

Educational Leadership Department



Student Spotlight: David Donaldson

Navy veteran, Operation Amped co-founder and family man prepares to complete Doctoral program

While many doctoral students dread their commute to class on the 405, David Donaldson has a commute that's hard to beat. David, a Navy veteran and co-founder of the non-profit Operation Amped, flew from Montana once a week to finish the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program.

David had started the program when he and his family lived in Manhattan Beach, but had to make a big adjustment when his wife got a new job in Montana and they decided to move there. It was a "sacrifice they were willing to make" to finish the program.

He came to the program with a fascination of leadership, but not a clear idea of what he wanted to do. In the Navy, he had experienced different types of leadership and teamwork that he hasn't been able to find anywhere else.

"When you work with people that have put their life on the line, they've signed their life away in a contract to go a die and fight, defend and sacrifice if that's what it takes," David said.

"There's something about working with that population that, with the level of

teamwork and the level of leadership that I've experienced, is something that has not been reproduced since I left."

When David retired from the Navy, he tried to take a step back from it, but three years later, he found himself working as a recreation therapist in the Navy Medical Center. There, he started an adventure-based program where he saw more potential for using adaptive sports as a therapeutic intervention for ill or injured veterans. He and several other veterans who saw the same potential in surfing came together to form Operation Amped, a non-profit that provides surfing clinics and outreaches for ill, injured or disabled veterans.

"When you do it, the benefits are obvious," David said. "The stuff that's happening right in front of you is pretty amazing to be a part of."

David isn't looking to become a principal or a teacher. When he was deciding on whether to pursue the Higher Education or the K-12 route, he chose K-12 because at the time, he thought he was going to do his research on a subject more closely related to it.

"I'm the oddball in the group because I'm not a teacher, I've never taught elementary school ... and I'm not an administrator," David said. "But I've worked in rehab for a long time. And my thought was: when you're working in rehab, there's the physical aspect of it, but you're really educating the people on 'how to' and to live their

lives differently and it's a different kind of education, basically."

David's ultimate goal after he finishes the program has always been to write a book about how veterans discover new meaning in life after learning adaptive sports and to tell their stories. He originally didn't think it was possible to tie that into the Ed.D program until his advisor suggested he do his dissertation on it.

"The clouds parted, the sun was shining brightly and it was kind of this 'Aha' moment where I could actually research what I had been passionate about for about 15 years," David said. "It still falls in the realm of education and learning and how that experience impacts lives."

After he completes the program, David may pursue a local political appointment in a veteran advisory committee, but for now he "really would like to write this book and go fishing."

Mark YOUR calendar

October 15-16

[CSULB Leadership Consortium: "Creating Community, Programs & Infrastructure through Effective Leadership"](#)

October 17

[Invite a Colleague to Lunch](#)

Mid-October

[Call for proposals for Leadership Symposium](#)

Top left photo: Donaldson (left) and Dr. James Scott (right) at an Operation Amped event. // Bottom right photo: Operation Amped clients practice balance and increase their endurance when they learn how to surf with OA. // Photos courtesy of David Donaldson

