



# A welcome home for veterans

by Alec Jennings

**T**he number of veterans of the armed services has increased steadily on campus in recent years. In spring 2010, there were 1,256, with more expected this fall.

The growing population of students coming out of service — and in many instances the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan — has led university personnel to work a multi-front to ensure that veteran students receive the services they need. These services are meant to help them adjust well to a dramatic change in lifestyle and make Texas State a model institution for welcoming future veterans.

“There’s a sense of urgency in my view,” says Katherine Selber, professor of social work and member of the Veterans Advisory Council at Texas State. “For the next 10 to 15 years at least, we’re going to see veterans coming back and transitioning. We need to get this done right and get it done now.”

A variety of factors can be attributed to the recent increase in the number of veterans returning to seek an education and choosing Texas State over other institutions throughout the state and country at large: the proximity of San Marcos to large military bases, the relatively new and updated G.I. Bill, the variety of services offered by Texas State to help veterans transition successfully and word of mouth from veteran alumni satisfied with a good college experience.

Ebony Littlefield



“This university is doing more than any other university I’ve seen in Texas,” says student Christopher Schave, Air Force veteran and president of the

### Veterans Alliance

After spending several years in the regimented, structured life of military service, young people can grow up

and interact socially with other people of common interests becomes a priority. The Veterans Alliance was formed by students in 2008 largely to fill this need.

“Veterans new to college life need to know where to go and who to talk to,” Schave says. “It can be confusing to make that transition, and that’s a lot of the purpose of our organization. We try to provide a social outlet. It’s good to have people in a similar situation to talk to, whether they’ve been in combat or not.”

The organization works to get information to veterans about services available to them and to inform Associated Student Government (ASG) and university administration about veterans’ needs.

“We’ve recently added a veterans’ liaison to help keep us informed about the needs of veterans on campus, and we communicate with the Veterans Alliance almost on a daily basis,” says Christopher Covo, 2009-10 president of ASG. “Maintaining communication between student

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recently formed Veterans Alliance at Texas State. “We really do have a lot of great people on campus who care and work hard to help veterans become successful students. Without these people, none of this would happen.”

quickly, soon leaving behind many of the youthful elements common in traditional college freshmen.

With a maturity and experience gap that could threaten to create a separation from many of their traditional peers on campus, finding an outlet to network



**Jude Prather** Specialist, Army; Senior public administration major from San Marcos

Even while serving his country, Jude Prather was working to serve its veterans.

“I encourage veterans to get involved,” Prather says. “You really can make a difference.”

Among his credentials, the Texas State Associated Student Government veterans’ liaison was deployed twice to Iraq, guarding supply convoys and traveling the country from south to north. In his spare time, he wrote letters back home, advocating change and urging legislators to ensure that veterans would be recognized and served by their country when they return home from combat.

“It’s my passion. It’s something I’ve been doing for the past decade,” he says. “I went from straddling a machine gun to holding a book in a very short time.”

In his efforts as a veterans’ advocate, Prather has spoken to City Council members, lobbying for strategies to make San Marcos a more veteran-friendly community. He has been outspoken in his support for an on-campus war memorial for university veterans who have given their lives serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Likewise, he has worked with local policy makers to form a task force in Hays County to recognize and address veteran policy needs.

“Texas State is doing a great job but can definitely do more. We could definitely put a greater emphasis on veteran needs.”



**Amanda Lewis** Senior airman, Air Force and Air Force Reserve; Senior social work major from San Antonio

For many students, the pursuit of opportunity is the whole point of attending a university.

Growing up in San Antonio, Amanda Lewis joined the Air Force out of high school to increase the number of career opportunities available to her and to earn the life experiences that can only be gained by serving in the United States military.

“I wanted to be independent and felt like I needed to go off on my own,” Lewis says. “The military gave me belief in myself. I felt really discouraged from high school, and the military showed me what I’m capable of. I grew up in the military.”

In the Air Force, Lewis has been stationed in Germany and deployed to Kuwait and Iraq. After not being a top student at the high school level, she says serving in the military gave her the confidence to achieve what seemed out of reach as a teenager.

“When I was in high school, I didn’t really think I was mature enough to go to college,” Lewis says. “Getting a degree has always been a personal goal.”

Now as a student majoring in social work and preparing to graduate, Lewis looks forward to using her military experience and education to help others find their opportunity and potential.



**Christopher Baisley** Petty officer second class, Navy and Navy Reserve; Freshman criminal justice major from Taylor

A member of each generation of Christopher Baisley's family has served in the armed forces, dating back to the Revolutionary War.

Patriotism and history, he says, motivated him to join the Navy after high school.

"It's a proud tradition in my family," says Baisley.

When Baisley's time in the Navy came to a close, he intended to work toward a college education with the goal of attending The University of Texas. Friends suggested he visit Texas State before making his final decision.

"I had friends and my current roommate who were at Texas State," he says. "The people I talked to at Texas State seemed more enthusiastic about me succeeding as a student, and that's what convinced me to come here for college."

Baisley says that while there were a few growing pains in making the transition from the Navy to life on campus, he sees his time in the Navy and his subsequent promotion in the Navy Reserve as a move in a positive direction.

"The change from people telling you where to go and what to do is different, but the transition really wasn't that difficult for me," he says. "After spending time away from school while in the Navy, it's like, let's see if we can dust off the cobwebs and get back to work. Even though the four years in the Navy sounded like a long time when I was in high school, I know it was worth the work."

government and veterans helps break down a separation between them and the traditional student population."

Encouraging participation between the traditional student population and veterans is echoed in Schave's efforts. After all, he says, one of the prime benefits of having veterans as students on a college campus is the introduction of diverse experiences and perspectives to improve the educational environment of the university as a whole.

"We try to encourage veterans to get involved on campus," Schave says. "We don't want to completely separate them from the rest of campus."

### Post 9/11 G.I. Bill

The Post 9/11 G.I. Bill not only gives those who have served honorably in the armed services an opportunity to achieve a higher education, but it also gives soldiers who don't intend to use it themselves to pass those benefits along to their immediate family — a spouse or a child.

"The new G.I. Bill pays tuition and fees with \$1,000 a year for books," says Murel Miller, veterans affairs certification technician at Texas State and member of the Veterans Advisory Council. "It also includes a housing stipend that is adjusted by the region where the student intends to attend college." Miller is also a veteran.

Gaining access to those benefits can often come at the expense of working

with the large federal bureaucracy of the Department of Veterans Affairs, which provides services to veterans past and present. The process can be frustrating for students who are eager to start school but need their benefits before they can begin.

"Generally, most of our veterans are able to sign up for classes and get their benefits without any trouble at all," says Miller, "but we always have a few outliers."

Because it handles hundreds of thousands of claims for benefits and other services, the Department of Veterans Affairs can be a common hassle for veterans or their families trying to get started on the path toward higher education.

"They're overwhelmed; there's no question about that," Miller says.

The new G.I. Bill is one of the reasons for the current and future growth in veteran enrollment. Military veterans became eligible to transfer their benefits to immediate family members in August 2009, and by then the fall semester was already under way. Miller says he expects veterans to enroll in greater numbers in the upcoming fall semester because of greater awareness of expanded benefits and because it will be the first full school year after those benefits were put in place.

"That's another challenge — in a good way," says Miller. "Veterans see this as an opportunity to send their children to school."

### Stress Brought Home

Standing on a boat in the ocean, a body naturally adapts to the waxing and waning nature of a sea voyage. Once back at port and off the boat, the body may feel wishy-washy as it readapts to the stability of dry land.

According to Gregory Snodgrass, assistant vice president for student affairs and director of the Counseling Center at Texas State, much like people standing on a boat in the ocean, soldiers in the line of fire on the battlefield adapt naturally to the stressful state of vigilance and hyper-awareness of their surroundings.

"In Iraq, for instance, it's around them all the time," says Snodgrass, a combat veteran himself. "That state of hyper-vigilance for them can become the norm."

Difficulties readjusting to civilian life can manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Used to living in a state of perpetual danger, life at home is quite different. This difference, according to Snodgrass, can create a miscommunication of sorts between the body and the mind. This miscommunication can leave the individual with feelings of agitation and anger without knowing or understanding why.

Accessibility to counseling and interpersonal communication with people experiencing similar issues becomes all the more important to ensure veterans' successful transition from soldier to student.

**Ebony Littlefield** Senior airman, Air Force; Freshman social work major from New York City

After growing up in New York and spending most of her adult life overseas serving in the Air Force, Ebony Littlefield is used to taking new life challenges in stride.

"I hit the ground running and keep going. When the dust settles, you can sit back and relax," she says. "It's a tricky balance, but after eight years I've learned to master it."

After ending her military service last fall, Littlefield began classes in the spring while she rears two young children at home and her husband serves in the Air Force overseas. Throughout the past decade, Littlefield readily admits that she has matured beyond her years, and that growth can often create a distance between her and her

traditional classmates.

"Being on active duty taught me how to focus on the task at hand," she says. "Some people don't want to go to class, but I look forward to it. There are so many students on campus who don't know how much work goes into being prepared to go to school."

Majoring in social work and serving in the Air Force ROTC at Texas State, Littlefield looks forward to completing her degree through use of the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill and returning to the service where she hopes to work on a personal level with other soldiers.

"I wanted to study in a field where I can go back into the service and be more helpful."



"Most of them do pretty well," says Snodgrass. "Sometimes they don't recognize the problem right away. That's one of the reasons there is a high instance of relationship difficulties for people coming back."

To make sure veterans receive adequate counseling services, the Counseling Center, along with the Veterans Alliance and the Veterans Advisory Council, advises faculty and staff about how to recognize veterans who may require counseling and what to do for them. In the military, the students were used to a culture where counseling and asking for help can sometimes be viewed as a weak-

ness and that creates an additional hurdle to overcome.

"You can never do too much," Snodgrass says. "I am comfortable that we're doing a good job, and we're working on doing more."

### Welcome Home

The yellow ribbon has become a symbol to remind us that soldiers are in harm's way in a distant land and to say thank you to troops and veterans who may be walking anonymously among us on the home front.

Daffodil-yellow bows decorate the bases of lamp posts, safety railings and

tree trunks on the Quad in the middle of familiar landmarks. The ribbons are a new addition in recent years, welcoming an increasing number of armed service veterans and their family members at the beginning of each academic semester.

Texas State's efforts to recruit and retain veteran students and provide services for them led to the university's inclusion in the top 15 percent of military-friendly colleges nationwide in 2009 according to *G.I. Jobs* magazine. A growing reputation for a military-friendly atmosphere and word of mouth from student veterans pleased with their experience have contributed to the overall

increase of enrollment of veterans at the university, according to Selber.

"Word of mouth is extremely important," Selber says, adding that tools to ensure success are also necessary to promote growth and retention. "You have to have the services beyond simply helping them with their V.A. benefits or they're not going to stay. We're definitely a leader in the field."

Another element Texas State has employed to help ease veterans into the role of student is a University Seminar class specifically designed for them, taught by faculty like Selber and Snodgrass who have a personal connection and knowledge of veterans' needs. (Selber's son is in the active military.) The goal is to eventually get the freshman veterans to interact in a classroom setting with tradi-

tional freshmen, improving the level of communication between the two often distinctly different groups of people and to help each learn from the other.

"It's an issue of diversity, just through their experience," says Selber. "They are a very different group from our traditional freshmen. They can be great mentors." ★



**Clay Patterson** Sergeant, Marine Corps;  
Junior international business major from Richardson

Although he won't earn his degree until spring 2011, Clay Patterson's resume already reads like that of a career public servant.

The Marine Corps veteran served multiple deployments, including one to Iraq, and is the past student regent for the Texas State University System. He participates in a variety of organizations and has held numerous student offices, including chief justice of the Associated Student Government, Student Foundation president and co-founder and former president of the Veterans Alliance. He says his motivation to serve the Texas State student body comes from a desire to continue giving to his country and an aversion to sitting idle.

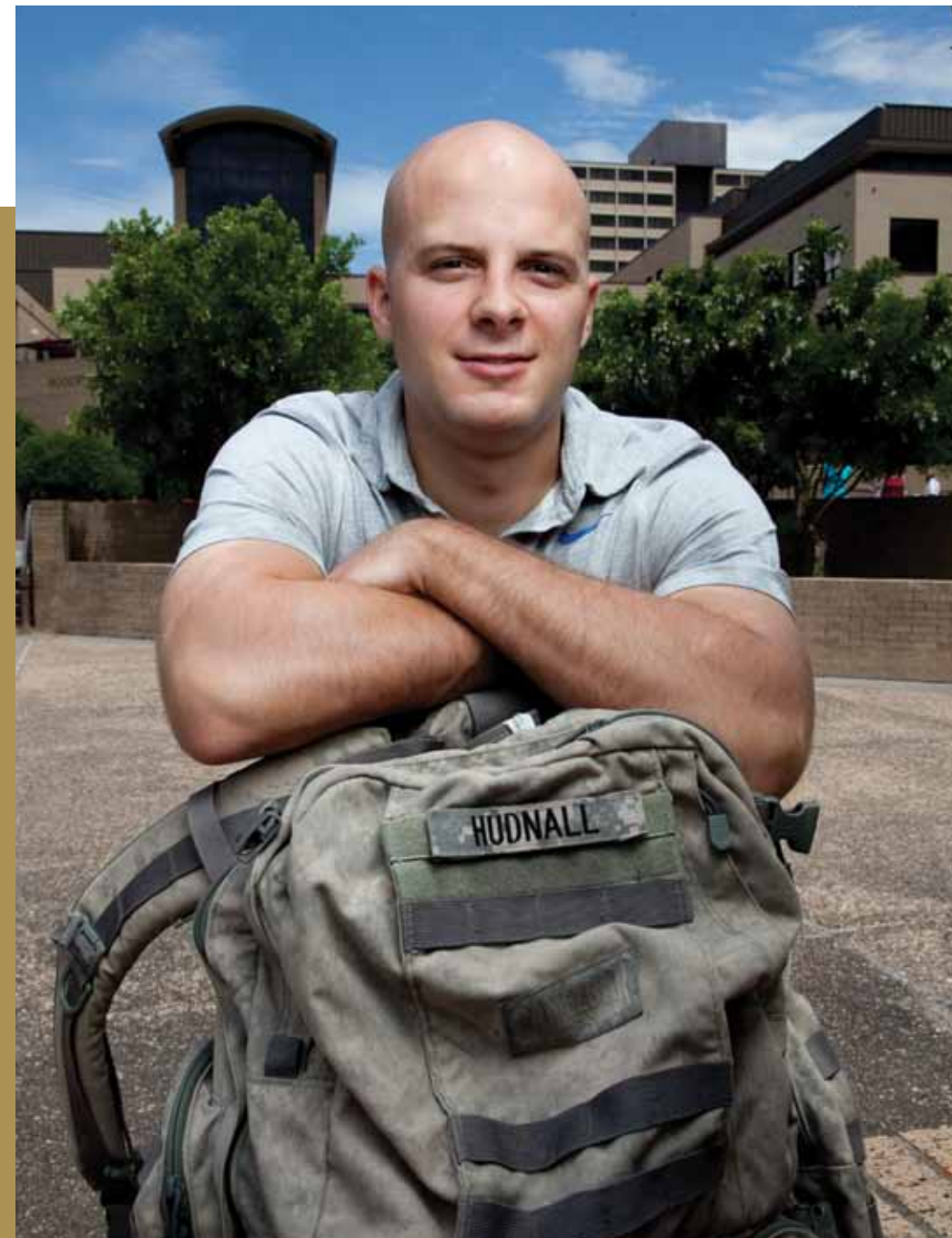
"Part of it is just staying busy," Patterson says. "After having such a structured life in the military, I felt like I had so much free time."

While it's necessary for many traditional students to work part-time jobs and find other means to make ends meet while earning their degrees, Patterson says having his school paid for through the G.I. Bill has given him an edge that is not a luxury to many.

"Having the G.I. Bill has given me the time to volunteer," he says. "I figured since I had my school paid for, I should give something back."

When it comes to life after college, Patterson makes no predictions.

"I just want to go out, make a difference and help people," he says. "Wherever I can do that the best is where I want to be."



**Luke Hudnall** Sergeant, Army;  
Senior finance major from Cincinnati, Ohio

For Luke Hudnall, the switch from combat soldier to student veteran has been almost instantaneous.

"I was doing patrols in Baghdad while other students were on Christmas break," Hudnall says in a January interview. "A month later I'm sitting in a business class."

The difference between operating a tank on a battlefield and studying for college exams is quite a contrast. "In Iraq I was sleeping on top of a tank without regular access to showers. When I came back, simply having a bottle of water was a big deal."

The biggest challenge, he says, was registering for classes while stationed halfway around the world in a different time zone. He worried that a delay could prevent him from attending classes as soon as his obligations to the military were completed.

One challenge was that Hudnall had already been a student at Texas State for about three years. His original military service ended in 2005, and he enrolled in classes and began his college education. But he was recalled, and suddenly he was back in an Army uniform.

"I was initially told I would have to reapply," he says, but that turned out not to be the case. "If my girlfriend hadn't been here to take care of a lot of that for me, I probably wouldn't be in college right now."

To avoid such complications, Hudnall suggests a centralized location such as a website where veterans can handle administrative issues while deployed overseas.

