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[http://www.army.mil/article/91091/Cooper\\_to\\_wounded\\_warriors\\_Education\\_is\\_key/](http://www.army.mil/article/91091/Cooper_to_wounded_warriors_Education_is_key/)

## Cooper to wounded warriors: Education is key

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By **Chelsesa Bissell, USAG Grafenwoehr Public Affairs**





VILSECK, Germany -- When Dr. Rory Cooper applied to the biomedical engineering Ph.D. program at the University of California Santa Barbara in the mid-1980s, there was a snag. According to Cooper, although he had stellar undergraduate grades, the UCSB admissions board hesitated to let him in. They cited his disability -- Cooper is in a wheelchair -- as the reason behind their reluctance.

"This was before the Americans with Disabilities Act when it was OK to discriminate against people with disabilities," explained Cooper, a wounded veteran, during a discussion for Grafenwoehr's Warrior Transition Battalion, Delta Company, here, Nov. 8.

Cooper eventually verified his worth to the board and earned his Ph.D., meanwhile, he also medaled in the Paralympics, proving that he was not only capable, but exceptional.

These days, the main obstacle for veterans in education isn't administrative, it's that they're not showing up. Even with equalizing legislation in place, the Post-9/11 GI Bill and veteran support programs at schools, veterans are still falling behind in education and subsequently employment, because they finish school in smaller numbers than civilians.

November is Warrior Care Month when the Army honors the sacrifices made by its most wounded and

ill Soldiers and veterans. This year, Warrior Care Month is highlighting education, employment and entrepreneurship among wounded veterans.

Education among veterans ranks as a major concern within the Army. With high unemployment numbers throughout the nation, education has become essential to keep veterans competitive in the job market. In October, the unemployment rate among post-9/11 veterans was 10 percent, over two percent higher than the national average, and the rate for veterans with severe injuries is a staggering 80 percent.

"Education is key," said Cooper. "The most successful outcome for rehabilitation is employment." While education is often the first step toward a job or profession, most veterans do not use the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Even with 2.1 million veterans now eligible for the bill, says Cooper, only 80,000 of them are enrolled in college.

And the number quickly deteriorates from there. After the first year of school, 3/4 of those 80,000 veterans will drop out, citing isolation from other veterans as their main reason for leaving.

As a professor and chair at University of Pittsburgh, senior researcher of rehabilitative science, and pioneer of the Experiential Learning for Veterans in Assistive Technology and Engineering program, Cooper has witnessed the advances that veterans and wounded veterans alike make through academia.

At the University of Pittsburgh, said Cooper, "veterans have a disproportionate number of leadership roles."

Education can propel those with disabilities even further. With an education and a career, wounded veterans can begin to create an identity beyond their injury while maintaining a steady income and higher quality of life.

"I think a disability is a defining event of a life, but it should not define a life," said Cooper, adding, "I think education is particularly important for people with disabilities. It's an equalizer. It levels the playing field."

Ellie Thometz, rehab therapy technician, thought Cooper's presentation to the WTU was pitch-perfect.

"We have a lot of guys who are curious about education, but don't exactly know where to go or what to do."

First Lt. Leon Perry, executive officer of the Warrior Transition Battalion, Delta Company, said that many of the unit's Soldiers go from infantry to injury to uncertainty. They either find it difficult to move forward, or don't know how to proceed.

But, Cooper proved that victory over injury is realistic.

"Dr. Rory Cooper is one of those people who got out and excelled in education and sports," said Perry. He added that Cooper is an inspiration.

"Seeing him helped them be comfortable transitioning out of the Army. It gives them motivation and it gives them hope."