

INTERVIEW *WITH* **MICHAEL KIRCHNER**

Dr. Michael Kirchner is an associate professor of organizational leadership at Purdue University Fort Wayne, where he teaches courses on human resource management and organizational behavior. His research is focused particularly on military veterans' career transitions.



What inspired your research on veteran education and career transitions?

I served in the U.S. Army National Guard from 2000 to 2006 and spent one year deployed to Iraq during that time. When I transitioned

out, I recognized things felt different, though I mostly resumed my civilian way of life. In fact, for the next six years, I shed much of any affiliation with the military.

My first semester of graduate school changed everything. As I finished my first semester, I gave a class presentation outlining opportunities to improve support offered to transitioning military veterans. Soon after, I was co-founding a student veteran organization. Within three months, we had over 50 student veterans signed up, and the ensuing years really opened my eyes to the transition issues former service members face when moving into higher education and nonmilitary workplaces.

Your research involves reaching out to different “military friendly” employers and businesses. How is this term defined, and why is it important for organizations to be military friendly?

Though I’ve led studies and been part of proposing definitions in the past, the term “military friendly” largely remains unexplored. Perhaps instead of defining, it may

be more appropriate to view the term as an aspiration that organizations can strive to achieve. I’ve been interested in the topic for the better part of 10 years as there are virtually no businesses (or colleges) that proclaim they are unfriendly to military veterans. At the same time, there are no criteria or requirements in place to differentiate one organization’s “friendliness” from another. Without standards in place, every organization can make the unsubstantiated friendliness claim, which only exacerbates the transition challenges military veterans experience. Conversely, employers who claim to be friendly but have little to no programming in place risk higher rates of frustration and turnover from their military veteran employees as their own expectations are often unmet. Being military friendly is really a win-win-win for military veterans, their employers, and the greater surrounding community.

How do we hold “military friendly” companies accountable in their day-to-day practices?

Great question. This may be controversial but it’s less about holding employers accountable and instead about considering the education we can offer to help them become more friendly to their military-affiliated employees. I appreciate that everyone wants to support the armed forces. In fact, there’s never been a better time in history to be a U.S. military veteran, and I am very grateful for that. We have programs everywhere to support veteran career transitions, and the recognition current and former service members receive is special and well deserved. Unfortunately, we lack industry experts who can teach employers about how to improve support of



their military-affiliated employees. Our best opportunity to introduce any form of accountability is to encourage employers to integrate military friendly practices and subsequently evaluate their impact on employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention and ultimately, the goals of the organization.

How do you aim to help veterans with your research?

I have been helping former service members transition into both higher education and postmilitary careers for the last decade. Much of my research has been informed through identifying sticking points experienced by transitioning service members. Military veteran transition issues involve numerous stakeholder groups including (a) the military, (b) higher education, (c) veteran service organizations, and (d) nonmilitary employers. Each play their own role and have unique knowledge gaps that need to be filled as a means of easing transition issues. My aim has been to address those knowledge gaps by providing, through scholarship and practice, replicable support structures that make a meaningful impact for all stakeholders.

How do you plan to integrate undergraduate students into your research in the future?

I have previously facilitated information sessions about conducting research and will continue to do so. I also tend to talk about my scholarship in lectures across the various courses I teach. Most importantly, I invite students who are interested in learning more to reach out and ask about current and upcoming research opportunities. Research is needed across all fields and career transition issues is just one of the countless opportunities available.

What is your advice for undergraduate students interested in getting involved with research at Purdue University Fort Wayne?

When I was an undergraduate student, I looked at any extracurricular offering as an obligation I didn't have time for. That was a serious mistake. There are so many programs and opportunities that allow us to explore our passions and interests if we're willing to take advantage of them. As an undergraduate student, I wish I had joined a student organization, studied abroad, job shadowed, completed an internship, and yes, engaged in a student research opportunity.

I love the phrase "you don't know what you don't know." My career path has been redirected on multiple occasions simply because I said "yes" to trying something new. All of those opportunities allow us to connect with motivated colleagues, build our network, and help us gain a deeper understanding of the things we care about. If you find you don't enjoy conducting research, that's still an important factor in your professional development! But if you participate in a research study and find out you love it, your entire future may be redirected in a very satisfying way.

Interviewer



CATIE GILHOOLY is a senior who graduated from the John Martinson Honors College at Purdue. She earned her degree in Professional Writing and English Literature with minors in Management and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and a certificate in Entrepreneurship & Innovation. Gilhooly worked as the coordinator for this volume and volume 12 of the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research* and served on the Student Editorial Board for volume 11. She worked with the College of Liberal Arts at Purdue as a recruitment intern and Dean's Ambassador and served the Purdue Bands and Orchestras department as a brother of Kappa Kappa Psi, a national honorary band fraternity. She is also a member of Sigma Tau Delta English honor society and Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi academic honor societies. Next, she will attend the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom to pursue a master of arts in Publishing.