



A SMARTER WAY TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN

By David Eckley, Silas Martinez and Ron Granieri September 8, 2020
<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/podcasts/accession-innovation/>

Welcome to **WAR ROOM** the official podcast of the U.S. Army War College Online Journal. Graciously supported by the Army War College Foundation, please join the conversation at warroom.armywarcollege.edu. We hope you enjoy the program.

The views expressed in this presentation are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

Ron Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Uncle Sam wants you, according to the famous James Montgomery Flagg poster. That direct appeal to the patriotism of young Americans has long lain at the heart of army recruiting, especially in the era of the All-volunteer force. Even if some appeals are evergreen however, strategies for recruiting and retaining appropriate members of the force, what is generally called "accessions" had been revised and reconsidered constantly within the leadership. Our guests today include two members of the U.S. Army War College community who have considered the role of innovation in accession policy in the military as part of a strategy research project. They are **Colonel Silas Martinez** who was the faculty advisor for the project and **Lieutenant Colonel David Eckley** of the U.S. Army War College Class of 2020 who was the main author of the report. Colonel Martinez has served as Director of Leader Development at the United States Army War College since 2017. He holds a PhD in industrial organizational psychology from Wright State University and is a 2015 Army War College graduate. His research interests include selection, individual differences, decision making support and talent management. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Eckley, the author of the report, is an Army intelligence officer who most recently served as a battalion commander in recruiting command. He holds a Master's degree in geographic and cartographic science from George Mason University and is a Class of 2020, as of last week, graduate of the U.S. Army War College. Welcome to A Better Peace, gentlemen.

Silas Martinez: It's great to be here.

David Eckley: Thanks, Ron.

SM: Thanks Ron.

RG: So, I wanted to start with a general question of Dave, how did you come to this project and Si, how did you come to be his advisor?

DE: Sure, so in our innovation class, which was part of the strategic leadership course that we took this year, I noted that my experience in recruiting command aligned with the innovation implementation strategy that was discussed in one of our classes. And so, I brought up, after I completed the reading, brought that up to Silas that hey, I have a case study that aligns with what we're talking about here in class and could I share that. So, he gave me an opportunity for about

5-10 minutes to discuss my experience in recruiting command. This is all based in my experience as a battalion commander within recruiting command. So, I talked about that with my classmates and then afterwards he indicated that this would be potentially a good case study to replace part of the curriculum. So that's kind of how the project got kicked off.

RG: Gotcha.

SM: Yeah, and from my point of view, I'm always looking to try to bring new and relevant and applicable material into the class and so on. Dave said, hey, you know I didn't know this at the time, but we did all this stuff that we were talking about in recruiting command. You know, I said, hey, there's some possibility here to maybe replace a case study or provide an additional case study for future lessons. And so that's what we did.

RG: And that's the idea, right? Is that this project will become part of future lessons in strategic leadership or innovation?

SM: Yeah, absolutely. So, we will continue to teach the lesson on leading innovative organizations, and we had been using a very, very good but a little bit aging case study about building aircraft carriers in World War II from the Japanese, American and the UK perspective and it's a great study, but one of the things that's different between what they did and what our leaders will do is it kind of focused on the efforts of the part of the organization that's solely focused on innovations. And this case study focuses on leaders who had to do their normal jobs and still innovate, so kind of this idea of in stride innovation which I think is something more applicable to our students, and so I thought the ability to offer that kind of case study would be great for instructors to choose from next year and in future years.

RG: Sure, the joke, I always think of is the idea of trying to change the oil on your car while you drive it, right? I guess that would be innovation and operations at the same time.

SM: Right.

RG: Dave, when you were working for recruiting command, for those listeners who are not experts in army organization, where does recruiting command sit within the larger structure of the enterprise?

DE: Sure, so recruiting command again is part of the accessions enterprise. U.S. Army Recruiting Command falls under Training and Doctrine Command along with U.S. Army Cadet Command, so those are the two main subordinate commands under TRADOC that deal with assessing both enlisted members for Recruiting Command and officers for U.S. Army Cadet Command.

RG: Right, and when you make that distinction, so even though it's called Cadet Command, that's not just for officers going through the Academy, right? That's also ROTC and other forms of officer accession?

DE: Correct. Silas, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that the Academy, at least for the Army, accounts for about 10% of the total officer population that's assessed on an annual basis.

The rest comes through over 270 programs that are located at colleges and universities across the United States.

RG: Gotcha, Okay, well this is good.

SM: And they do fall under different umbrellas there.

RG: They do. Okay.

SM: Yes.

RG: Right. Because that is one of the interesting questions of the different ways that one can become an officer in the Armed Forces and then also the difference between becoming a commissioned officer versus enlisting and becoming an enlisted man. Eventually everybody ends up in the same army but they don't all go in through the same door I guess to get into the army.

SM: Correct. Correct.

RG: So, in your case study, you mention the nature of the problem and then you have six steps for dealing with innovation with accessions. Can you briefly list those steps and then we can talk about how they fit together?

DE: Sure, yeah. I mean the first step is ensuring that conditions are set to enable the organization to be successful in innovation, and that really has to do with the leader of the organization establishing those conditions. How those conditions are established depends on what is the leader paying attention to? What is the leader measuring? What is the leader rewarding? How is the leader messaging to the organization? Does he indicate that he really cares about this innovation effort? So, that's kind of the first scene-setter that's required to be successful. The second thing is correctly identifying your problem or opportunity if it might be an opportunity to pursue. Then you deal with generating ideas to solve that problem or leverage that opportunity. Then you try out your ideas and then you kind of diffuse or scale, really, you're implementing the right idea to solve the problem and make the innovation effort successful. And then when you do that successfully, you end up creating a culture of innovation.

RG: Gotcha, there's a fundamental challenge for leaders, especially a leader who moves into a new leadership position, is how much is a leader, how much is a leader measured on the basis of how well that leader carries on things that are already working well, versus does the leader come in with a whole lot of brand new ideas so that the leader can put his or her stamp on the organization. Thinking very broadly, how do you figure leaders should approach the issue of balancing innovation versus good management?

SM: Well, a responsibility of, I think all senior leaders is to continually scan their environment and see how well they think that the future environment is going to require an adaptation or alignment of their own organization in order to meet their projected future state, right?

RG: Right.

SM: In this case what we found out was, you know, the things that had been working weren't working anymore, and so we really had to look at how do I continue to do the things that are

working but make adjustments on the move to innovate processes and procedures in a way that will allow us to meet our accessions mission.

RG: Right and Dave, so as far as setting the conditions, Secretary Esper made clear in his instructions, I guess to the accessions enterprise that he wanted to, “try new things and if they don't work move on to something else.” What was it that wasn't working that Si referenced here to, that wasn't working, that needed to be addressed?

DE: Sure, so a quick, quick background. The Army had been downsizing for a number of years after the peak of the effort in Iraq and Afghanistan, and when the Trump Administration came on board, the national security strategy required the Army to grow. So, the challenge was how to reverse the momentum that initiated in 2010 when the force peaked, the Army force peaked at 562,000 troops and the Army was on a draw down to 450,000, and was making progress towards that goal, but had to reverse midstream with the change in administration. So, we were coming back from a low point of 460,000 at the end of 2016 trying to come back up to 476,000. So initially we had been successful in 2017 of reaching that 476,000 and strength, but then we met a challenge in 2018, which was really compounding factors that played into the Army's inability to meet its recruiting mission and strength mission for FY18. The main things contributing to that was a strong economy. So, we had an unemployment rate of 3.6%, which was the lowest it had been in multiple decades. That is always difficult for the Army to compete with industry and academia for America's most talented youth when there are all these other options that they can pursue. So just to give you a couple specifics on that: there are only 500,000 Americans between the age of 17 and 24 that are both qualified and propensed to serve. Qualified means they meet the requirements, so they are physically able to serve. They don't have a record that would keep them from serving, whether that's a criminal record or issues with drugs or that sort of thing and then they are propensed, which means they actually want to serve. So, all the military services, academia, and industry are all competing for these 500,000 individuals. The Army's piece of that for FY18 was 68,500 and we fell 6,500 short. So, that was the problem the Army was facing coming into FY19.

RG: Right. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask you, how many recruits? How many accessions does the Army shoot for in a given year? So, the number was 68,000 and change, how much has that number fluctuated over the years assuming that we always have people leaving the service as we're coming in? Is that 60-70,000 number common or was that a change from previous years?

DE: Yeah, that was actually a high point for the Army within the decade. That number of recruits, but it's tied to end strength and what the Army says it needs for its total force and, based on the national security strategy, the Army estimated that it would need half a million active duty soldiers in order to achieve the requirements of the national security strategy. And it was on pace to reach that goal by 2024, but Secretary Esper recognized after the challenges of FY18 that the scheduled increase of 4,000 troops per year was unrealistic and so he scaled that back at the beginning of FY19 and set a goal for 478,000 which was a 2,000 in strength increase over FY18 and set the recruiting goal for 68,000 recruits for FY19, which was 500 less than was the goal in

FY18. So, took a more realistic approach and the goal was to reach 500,000 by 2030 instead of 2024.

RG: Gotcha, and just not to get too lost in the weeds but the numbers do fascinate me. This notion that there is only about 500,000 appropriate people in the target age range at anytime, is that the idea that in any given year we can assume there are 500,000 17 to 24 year-olds who are propensed—I like propensed by the way, I'm going to try to work that into future conversations—that are qualified and propensed?

DE: Yeah, that's the estimate.

RG: Gotcha. Well, so then what approach did the Army then take if the idea was the Army needed to reach that goal and the Army wanted to somehow find a better way to appeal to members of that cohort, that 500,000 person cohort? What innovation approaches did the Army take?

DE: So, the main thing the Army did was take a strategy of targeted marketing. So, this industrial age idea of one size fits all, the Army recognized that it wasn't working anymore and so we needed to go appeal to individuals and unique markets. Traditionally the Army is successful in the South, Southeast and Southwest, that's where a majority of recruits came from, but that's not where a majority of the American population is. And so, the Army identified that there were these 22 cities—they actually called it Focus 22 was the strategy to target the 22 most populated cities that most underproduced when you looked at the statistics based on how many were eligible, how many were propensed and yet, how many was the Army actually recruiting? So, targeted efforts within zip codes, within these areas from a marketing standpoint and actual recruitment engagement ended up being a novel approach that the Army had not taken before. So, that was one way to access new markets. The other was looking at what the youth was interested in. So, Generation Z, 17-24 year-olds, and at this current point in history were interested in some things that the Army had not tried to leverage. And one of the main industries was Esports. Esports is electronic sports, so this idea of competing in a digital space through video game competitions and in various sports activities, whether that's actually a sports video game, or really any kind of video game, it doesn't have to be sports related. But the projections were for that industry, there would be more fans watching Esports online than any other professional sport but the NFL by 2021.

RG: That might even be accelerated in this age of COVID where we we've gone several months without any professional sports to watch, right?

DE: Absolutely, absolutely. So yeah. Actually, so this was an effort that was initiated within recruiting command by Major General Muth when he asked recruiters to come up with ideas. So, he solicited ideas from across the force and there were two recruiters in particular that came back with ideas that were really pretty radical ideas to try out. One dealt with leveraging and accessing the Esports community. The other was dealing with access to the CrossFit community or functional fitness, which the Army is interested in anyway. We want physically fit individuals to join the military. So, the initial analysis that was done on the availability of 17-24 year-olds within these particular markets led U.S. Army Recruiting Command to create an initiative where

they stood up an Esports team and they called it a functional fitness team. But it was essentially, CrossFit was the activity that they were competing in.

RG: And so, the idea is, not to interrupt, the idea is you create these teams that are both going to participate in the activity so people will see, hey look, these are people from the Army, that looks kind of interesting, they're interested in what I'm in. Is it also a matter of the Army seeking out either advertising in those forums or also the Army looking to direct mail or direct to reach out to people who have expressed an interest in either of those things?

DE: Yes, Sir. So, within marketing there's this idea called the consumer's journey, which consists of three different phases. You have awareness, which is where the individual learns about a product. In this case, where a potential prospect learns about the Army and what the Army offers. Then you have engagement where the individual starts to take a personal interest, a personal responsibility and does some research. And then there's activation where an individual makes a decision. So, what the Army was trying to do in these new markets was create awareness through these sports teams that were highly, highly competitive. So, the Army cased internally its individuals that it already identified because many of these individuals had already made a name for themselves within their community both for Esports and functional fitness, held tryouts. There was over 6,000 people that applied to be part of the Esports Team. 20 were selected.

RG: So, 6,000 current members of the force?

DE: Current members, yes. This was only internal. But the idea was to create these teams that could compete within these industries and make a name for the Army, right? So, that's creating awareness. That's the awareness phase of the consumer journey or the Army's marketing effort. And then overtime, by making a name, the Army making a name for itself within the Esports community and the fitness communities, then that provides the opportunity for recruiters to come alongside these individuals who have improved the strength of the Army brand and discuss details, engage and then help individuals decide to join the Army.

RG: And for David and also for you Si, to bring this in, in what ways were these innovations to bring in, to look into Esports to look into CrossFit, were they qualitatively different from, say, the earlier generation of accession, innovators who came up with the idea of advertising, advertising recruiting commercials during professional sports events or even sponsoring a NASCAR vehicle? Are these differences in nature or in degree or neither than those previous innovations?

DE: Yeah, that's an interesting thought. I think that the previous efforts. I guess maybe to provide a little bit of context even. So, Army marketing and research group was the Army's organization that's responsible for all of the Army's marketing efforts. They had 23 programs that they were pursuing, leading up to 2018 that actually came under scrutiny, and the Army realized that it was not getting the return on investment and it actually had not been affectively measuring its return on investment for these programs. So, this was kind of a lesson learned that maybe led to the need for innovation. But to your point, these programs did include things like the National Hot Rod Association, the All-American Bowl, where they were appealing to a large population

that already had some level of propensity, and maybe did not have all of the qualifications necessarily. I think, really, the challenge that the Army realized though, is they didn't have a way of identifying that the people that they thought they were attracting, they actually weren't. And so that's what led to the analysis that identified a greater opportunity within the E-sports community and the fitness community than the Army had been pursuing in communities such as National Hot Rod fans or even high school football.

RG: Right, gotcha. Silas, you wanted to jump in on that with a comment?

SM: Yeah, I think one of the fascinating things about this case in particular, but about a lot of innovative activities, is that successful innovations can actually be counterproductive to the establishment on how they do things. And these two activities are examples of that. How do you then process an intent of interest or somebody who says, yeah, I'm interested in this from an Esports event? How do we do that? How do the recruiters get credit or fail to get credit for the things that they used to do? And these are things that the leaders had to carefully manage if they were going to try to bring this culture of innovation. Dave, can you talk a little bit about some of that?

DE: Sure, yeah. So not only did the Army try to target the right marketplace or the right portions of the market. The methodology by which they tried to communicate with potential prospects changed. So, under the industrial model, it was all based on personal contact, face-to-face interaction, typically on a high school campus. But the Army realized that by simple observation of high schoolers who would stand in a group and not talk to each other but rather text each other when there are 10 feet apart, hey, we need to be interacting in the digital space, not that they don't need to interact face-to-face, but there needs to be this interaction also within a digital space and so a lot of emphasis was placed on how do we do virtual recruiting and the Recruiting Command met significant success by deliberately focusing additional effort within the digital space in addition to activities that are already and continuing to go on in the high school campuses.

SM: Dave, did they have to change the way that individuals, recruiters got "credit" for a recruit based on the fact that we're not doing face-to-face anymore and how was that managed?

DE: Yeah, so I think they're still working through the processes on how to attribute credit because that is a challenge. One overarching change that was made, since 2003, Recruiting Command was only assigning missions at the unit level. So, a station located within and responsible for a certain number of zip codes within a region would be given a certain number of recruits or a mission that their station had to accomplish collectively, and so there was no individual responsibility. An individual could not be given a mission since 2003, but Recruiting Command recognized that hey, if we incentivize individuals and teams, we can potentially get more bang for our buck and so Recruiting Command tried that out also in FY19 and attributes their ability to meet the FY19 mission in part to what they call hybrid mission model, which was assigning missions to both individuals and to teams at the station level.

SM: Awesome, thanks.

RG: Thank you. I have, as we approach the end of this interesting conversation, a question that I've been wondering about as well. Going back to what Silas said about Recruiting Command recruiters getting credit for their recruits is, how exactly does one measure success in these kinds of circumstances, especially when you consider, as you mentioned in the beginning, Dave, that one of the reasons why recruiting was suffering is you had a strong economy, so you have low unemployment. If the general economy shifts and unemployment goes up, then more people will consider joining the armed forces regardless of how it's advertised or who it's reached out to, and so the question of how does Accession Command going forward or the accession enterprise going forward, how does it imagine itself measuring the success and failure of these innovative strategies? Is it based on the number of recruits? Is it based on somehow interviewing recruits to get a sense of what brought them to it? How is that going to work?

SM: I think success is really different at different levels, right? At the recruiter level, it's did I meet mission? At the Esports team or the CrossFit team, it's did I generate a number of contacts? But at the strategic level, it's really, are my processes aligned and enabled to take advantage of the innovations that have been created at various levels? And so, that's what makes this fascinating. It's not just the effort, but it's the tying it back into the overall question that you started with, Ron, which is, am I moving the organization to where I think it's going to be in the future in order to be successful? I mean, that's what's fascinating about this.

RG: Absolutely.

DE: So, I think it's bigger than just recruiting. It's bigger than just accession. So, the Army has been taking a close look at talent management. How do we get the most out of every individual that we have in the force? How do we best fit the talents and the skill sets that our noncommissioned officers, our soldiers, our officers have and line them up to be as successful as they possibly can be in the various jobs and responsibilities that the Army has. And so, the Army Talent Management Task Force has been working on this problem for a long time. They've had various innovation strategies that have come out, partly the focus has been on better assessing, keep the skill sets and the abilities of individuals in order to align them with the requirements that the Army has, but I think as the Army is successful at better managing its talent, that will help recruiting efforts as the Army is able to say, hey, if you come and join our organization, we are going to tailor the unique skill set and the unique abilities that you as an individual bring and we're going to optimize those in the Army and you are going to have more job satisfaction than you could have anywhere else by working for our team. So that's a long-term strategy to actually realize that. But by focusing internally on talent management in the end, we'll be able to offer a better product to the potential recruit.

RG: Gotcha, and to end on a tongue twister right, is that successful accessions require successful assessment, two different words that sound very much the same and are related to each other. So, this idea is certainly who you attract, but who you're able to keep. Well, thanks to both of you for this conversation. Thanks for joining us today. Thank you, Colonel Silas Martinez, Lieutenant Colonel Dave Eckley.

SM: Thanks Ron, this was great.

DE: Thank you, yeah.

RG: And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and suggestions for future programs. We're always interested in hearing from you. Please subscribe to A Better Peace and then rate and review this podcast once you have subscribed so that other people can find out about it too. We are always interested in increasing the audience for these conversations and we look forward to inviting you to future conversations. But until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.