



KELLY VON LUNEN / VFW

Returning to school after military service can be a difficult transition for many veterans. These students are older than their non-veteran classmates, and they're further removed from a traditional classroom setting. Often they have other obligations outside of simply attending classes, including families and full-time jobs. Some have service-related disabilities.

These factors combined with the pressures of going to college mean student-veterans benefit from supplementary support systems to aid in acclimating to student life.

"I guess [going to school] wasn't really reacquainting myself with civilian life, but learning for the first time what it's like to be an adult in the civilian world," said Marine veteran Sara Sneath, a junior at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

Findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement's 2010 annual survey suggest significantly lower rates of perceived support in the campus envi-

By Kelly Gibson

Getting a college degree is hard enough, but on top of learning algebra and biology, student-veterans must learn how to cope in a civilian world. Finding support systems on college campuses can help with that transition.



Above: Iraq vet Josh Wheeler makes his way to his next class at Arkansas State University in April. Wheeler, president of the *Student Vets Organization*, stresses the importance of getting involved on campus to help with the transition to college life.

ronment by both combat and non-combat student-veterans. Since that report, numerous universities and colleges across the country have introduced veteran-support programs in order to better assist and engage these students.

"The schools that are most successful in attracting and retaining veterans are

those that can build a sense of community on campus," Sean Collins, brand manager for *G.I. Jobs* magazine, told *USA Today* in an article dated April 12, 2011.

Current student-veterans say they experience an overall positive campus environment, a very different sentiment than that of Vietnam-era student-veterans.

"Sometimes military people like to say 'Oh man, you're going back to the college campus, it's going to be people who are just going to hate you because you were in the military,'" said Nathan Dehnke, a master's degree student in political science at the University of Kansas (KU) and an Iraq War veteran. "No, it's not necessarily that way—not at all in my experience."

But Dehnke also attends a school that can be found near the top of "Military Friendly Campuses" lists. *Military Times* ranked KU 12th on its "best for vets" list of schools. In general, it is an odd case for student-veterans to encounter hostile classmates or professors.

"Whether or not they agree with what's going on in Iraq or Afghanistan, or whether or not they agree with the policies of the Army, they've taken a very open-minded perspective, at least in regard to veterans," Dehnke said.

Often, it is not a political disagreement that causes dissonance in the classroom. Rather it is professors lacking understanding of a student-veteran's unique position.

"Unfortunately, I think it just may be difficult for professors in general to understand why a student's first priority is not school," said Sneath.

Finding a Voice on Campus

To help alleviate some of the stress misunderstanding can cause, student-vets seek out on-campus organizations. They create a mouthpiece to help resolve concerns and offer support as students acclimate to a very different lifestyle.

"A lot of student groups were born out of necessity to provide a voice for vets starting college," said Dan Parker, VFW associate director of membership and co-founder of KU Collegiate Veterans (KUCV).

"I knew a lot of guys on campus," Parker said, "and we'd sit around talking about things we thought needed to be fixed."

VFW played a vital role in the creation of KUCV in 2007. The three founders of the group were all VFW members, and Post 852 in Lawrence, Kan., offered the fledgling group a meeting location.

VFW's Department of New York has worked to provide support by partnering with Excelsior College, a non-profit

distance-learning institution based in Albany, N.Y. It provides reduced tuition for veterans and their families in order to reach younger vets.

Other Posts in communities with higher education institutions—whether those institutions are universities, community colleges or trade schools—have also started to offer support to student-veterans.

Sid Mize, commander of Post 1991 in Jonesboro, Ark., let the student-veteran organization from Arkansas State University (ASU) hold meetings at the Post. Mize, a Vietnam veteran, said he's gained a few new members in this way. But the most rewarding part is simply being there if someone should have a question or concern.

"It's rewarding to step up and help

"We've been supporting them all along," said Mize. "Posts have to reach out to student-veterans in their community."

The Post initially gave the center \$600, and last year gave \$2,000. It also provides in-kind donations of food and volunteers when the center holds events for veterans.

"Anytime they ask for something, we try to help them out as best as possible," Mize said.

'Yellow Pages for Veterans'

Though the PRIDE Center is not the only initiative in the country geared toward helping student-veterans, it is a great example because it offers so many services in one central location. The center is housed next to ASU's School of Nursing.

PHOTO BY JIM STEM



Larry Braue, director of the University of South Florida's Veterans Services, teaches the three-credit VetSuccess course. Schools across the country provide veteran-only courses to provide support for student-vets.

out because the transition to college is tough," said Mize. "We're here for them."

The Post also has the unique opportunity to work with the *Beck Personal Rehabilitation, Individual Development and Education (PRIDE) Center*, a comprehensive resource for veterans located on the ASU campus.

The PRIDE Center, operational since 2007, offers education and career assistance, mental health and personal rehabilitation services, and mentoring and socialization opportunities. The university also offers in-state tuition to all veterans, whether they are from Arkansas or not.

It uses students to do much of the resource work necessary to facilitate rehabilitation and integration for veterans.

When campus resources are not enough, staff members often make referrals to community resources. Some liken the program to a "yellow pages" for veterans.

"One of the things that we really focus on at the Beck PRIDE Center is how to help veterans visualize something positive and different, and use that to help them create a new life," said Susan Tonymon, director of the center. "They still want to serve. They still want to have purpose in their lives. They still

have things they want to do.”

Another important service the PRIDE Center provides is a “cultural competency” course for student-veterans, staff, faculty and community members.

“We explore ways that the faculty and staff can help veterans to be more confident in the classroom because they bring a lot of their skills, talents and character with them into the classroom,” said Tonymon.

The cultural competency piece of the program is very important for those less knowledgeable about the needs of student-veterans. It is an essential component in creating a vet-friendly community. Community members can misinterpret a vet’s actions, and that may lead to confrontation in the classroom.

“One of the things faculty and staff need to be aware of is most student-veterans are going to sit in the back,” said Lynda Nash, mental health expert for the PRIDE Center. “They want that last row. It’s not because they’re not interested, or they want to sleep through class, but they don’t want anybody behind them.”

Help for the ‘Middle Ground’

For some participants at the PRIDE Center, just learning the ropes is the hardest part of going back to school. But the center also helps prepare freshly returning veterans for reintegration into society as a civilian, prior to going back to school.

Levi Crawford is one such participant. He is in what the staff at the center calls “the middle ground.” Crawford, a former Army combat engineer with the 103rd Route Clearance Co., 105th Eng. Bn., served for eight years, with two tours in Iraq (2006, 2008) and one in Afghanistan in 2010 where he was WIA by a rocket-propelled grenade.

He spent nine months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and returned to his home in Arkansas two weeks earlier than doctors anticipated. Crawford uses the center’s services to help him prepare for medical separation from the Army, get VA benefits, and choose which GI Bill benefit is right for him.

“I’m in the Army, but I’m not in the Army, and I’m disabled but I’m not disabled,” Crawford said. “I can come here and ask if I do claim TBI, will it kick me



KELLY VONLUNEN/VFW

Levi Crawford inspects the scars on his arm. Crawford, wounded in Afghanistan in 2010, uses the Beck PRIDE Center to help him prepare for college in Arkansas.

out of the military or will it not? What will it do to help me? I can find out without actually doing it.”

Crawford says one of the most useful parts of the PRIDE Center is the opportunity to network with other veterans who have had similar experiences.

“Someone I met here, or knew before being in my unit, has already gone

through what I’m going through and can help me out as far as filling out applications,” Crawford said.

Beyond simply knowing what paperwork to fill out, student-veterans mentoring one another can be beneficial on many levels.

“Veterans are very aware of their presence on campus, so they will monitor each other,” Tonymon said. “They will confront each other, not in a bad way, but in a self-correcting way. There is definitely cohesion among all veterans on campus.”

Current student-veterans stress using that natural cohesion as an advantage while building a supportive campus community.

“The most valuable resource is to find something within your school that has to do with being a vet,” said Josh Wheeler, president of the Arkansas State University Student Veterans Organization. “Find some group and get involved, because it makes that transition so much easier.”

To learn more about the Beck PRIDE Center, visit www2.astate.edu/cpi/beckpride. To find a student veterans organization near you, visit www.studentveterans.org/chapters/search.php. ☛

E-mail kgibson@vfw.org

For more photos and video interviews from the Beck PRIDE Center, visit www.facebook.com/vfwmagazine.



Additional Resources

Here are a few initiatives across the country to support student-veterans.

- **University of Iowa**, “Life After War: Post-Deployment Issues”—A three-hour, veterans-only course helps student-veterans understand the natural consequences of experiencing combat.
- **Washington State VA**, “Veteran-Friendly Campus” program—Peter Schmidt, a psychologist from Washington, has assisted faculty and staff at 80 schools throughout the state to better understand military culture and how to adapt the campus environment for returning combat veterans.
- **Cleveland State University**, “Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran” program—It assists veterans adjust to an academic environment through veteran-only classes, academic advising, enrollment assistance and career counseling.
- **Citrus College** (Glendora, Calif.), “Boots to Books” course—Through this course veterans learn interpersonal skills, techniques for dealing with transition issues and stress management.
- **VA**, “VetSuccess”—Offered through VA, vets can find resources nearby to assist in transitioning at home, on campus, at work and in the community. The initiative also offers tips on how to fill out a job application, interview skills, and pointers for building a resumé and writing a cover letter.

(Source: Military Times EDGE)