

Episode 16: Saint Leo University's Office of Military Affairs & Services

Speaker 1:

Saint Leo 360, a 360 degree overview of the Saint Leo University Community.

Greg Lindberg:

Welcome to another episode of the Saint Leo 360 podcast. Once again, this is your host, Greg Lindberg. And on this particular episode, it's a pleasure to be joined by Dr. Luke McClees, who is the director of the office of Military Affairs and Services here, at Saint Leo University. Dr. McCleese, Thanks so much for joining us.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Greg. Thank you. Thanks for having me out today, and I look forward to speaking with you guys.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. And I know in general, Saint Leo has a long history of educating the military, and military families. And so, we definitely have a lot of good stuff to get into today. So first off, Luke, talk to me about your military background, I know you are a vet. And, talk to me about that background, and your experience in the military.

Dr. Luke McClees:

That's correct. I'm a veteran of the United States Marine Corps. I was an enlisted guy, I was a 0341, which my job was by trade, was mortars, but I was forward observer during this time. So, I adjusted mortar fire, artillery fire, called for close air support. I had a time when... I was in during a time, rather, where I was constantly deployed. We'd go on short deployments, come back, go to a school, or prepare for another deployment. So, my entire time in, I was kind of on the go, and doing things, and everything that range from, police security to humanitarian assistance, to combat action roles.

Greg Lindberg:

Interesting. And I'm curious, what actually inspired you to enlist?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Yeah, it's pretty complicated. There were a lot of things floating around in my head at the time, of being 18 years old. And part of it was, I grew up in a household where my father is an older gentleman, he had served in World War II, and all of his relatives had done so. They felt drawn to it, patriotically. But also, it was a means of upward mobility, because they were from Appalachian region. And, this gave them a way to get out of Appalachia, and do something else.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, I grew up in that kind of climate, and context my whole life. But ultimately, I think when I was around 18, it was partly fueled by being in love with adventure, and the idea of adventure, the romantic idea of adventure, reading some Hemingway, and even though things could be grim, and not so pretty, it would be different than the normal life of get out of high school, go to college, get married, have a family, and then work in the same job until forever. This gave me an outlet to do something different, and see the world. And definitely, see the world in a way that I couldn't have otherwise, and in a context that I couldn't have otherwise.

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Greg Lindberg:

I know. I am just fascinated by everyone's story. Everyone has a different reason, and as far as how they do wind up entering the military, so some really interesting stuff. Let's talk about your educational background. Talk to me about your undergrad, and your graduate studies.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Sure. My undergraduate degree was from the University of Kentucky, and that was a degree in Spanish and Hispanic studies. And really at the time, the climate on universities and colleges was not anything close to what we have now. It was basically, do you want to use your GI Bill? Okay, see someone at the end of the financial service building, they'll process your paperwork in between smoke breaks. And, the advisors... My advisor, my experience was the first question I remember her asking me was, "Why did you come to college?" "Why are you here?"

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, I got that degree because I wanted that degree, and I didn't really see past just trying to achieve, and master this language that I knew was useful, and that I just was drawn to, and I like.

Dr. Luke McClees:

There was no type of career orientation outside of that. So, once I got that, I did start teaching. And, I started teaching in a K-12 system, a ProQual system. And during that time, after my first year, I realized to go on and to advance, I needed my master's degree. So, I started studying at Georgetown College for my masters in Teaching World Languages, with the emphasis being in teaching Spanish. And then, a couple of years later after that, I started working at the laboratory school, the Model Laboratory School for Eastern Kentucky University. And, this really opened the door for me after a year, to also work the Model Laboratory Schools in the College of Education. But then, it opened up for me to teach college level classes. So, I started teaching undergraduate and graduate classes, and this segued me into being in EKU, over full-time for the rest of my time there.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, I taught basically all of the world language teachers, or people who are aspiring to be world's language teachers. And, it was during this time that I started working on my doctorate, and my doctorate staying in line with education, is in educational leadership and policy studies. And, my research for that was focusing on what leaders can do, and how leaders can understand, what it looks like when someone's in a world language classroom, but what they're learning as far as large C cultural, and intercultural nuances.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. And then, I know there was a Veterans Studies Program you were also involved in, as far as teaching and that. Talk a little bit about that.

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Dr. Luke McClees:

Correct. So, this is really exciting, because not only is it the Veteran Studies Program, but it's the Vanguard Veteran Studies Program for the nation, and the world. At the time Eastern Kentucky University had just established. It was young. It was a year old and established a program. And, there was certain criteria, they were looking for people to teach, and also to contribute to research, and help kind of proliferate the program.

Dr. Luke McClees:

And, they needed a certain type of instructor and professor, and they were hard to come by. And, I was talking to the then director, and she and I were talking about what she was looking for. And, she said, "I need someone with a masters, preferably someone with a doctorate degree, or working towards a doctorate degree." I need someone who has a military background, preferably with combat deployments and understands."

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, I was like, "Oh yeah, I think I know someone who could help you out here." So, it was kind of by chance, but it was also why I applied, everything looked great. And then, for the rest of my time, I was kind of split up between the college of education, and this program. And so, I tried to couple all my research together, and I really started looking at the research area of when veterans studies is to be taught, kind of what is the pedagogy of veterans studies going to be, and what are the practices?

Dr. Luke McClees:

And also, those inner cultural nuances of how is it when a military veteran member interacts with society, because everyone always talks about the gap or the bridge there between civilians, and military members, and veterans. So, what does that landscape look like? And also, from the aspect of, you have groups of people who are in multinational situations, they're in multicultural situations constantly, what are some of those things that they're bringing back to the rest of us, and to academics, and how do we learn from that?

Greg Lindberg:

Very interesting. And then, let's talk about your journey to Saint Leo University, and obviously staying in education, you were teaching before, and then you came here for kind of a different role.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Right. So, ultimately what brought me here was a life change. On my wife's side of the family, there had been some things going on, and ultimately her father passed away, and her mother needed some help, and she didn't want to live where we lived. So, we moved here. We moved here, and she works in the medical field. So, she found employment very quick. And, I kind of held back to help adjust the kids, and to just really support her, and start looking for something. In doing that, I kept up with networking, and really got involved in the Hillsborough County veteran ecosystem. And during an event at USAA, I was learning from, and supporting part of CO. STARTERS, which is a program in Hillsborough County that teaches veterans kind of the skills of entrepreneurship. So, I was there along with them and representing them.

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Dr. Luke McClees:

And, I struck up a conversation with someone who had identified themselves as being on the board here. And so, he and I started talking, and I told him about my current situation. And he said, "Well, I think I know of a position that sounds like it was cut right out of the woodwork for you." So, I went home and I researched it, and I looked at it, and I thought it over, and it was a switch, but it seemed very in line with all my interests. And, sometimes all those interests, it's a hard patchwork to kind of fulfill.

Dr. Luke McClees:

And one of my things, when I was faculty that I was always concerned, or I always thought about was, is there a real impact with this research? Is it just being read by other people who are interested in writing something about it, and is there even going to be any application? And so, I felt like this position was a way to see a direct result in the work that I wanted to do in the space where academics, and military connected population overlap.

Greg Lindberg:

Oh, I see. And, before we kind of get into your duties in the role of the office, let's talk a little bit about the history of Saint Leo educating the military, and then that kind of thing. Can you kind of speak to maybe when Saint Leo initially started, with the first military students, and then how long that's been since?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Sure. And, that was something, as I was researching Saint Leo, that I found very interesting. From 1890 through 1903 Saint Leo was actually considered a military college. Something that's very interesting, there was also two periods in history where the word military was directly in the title. But, I think the pivotal part for Saint Leo, and really kind of the market disruptor was in the 70s in 1973, when Saint Leo started making a move to educate people in the service at a time when the climate was not like that for other universities, and colleges in the United States.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So I think, they really went against the grain, but in that found a huge piece of service to people, and a way to help educate a demographic that really wasn't getting adequate attention at the time.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. And, from what I understand, Saint Leo is really one of the first to offer the distance learning opportunities and programs, especially to individuals overseas, and then deployed. Correct?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Correct. And, this kind of tied into that time period.

Greg Lindberg:

Right.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Yeah.

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Greg Lindberg:

No, I see. Let's fast forward to today, and let's talk about roughly how many students, whether they're active duty, veteran, reserve, guard, whatnot, or even military families. How many students would you say roughly do we currently have that are in some way connected to the military?

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, complete connection, and I'm glad you mentioned also family, because family is really historically, probably even more underthought about, and underserved than all the service members. However, I'm rounding up a little bit. We're looking at around with going to 5,000 students. And, looking at Saint Leo's overall population, that's considerable amount of the overall student body. And, I think also compared to other universities, it's really telling of our relationship with military and veterans, because in many places, our numbers eclipse what other schools have, and who they're serving.

Greg Lindberg:

Right. That is awesome that we do have that opportunity to serve so many military, and their families.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Completely.

Greg Lindberg:

Let's dive into the office of military affairs and services, and talk about kind of some of the specific services that your office actually can provide.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So my office, large in part is, is a connecting office. And really, we're the face for veterans, for military students, for their families, somebody who understands them, what they've been through, or what they're going through. To speak, we understand when they're throwing acronyms at us, what they're saying, and connecting them with where or who they need to be connected to, to really be successful. And so, with my office, it's like somebody might come to us, maybe they didn't start with financial services, so they come to us, and we can give them an orientation of they'll need, and then refer them back to the right people within that department to get help. Same way with counseling, same way with career services, and then working with that other entity to make sure all of those soft skills that the military or veteran member have, are appropriately transferred to whatever they need, or do.

Dr. Luke McClees:

I think about this often, and I work closely with Susan Mickey in Career Services. Because, we have a population that's in high demand right now for skills, as simple as being polite, being on time, and motivated to work. Yet, because it's been such a necessity of their job thus far, they don't know how to really translate that onto paper. Things are improving, and they're getting better, but Susan and I are able to assess that whole package that the person brings, and help them translate that, and then help them get in the mindset of what it takes to be successful. Some other things are, looking at the larger things within the state and the nation that might be happening, the climate. Our military is always in an ebb and flow, depending on what's happening in size, and budget, and things of this nature. So, looking at that to see if there's going to be any impact, that's going to affect our students in a negative way; but also, sharing anything positive, any new growth things that are coming.

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Greg Lindberg:

Right. So, it is quite a variety, and array of services that a student could receive from your office, it sounds like.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Correct.

Greg Lindberg:

And in general, would you say students generally come to you in your office, or do you seek them out, or is it kind of a mix?

Dr. Luke McClees:

It's a mix. Many will come to me, and they know that I'm in and out of the office all day. They know to get a hold of me, however, I do make it onto campus to seek them out. The interesting thing about our population with military and veteran students on campus for example, is that many have families, many have jobs, so in some cases, they're hustling to get to campus. They get to campus, they knock out their couple of classes for the day, and then they leave. So, another thing at the office is really growing to do, is all the services that we provide in person or online, making them not only live, but also asynchronous. So, people could access them at any time. And, we're making the central location, so even if they don't see us right away, they'll know how to get to things. And then, we can always fill in the gaps by phone calls and email, or trying to track people's schedules down.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah, we definitely should emphasize that your office serves the entire university, obviously center's, online campus, since [crosstalk 00:18:01] we do have students all over.

Dr. Luke McClees:

That is correct.

Greg Lindberg:

And, let's talk about, let's say there is a military student or a veteran, lets just say an active duty member, or veteran listening to this podcast, considering Saint Leo. Why would you say that individual should enroll with Saint Leo? And, Why would they feel comfortable and at ease being a student here?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Honestly, there are many reasons. For the depth, just what we discussed earlier, the history, and the lineage of what kind of relationship Saint Leo has had with the military. I think there's a deep understanding of the culture here, more so than in other places. But also, many of our programs are very flexible. And so, I know my students directly, I talked to students, some of them only take classes on campus. Some of them take them on a campus, whether it be this campus, or centers, and then online. There's a combination there. And then, some people are completely online. And, I think that's huge, because there's so much flexibility to accommodate someone's goal. And then furthermore, the services that are in place around, beyond just academics. When someone has the degree, what are they going to do with it?

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Dr. Luke McClees:

Or, while they're getting it, what kind of services are available to them, so they get the best quality education. There's really such volume and depth, and very hungry professional people here at Saint Leo. And, I would like to add further, we have a large amount of faculty and staff that are also military connected, many veterans, and faculty, and staff. And I think, this is very interesting because they have firsthand experience that they can relate to a particular student. And, this could be a crucial factor in someone getting a degree, or not.

Greg Lindberg:

Very well said. And, like you were saying before, just being able to speak that language, the lingo, the acronyms, having that relatability, I think it's a huge benefit.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Completely. I agree. A 100 percent.

Greg Lindberg:

Let's talk about the benefits of earning a college degree, whether it's an active duty member who wants to earn that degree while still enlisted, or it's a veteran that does not have education, or maybe has a little education, but still wants to fulfill, and actually earn that degree. Talk about the benefits of earning that degree, and perhaps even the combination of that military experience with a college degree.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Absolutely. Education is one of those things that in our country, and still today unlocks doors. And, it does things for people that they just couldn't do otherwise. And, one of the most beautiful attributes of education is providing someone with options, and options they wouldn't have. So, coupling this with military service is very powerful. First I'll address someone getting a degree, or working towards a degree, completing a degree while still in the service. When someone finds himself with this beautiful opportunity, they can come out in a very, very powerful position. Because really, they've got work experience under their belt, where some of the people getting out of college just have a degree, but not a type of work experience. They also have some knowledge of the world, and the inner workings of organizations.

Dr. Luke McClees:

But more and more we're seeing, and more importantly, we're saying that employers, they want to see that a degree is completed, but they also want to see that successful employment. And, they're seeking out the skills that military members have. So, I mentioned it earlier when talking about working with career services, and it's definitely true. They're really looking for workers now, that still have knowledge of you should show up to work on time, you should do all the things that you need to do, take initiative, complete one task before you start another. That some employers are thinking are lost currently. However, not in the military, and veteran population.

Dr. Luke McClees:

I think if someone has completed service, and is going on to get a degree, it's the same type of thing, or eventually they're going to be able to put these two parts of their life together, and really come out in a very powerful position, where they don't have to be two separate life experiences. One can draw from

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the other, and eventually they can build on it to a point where they're in a very comfortable position of having the education that they need to open these opportunities up, but also having the life experience of what gainful employment really feels like, tastes like, and how they can apply it to something bigger and better.

Greg Lindberg:

Yeah. That's very well said. And, I would imagine if an employer gets a resume, and sees both military service and a degree, to me, it's almost like the ideal combination, because of what you said of how they are similar, but yet they really do kind of play off each other.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Exactly. And, I think what's interesting, you're seeing it more and more and employers, but I would say particularly in the IT related field, there are some of those employers, and a growing number that look at military members who have education, and they're starting to sponsor them. Whether they're in service, or they're going through school. And, they're basically saying, "If you come and work for us, we see what you're trying to achieve here." "Once you achieve it, you've got a job." I think that's really powerful, because when we talk about the issues of transition, one of those issues that can be a pitfall is job seeking. And so, for someone to go from the military to higher education, right to a position that they want to work for. That's very powerful, and can alleviate a lot of stress that generations prior had to go through.

Greg Lindberg:

I also know that there are some opportunities for those who serve to apply some of their military experience, and some of the training that they get in the military toward their coursework, and their degree programs, and specifically the credits. Can you touch on that a little bit?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Yes. There most definitely is. And, really this starts at the accrediting body of the institution, and then it kind of funnels down to the institution, and then to what branch was the person, and what kind of role did they have while they're in. But, all those give you the kind of summation of what those credits will be, now saying that to say, Saint Leo does provide credits for service, and it's based on those things. What did someone do while they're in? What was their job, their capacity? What was their training like? All that's taken into consideration, and then those are applied to whatever degree the individual is seeking.

Greg Lindberg:

Let's talk about the financial aid side, the actual paying for college question, which is obviously, a question for any college student. And, how does Saint Leo support military individuals in terms of using, I know you mentioned the GI bill, and I know there are other opportunities to use funding toward tuition.

Dr. Luke McClees:

So, I'm going to speak on behalf of the financial services, but I'll say this, they work in conjunction with me, and we collaborate daily, but I definitely have to say this, it's the most seamless process I've ever witnessed for benefits in my life. I mentioned earlier that my experience was some by, processing the paperwork in between smoke breaks. I was saying that jokingly, but that's exactly what happened. And,

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it was someone who was just a couple years older than me. And, I had to fill out all the paperwork, and I had to get it to them in this window of time. And, it was all on me. And, if I didn't get it, then I didn't get paid for that semester to go to school. At Saint Leo, all they have to do is provide all the crucial information to get the process started.

Dr. Luke McClees:

And, our processing people, which are in training constantly, best practices across the board, they do a seamless job of once someone indicates they want to go to school here, getting that process all taken care of. So, all the person has to do is say, "I want to be a part of Saint Leo, here's all the personal info, let's go." And, they really do it from start to finish. It's very impressive. And, everybody's different, everybody's got a different life situation, and different things coming at them. And, the team that's in place there, they know how to handle it. They think through these things, and they're always able to accommodate our students, or future students, and it's really impressive.

Greg Lindberg:

That's great. I know, just like I mentioned before, financial aid, and how you're going to pay for school is always, can be very stressful. When I think, it's awesome that we really do support that, and give students the peace of mind to know that they can really focus on their studies, and their classes, and can let the benefits, and everything else take care of themselves.

Dr. Luke McClees:

I completely agree. And, I think it's a good indicator when someone is starting the process of becoming a student here, that's their first experience coming into Saint Leo, and started out in such a positive, and kind of hands-off, easy way, I think is great. It's really telling of the type of experience a student is going to have here, until they get their degree.

Greg Lindberg:

Absolutely. All right. So to wrap up here, if someone listening to this would like to learn more about Saint Leo and specifically your office, how can they get in touch with you?

Dr. Luke McClees:

Completely. My office number is, area code 352 588-6703. And, my email is very easy, it's just militaryservices@saintleo.edu. Also my associate director, who's in Virginia, because of our large population of centers, and Mark Westbrook. Mark, his phone number, he can be reached at area code 757 249-0390. And then, his email is Mark.Westbrook@saintleo.edu.

Greg Lindberg:

All right, well, I really appreciate you joining us here on the Saint Leo 360 podcast, Luke, and I hope everyone is informed about how we can assist any students with any kind of military background or connection.

Dr. Luke McClees:

Thank you, Greg. Thank you for having me, and thank you for giving me this opportunity to help educate people about the office, and what the office does, and how we can help them reach their goal.

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Speaker 1:

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