

EDUCATION

Celebrate the grads who choose military service — there's much to learn there



Jay Mathews

Several years ago, Toni Stinson's son was told he couldn't wear special cords signifying military enlistment at his high school graduation. It

would not have been disruptive. Only five or six seniors were enlisting. But the school said no.

Stinson didn't think that was right. So she founded the Fredericksburg, Va., chapter of Our Community Salutes, a growing group including many parents who think teenagers choosing military service should not be shoved aside as we pat the backs of our college-bound children.

It's not that we think getting a job or enlisting instead of going to college is wrong, but many of

us unintentionally leave the impression that higher education is the smarter move. Even parents such as Bonnie Vona, whose daughter became an Army officer after finishing college, sense disapproval. "The reaction I encounter is a somewhat snide 'Why would she do that?'" said Vona, chair of Our Community Salutes in Fairfax County.

I have a somewhat different take on this. I volunteered for the draft after college near the height of the Vietnam War. I didn't agree with that conflict, but I was not a conscientious objector. From what I learned then and after, I think any slighting of our enlistees is the result not of anti-military bias but of ignorance.

A good example is the reaction to Gregory Salcido, a history teacher in Pico Rivera, Calif., who was surreptitiously recorded

telling a student wearing a Marine Corps sweatshirt that Americans serving overseas were "a bunch of dumbs--s... the lowest of our low."

Salcido was dismissed for bullying the student, his school board president said. I would have fired him for being a bad teacher; he told his class things that he would have known were untrue if he had done his homework. He thought he was better than enlistees because they don't have college degrees.

In fact, the young people who enlist these days measure up far above average. They also learn a great deal, as I did, from experienced teachers in the military. Only 29 percent of today's youths even have the cognitive, physical and legal requirements to be considered for induction, according to the

U.S. Army Recruiting Command. And almost everyone in that group is already enrolled in college, lacks a high school diploma or can't pass Army aptitude tests. (I flunked the mechanical aptitude section.)

So the Army estimates that less than 1 percent of U.S. youths who are eligible are both qualified and want to serve. That is about 144,000 people, who are far from being the "lowest of our low." Most will stay in the military four or five years and find when they enter college that on average they do better than traditional students, according to the Army.

One example is Mathieu Delmar, who just graduated from Washington-Lee High School in Arlington County and is on his way to the U.S. Coast Guard. He told me he prefers that to college

now because "I hate school." Some friends expressed surprise at his choice, given he had good scores on some Advanced Placement tests.

Kenneth E. Hartman, a veteran and educator who founded Our Community Salutes, told me in April that "this is the time of the year when the parents go underground, because they are tired of defending their son's/daughter's decision to enlist."

One group member said he thought enlistees sensed disappointment from school administrators because those educators' careers were focused on getting as many students into college as possible. There may be some like that, but most just want kids to follow their instincts.

Hartman and his organization

should be proud. Recognition of enlistees at graduation now appears standard in Fairfax County and much of the rest of Northern Virginia in part because of their work. The group has chapters in 19 other states and the District.

I got some odd looks when I showed up in uniform (to get an airfare discount) at a summer Chinese language course in Vermont after I left Vietnam. But I never encountered any anti-GI sentiment except at peace marches.

These days the military is America's top-rated institution. Those of us who have seen what that service does for young adults understand that they are getting a unique education, despite annoyances like KP and guard duty.

jay.mathews@washpost.com