I'm a veteran myself, and I think of, like, we're very regimented in our way. We know we've got to go A to B, and we're not going to be stopped. That's part of what we want to do is, how do we check the box to get where we need to be? So, some of them come in here and into this environment and let's, for instance, say that they're taking an MBA degree program, and they already have a particular field in mind because that's what they know. But while they're here, our office, we try to help do that. We try to get them involved with the Career Development Center and other nonprofits working in this space to kind of broaden their network a bit to understand that what they don't know exists out there, that could be a possibility.

So, there's companies and fields that they weren't even thinking about, and now they're working in those fields because of it, right?

Taylor Pardue:

And like you mentioned earlier, not just telling them that possibilities exist, but really putting them in touch with employers and making those connections.

Nick Drake:

Yeah, I mean, we've found that ... We just had Brian Pezzulo. Brian Pezzulo is a perfect example. He was on campus yesterday. Brian came in here, went to Wake Tech. Got out of the Marine Corps probably around 2014, started at Wake Tech. Came over here to NC State. Did his bachelor's degree. Worked in our office, and then he stayed and did his MBA. But Brian is a perfect example that I like to use because, anytime we hosted stuff, Brian, whether he was interested or not, was always there. And from that, he built out a connection with Deloitte, and he's been working with Deloitte now for the last three, four years, whatever it's been. And he's moved up, but now he's paying it forward, giving it back. He's here at NC State, meeting with the students.

And those type of groups want to hire veterans. And in a lot of cases, as long as you have the piece of paper, the degree, they can mold you or they can get you set up for success in those areas. So, what they're looking to do is get students two or three years out from graduation, not the typical career-hiring fairs that you see. Not saying they're not great, they absolutely serve a purpose, but the intent

behind what we're trying to do is build that network. So, it's kind of an informal interview process over a two- or three-year period of time. So, that way, they already know what their transition plan is once they're leaving NC State and "I'm going to work for Deloitte" or "I'm working for ARA," or Google, or whatever it's going to be. They already kind of have an idea. So, it's not showing up and just throwing paper out on a table and hoping something sticks. We're really trying to plan that out intentionally.

Taylor Pardue:

You mentioned how Brian was paying it forward. How are some of the other military-affiliated alumni giving back to the university as well?

Nick Drake:

Oh, absolutely. So, we have an enhancement fund that's established here, and I can tell you, we've had a lot of great success. And again, going back to Jeff and Kelly in 2018, when that was really in its first year. Over that time, we've had money that has just rolled in there that's been passive. And we've had some that we've done specific campaigns that have been targeted. So, for instance, we have one upcoming starting Nov. 1, running through Veterans Day. We're doing a crowdfunding project. And really, the intent behind that is to help replenish some of those funds so we can continue programming at a high level to replenish some of those funds that we use to do the facility enhancements. So, those are big things for us.

Additionally, we've also tried to use creative ways here at NC State to enhance current projects or events. So, for instance, we've twice now applied for grants through the NC State Foundation, those specific grants originally in 2017 to get furniture for our space. So, when we started, it was TJ Willis over in Campus Enterprises. TJ is such a great guy. But when we moved into that space, I had literally a rolling chair at a table with some caster wheels on it, and I had a filing cabinet. It was just Nick to his thoughts back then. I was still borrowing a computer from Wellness and Recreation at the time, too. So, didn't have anything.

But in 2017, 2018, when we did that original grant, it allowed us to get computers for students to use, a printer set up. It allowed us to get furniture in the space, so that it wasn't just kind of bare bones and what was in there before. And then, last, fast-forward to this last one this year, we went back to the grant for a collaborative project that I am on working with some colleagues across campus and also in the community, some notable alums, on establishing a veteran garden, veteran park, veteran memorial, whatever that title ends up being, on the Court of North Carolina. So, the scope of the project has already been laid out, and this grant's going to help fund landscaping, movement of a light pole so that we have a direct sight line to the Belltower, because, again, that's part of the significance of this space is that it's hallowed ground already on the Court of North Carolina because of the history of what takes place, or what did take place, in that space.

But what's kind of cool is there's a direct sight line from the area where this military garden is going to be, direct sight line to the Belltower. The Memorial Belltower, as we mentioned earlier, is a memorial to those who were lost in World War I. So, we're putting some plaques in that space. We're doing kind of a scroll of honor. So, we'll have a QR code on a bronze plaque with some language there, letting people know what it is. But it'll be an active scroll, fluid scroll, which will be maintained on a website through my office, through Military and Veteran Services, that will honor all those who have been lost, who have served in the military that have been lost, whether it's in active combat or training while actively engaged in the military and have graduated from NC State. So, that's really a cool project that I think I'm proud of, at least be part of, and the folks that we're working on, because that one's going to be a significant thing that's going to always have a lasting impact here on the campus and what it signifies.

Taylor Pardue:

Absolutely. So, in addition to all of this, there are also direct scholarships that these students can take advantage of and apply for. Tell us a little bit about those and how they work.

Nick Drake:

Here at the university, we have just shy of 20 scholarships at the university, varying in different ranges from \$500 all the way up to full tuition, that are military-connected scholarships. And by military-connected, I'm getting a little out of my realm of who, I shared that I serve. A few of them are ROTC-specific as well. But what I would tell you is that, over the years, these scholarships have helped significantly to students. A lot of them do go through an application process. So, in particular, the Lanning-Green scholarship and the Carroll and Shirley Scott scholarship. These are two, specifically, that my office, I'm part of a team that review these scholarships each year to determine awards for the students. But a bunch of these are also need-based as well.

But one in particular, and this is a recent one from last year, is Jerry and Pat Collier have committed to the university money for future scholarships for students in engineering, specifically civil engineering, and then branching out to the other engineering majors. And this is going to be significant in the realm that it's going to give nearly a hundred full paid tuition and fee scholarships to veterans who are attending NC State. This has not been seen anywhere in the country, which is in its own right pretty impressive.

But I will also say this, that Jerry and Pat have a current scholarship that's already here at the university that student veterans are able to apply for and get. Currently, Ethan Watson is on that scholarship. So, their impact and the love and the passion that they have for this demographic, it's second to none. So, just Jerry and Pat, the opportunities that we get to spend with them and just being great human beings that they are and the passion that they have for this population makes our job a lot easier and certainly much more enjoyable, and it's something I'm proud of as the director here to be able to help guide that along.

Taylor Pardue:

So, we've talked about how people have already gotten involved with Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services, but talk to listeners who maybe have not given before, but explain a little bit about why now is such a great time to get involved and the ongoing needs that we have.

Nick Drake:

We want to be ahead of the curve. So, as we look at best practices around the country and things that we're doing, we don't look at best practices because we want to do what other schools are doing. We want to serve our veterans that much better. So, folks that are willing to support and give to Military and Veteran Services goes back directly to the students through programming, through staffing. So, I will say this, in, see, I got to go back in my time, 2022, so, it was about a year ago. We went through our program review, which is probably an every five- to eight-year process where our program will have an external and internal review team that'll come in place. They'll peel back everything. Myself, as a director, I wrote a comprehensive self-study.

So, again, the object of it, right, is to be transparent on what we've done so that we can figure out the best ways to move forward and the next best steps. So, from that report comes a series of recommendations, and that's the end goal, right? The reviewers provide you with some recommendations. A few of the recommendations looking at the national data show that, here at NC State, the number of students that we serve, we're still low in terms of the number of full-time staff we

have dedicated to serve this population. So, for instance, we have more than 1,100 students who are currently, this semester, this fall 2023 semester, are on some chapter of veterans-education benefits. The VA, the national recommendation is that you have one professional staff, a certified official, for every 200 students on benefits, and we have two full-time.

So, again, you could see that would be 400. We'd have a gap of roughly 700, so those two have come right down. So, my point being is that gifts are going to help with programming and also for future needs when we talk about staffing, and then also future expansion of, maybe, our current footprint, but also expanding the Centennial Campus.

So, again, here at the university, we're located on Main Campus. A lot of our students are in engineering, so unless they're being intentional about getting on a bus or using transportation to get over to Main Campus, they're probably not accessing, outside of email connection, a lot of our services and programs. So, that would be the future strategic plan here when we're looking three to five years, is how do we get a permanent footprint on Centennial outside of what we're currently doing with just office hours once a week? Getting a staff member and getting permanent hours over here.

And then, lastly, in terms of the giving, right now we have our enhancement fund that we have set up, those current-use funds. It's at the discretion of myself and our team. Those are good because there's not a lot of restrictions on it, meaning that we can do a lot of community-outreach events easily and quickly. So, I think that's one of the strengths of our department. So, for instance, we're doing a partnership with Raleigh Vet Connect, which is a group of veterans who come together. It's just an informal networking. We're going to set it up at Lonnie Poole [Golf Course], and we scheduled that one month out from the date that's going to happen, and we can do things that quick to the benefit of our students.

So, money. And then, lastly, I would say time. Our alumni association, we have a veteran alumni network, so a lot of this group giving back, I'll say it again, is the networking aspect is huge. So, alumni veteran or friends of the program, if they have opportunities or know of opportunities or just want to give back time for programs and just hang out with veterans, we have a lot of different programs throughout the year where these organic engagement-type things can happen naturally. So, if they're willing to give back time, we'd always love to have them.

Taylor Pardue:

Sounds great. Thanks so much for being here today, Nick, and just for all that you're doing for our university. It's been really exciting to hear all that's changed in the last few years, and then to hear about, too, all the big things that are coming up soon. Just really exciting and really appreciate your time.

Nick Drake:

Yeah. Thank you so much, Taylor. I do appreciate the comments, and I definitely appreciate the time. Any opportunity to get the word out about what we do is something we're passionate about, so I'm glad we could do it. Thanks so much.

Taylor Pardue:

To learn more about the Jeffrey Wright Military and Veteran Services and how you can help further its invaluable mission, please visit [veterans.ncsu.edu](http://veterans.ncsu.edu). If you'd like to hear even more stories of Wolfpack success, please subscribe to the NC State Philanthropy Podcast today in the Apple or Google Podcast stores, on Spotify or through Stitcher. Be sure to leave a comment and rating as well to let us know how we're doing. Thanks for listening, and as always, go Pack.