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## Student Affairs

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### **Colleges Help Veterans Advance From Combat to Classroom**

*By Katherine Mangan*

After 19 years in the U.S. Army, Steven W. Todd arrived at Western Michigan University with needs the average college freshman could hardly imagine.

The 41-year-old veteran has trouble concentrating because of a brain injury he suffered when he was struck by a ricocheted bullet during Operation Desert Storm. Mr. Todd, who has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, says he might not have survived the transition from soldier to student if not for the campus veterans-advocacy office, where he can count on staff members to raise his confidence and offer advice.

On campuses nationwide, offices like the one at Western Michigan are helping hundreds of thousands of veterans acclimate to college life this fall. The Post-9/11 GI Bill, which went into effect in August, pays for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to attend public, in-state colleges. It has created a surge of enrollment at four-year colleges among former service members.

Western Michigan, which offers in-state tuition to any service member or dependent, regardless of home state, has at least 450 veterans or dependents enrolled this fall, 150 of them new.

While many of those students are more mature and motivated than the average freshman, they bring special needs that colleges are struggling to meet in a season of cutbacks. Many have been away from the classroom for years. Some received GED's in the military and may need remedial courses, which are more common at a

community college than at a more selective four-year college. Some suffer from post-combat stress disorders or other physical or emotional disabilities.

Colleges are responding by beefing up their counseling services for veterans, making it easier for them to get credit for military service, and streamlining the process of applying for financial aid, benefits, and housing assistance.

When Mr. Todd enrolled at Western Michigan, in May, a campus ROTC officer reviewed his military records with the admissions office and helped him gain 19 credit hours for his military training and 11 hours from courses he had taken at a junior college. Mr. Todd is now earning A's and B's in his education and history classes and is looking forward to becoming a secondary-school teacher.

The transition wasn't easy.

"It was hard to focus when traditional-age students were chit-chatting during a lecture or a person started texting a friend under the table," says Mr. Todd.

Sometimes the ordinary sounds of a campus teeming with international students puts him on edge.

"Over the summer, there was a class a couple of rooms away with a lot of Middle Eastern students," he says. "When their class let out, they'd be walking down the hall speaking in Arabic or Farsi, and I was instantly on alert. I'd have a virtual flashback right there in class."

He began to wonder whether he should give up and return to his most recent civilian job, as a truck driver. "There were days when I wanted to throw my hands up, drop my classes, and get back in the semi," he says. The advocacy-office staff persuaded him to talk with his professors, one of whom was a veteran who, like Mr. Todd, had served in Iraq in Operation Desert Storm in 1990-91.

"He walked with me back to his office, and it felt like two Army

buddies," Mr. Todd says. "Walking and talking with him made me feel safe."

#### 'A Different Perspective on Life'

After that, Mr. Todd, whose courses include one on Middle Eastern history and culture, met with each of his professors and warned them that he might have to leave the room for a few minutes if he experienced a flashback. "Every one of them was understanding and receptive," says Mr. Todd.

For faculty and staff members who are less familiar with the struggles many veterans face when deploying back into the military or reintegrating to student life, Western Michigan held a Web seminar in September. The session described how military disruptions affect veterans' experience in the classroom and offered tips on how professors and counselors could help.

Tracey L. Moon, the campus's new military advocate, says she plans to meet regularly with representatives of the nearby Veterans Administration hospital, in Battle Creek, to connect with patients who are interested in higher education. The meetings also help her stay up to date on medical issues facing veterans.

When students redeploy, she helps them withdraw from classes without getting a failing grade and, in some cases, arranges for them to complete courses online. She also helps streamline the process when they return.

#### 'There's No Commander'

Similar efforts are taking place at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, where Michael Dakduk, a four-year veteran of the U.S. Marines, is a junior.

Like many veterans now returning to college campuses, Mr. Dakduk joined the service following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After graduating from high school at age 17, he traveled by bus from his home, in Las Vegas, to New York to see the site of the World Trade Center. He joined the Marines and spent the next four years in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At 22 he returned to Nevada to attend college on a state scholarship he had earned in high school that remained valid for six years. By then "I had a different perspective on life," he says. "I had matured beyond my years and appreciated life differently."

Assimilating back into life as a civilian and student isn't always easy, says Mr. Dakduk, who is vice president of the university's chapter of Student Veterans of America, a national group that was formed last year and now has 208 chapters nationwide.

"There's a structure in the military," he says. "You know what to do. You wake up at 5:30, train, follow your set schedule for the day, go out and do your mission, and come back and do it all over again. At a university, there's no commander or structure like that."

Veterans accustomed to a clear chain of command can find academic bureaucracy confusing and frustrating, particularly when they run into snags enrolling for classes and tracking benefits. Facing delays in getting their benefits from the VA, veterans on some campuses are turning to campus administrators for payment deferrals and textbook vouchers.

Mr. Dakduk's chapter of the student veterans' group focuses on connecting members with support services and lobbying lawmakers for veteran-friendly legislation. The university created a veterans-assistance committee with representatives from the admissions, disability-resources, counseling, and ROTC offices, along with veterans themselves. The group, which meets monthly, is working on a Web site and a specialized orientation for veterans.

Robert Ackerman, an associate professor of educational leadership at Las Vegas, says such peer groups allow veterans to socialize without the inquiries that make many feel uncomfortable.

"The question they always get is, 'Have you killed anybody?,'" says Mr. Ackerman, who has written and lectured extensively about the transition from combat to campus. "Being around people who don't make judgments about you because of that question is important to

veterans."

Those who are in the National Guard and may be deployed at any time have different needs than those who have returned from combat. A service member who has been deployed in the middle of the semester and is preoccupied by writing a will and making child-care arrangements might, for instance, forget to withdraw from a class and end up with a failing grade.

"Campuses also have to be concerned about students who return from combat who are processing the kinds of things they saw when they were in war zones," Mr. Ackerman says. "Some have a very difficult time being confined to a classroom space. Sitting for an hour or hour and a half can be difficult for some people who have been in very tense situations."

#### Strength in Numbers

Gerald Kapinos served in the U.S. Air Force from 2002 to 2008, when he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. There, an assistant dean of students for veterans helps coordinate services for more than 600 veterans and ROTC cadets.

"I was 28 and had been married for seven years when I separated from the military," Mr. Kapinos says. "My classmates were 18 years old and had graduated from high school the year before."

Getting to know them wasn't easy. So he welcomed the chance to get together with fellow veterans through the Madison chapter of Student Veterans of America. After heading that chapter, Mr. Kapinos became the group's Midwest regional director.

"We've found that campus counseling centers are more geared toward 18-year-olds missing their parents," he says. "We have complex issues that are more deep-rooted than just being homesick."

The campus chapter supports veterans and tries to educate other students about the military experience. Recently the chapter organized a public teach-in. "There were a lot of questions about

what day-to-day life was like and whether we were for or against the war," he says.

The group's Web site also offers veterans' perspectives to students working on research papers on the Middle East and related topics.

"If a student is doing a research project on the surge in Iraq and how it unfolded, we have members who were part of that surge who can sit down and add some on-the-ground perspective to all of the scholastic research and newspaper articles and archives," says Mr. Kapinos, a junior who is studying history and Middle East studies.

Although his own adjustment went relatively smoothly, he has heard of combat veterans who, while in large classes, had the feeling that someone might be sneaking up on them. Sitting with their backs to the wall made some of them feel more secure.

The university's own Web site for veterans offers detailed information about which military courses do and do not qualify for transfer credit, and the steps that students need to take to transfer in or reapply after deployment. Last year the university hired the former head of its ROTC program, Lt. Col. John Bechtol, who had retired from the Army, to a new position as assistant dean for veterans. He will oversee the orientation and transition of student veterans, help them obtain benefits, and step in if they have problems that are not resolved through usual procedures.

#### Disability Law at Issue

Other college and universities, too, are making changes in support of veterans.

The University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown offers them accelerated admissions reviews, application-fee waivers, top-priority registration, and deferred tuition payments. It also has a support group and free campus housing for veterans.

At George Mason University, Michael Johnson serves in a new position as director of military services, advising faculty and staff members on how to interact with veterans and overseeing a variety

of support services. The campus also has a student-run peer-counseling group for veterans.

Mr. Johnson would like to see the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provide money to help colleges expand counseling and psychological services.

"The VA is creating an environment where they are placing more students on campus but not giving colleges the infrastructure to deal with them," he says.

In order to remain in compliance with federal disability laws, colleges that receive veterans with serious injuries may have to spend more money on accommodations. Some may need to hire or train counselors to address combat-related stress disorders. Colleges also must have a staff member who can certify benefits for veterans, says Mr. Johnson.

"The GI Bill is a great thing," he says, "but it is bringing a lot of students to campus with special needs that colleges will be struggling to address in tough economic times."

*Austin Wright contributed to this article.*

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