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Easing From Combat to Classroom

GI Bill's Growth Fuels a Rush of On-Campus Advisory, Advocacy Services

By Emma Brown
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During his second tour of duty in Afghanistan, Sgt. Chris Day made a habit of wearing a Terps T-shirt under his uniform. He planned to enroll at the University of Maryland as soon as he got out of the Army.

Last fall, three months after Day returned to the United States, he moved into a freshman dorm at College Park and traded the Terps shirt for a pair of sunglasses. The glasses helped him cope, sliding through the days feeling invisible to fresh-out-of-high-school 18-year-olds with whom he suddenly shared a life.

"I felt real isolated, like I didn't belong," said Day, 23, a physical education major who still keeps his hair cropped military-style. "I'm not super-old, but I spent 27 months in Afghanistan, and I feel super-old because of that."

As more veterans such as Day return to school, drawn by a new GI Bill that offers more-generous benefits than its predecessor, colleges and universities in the Washington region and across the nation are launching efforts to ease the daunting social, psychological and logistical transition from combat to classroom.

"There's this renewed sense of obligation to the men and women who voluntarily served to defend our country," said Jim Selbe of the American Council on Education. The D.C.-based association published a nationwide survey in July showing that 57 percent of institutions have veteran-specific programs and services.

Student veterans are a singular population: They are older and more likely to be married than traditional students, and they are more likely, as reserve members, to be called up for deployment in the middle of the semester. Some return from combat needing help dealing with the emotional aftermath of war; many, like Day, feel isolated.

And all deal with the frustrations of navigating bureaucracies in their schools and the Department of Veterans Affairs, both of which have rules and procedures that can be overwhelming. Tuition is due the first of the month, but the GI Bill payment arrives much later. Academic credits earned in military training won't transfer. Call the federal government, and it's impossible to get a human being on the line; call the university, and no one is quite sure who can help.

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"The military is so structured and organized, and when you get on a college campus, it's chaos," said Michael Johnson, a Marine who served in Iraq in 2005. "What we don't want to see is that guy get so frustrated with the system that he quits -- or doesn't even start."

Johnson was hired by George Mason University last year, at the behest of student veterans, to be the school's first full-time veterans' liaison. He reviews academic policies to make sure they are not discriminatory (if you deploy mid-semester, do you risk getting an F?), and his office is a one-stop shop for the school's 425 veterans. He's building a Web site for them, helping organize a peer mentoring group and, with a grant, this year hired a transitions adviser and counselor specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Mason's diversity is one of the things that has made it into a draw," said David Alpher, who teaches courses in conflict resolution at the school. GMU is pushing to attract veterans not only because it's the right thing to do, he said, but also "for the usual mercenary reasons."

The number of student veterans receiving benefits is expected to climb as much as 25 percent this year to 460,000, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and schools that can attract them will share in the \$78 billion the federal government will spend in the next decade on educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which took effect Aug. 1. The law offers allowances for housing and books and covers in-state tuition at public institutions; more expensive private colleges can also opt in to the Yellow Ribbon Program, in which the federal government will match, dollar for dollar, any additional tuition aid provided by the school.

Many schools, ranging from community colleges to four-year public and private institutions, have resource centers to make information more easily available, created positions for internal veteran advocates and strived to connect student veterans with one another and other students.

Often, the changes have come in response to requests from veterans themselves.

"The government will pay you to be there, but will the community support you?" said Brian Hawthorne, 24, a senior at George Washington University who is legislative director for Student Veterans of America. The national organization, founded in 2008, has grown to 199 chapters, becoming a strong voice for recognition of veterans' needs on campus.

Hawthorne, a medic with the Army Reserve since 2003, co-founded George Washington's student veterans group last year after returning from his second deployment to Iraq and finding that there was no system for raising issues with the administration. When the school's certification officer -- whose job is to help process paperwork for students to get GI Bill payments -- was moved to an office in Virginia, "we burned the house down," said Hawthorne, a geography major.

The school's decision to move the official dedicated to helping veterans suggested to Hawthorne and other students that their welfare was not a priority. "That's when our group got our strength, in that fight," he said.

University administrators, including some who are veterans, heeded the group's concerns. They pledged \$18,000 a year to as many as 350 eligible undergraduates; the federal government matches

that under the Yellow Ribbon Program. Together with the District's education benefit under the GI Bill, the aid package means that the \$40,000-a-year private school is now effectively free to veterans. The university also launched a Web site for veterans and hired two graduate students to staff a veterans office, augmenting the certification officer based in Virginia.

American University also held its first veterans orientation recently. The University of Maryland created an office to better help the school's 400 student veterans in response to complaints that their needs were being overlooked. The office is staffed by two graduate students, both veterans. Administrators at College Park also jump-started a long-dormant student group, Terp Vets, and are putting together a semester-long veterans transition course, which will begin next year.

"It's gone from nothing to having every resource someone could need at our fingertips," said Laurissa Flowers, 24, who served with the Army in Iraq and is president of Terp Vets.

Two-year schools are ramping up services as well. Last fall, Montgomery College created the Combat2College program, which includes streamlined registration, academic advising and counseling for veterans, staff training in vet-specific needs and vets-only gym hours. In November, Northern Virginia Community College will hire three people to staff a new office to help veterans transition into the school and to four-year colleges.

Such efforts, along with new student clubs, create ways for veterans to find others who understand their experiences. And those personal connections could save lives, said Larkin Harris, who heads Student Veterans of America's efforts to improve mental health services. Nationwide, five student veterans have committed suicide in the past six months, she said.

For Day, the U-Md. student, talking about the past stirs feelings he would rather not confront. "I'm still getting back on my feet," he said. But when he attended a brown-bag lunch put on by the new Veterans Programs Office in November, he was grateful to meet men and women who made him feel less old, he said, and less tired -- especially three leaders of Terp Vets, all seniors.

"They did time overseas, they're graduating and they're not super-crazy," he said. "It lets me know that going to college is possible."

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