The Returning College Veteran: Challenges and Strategies

By Arthur Jackson and Jacqueline Sheehan

The deployment of U.S. troops in Operation Freedom and other campaigns abroad have posed a unique situation for colleges and universities nationwide. Significant numbers of military personnel are members of the National Guard and reserve units of the armed forces who were enrolled as college students before they entered active duty.

The numbers of National Guardsmen and reservists engaged in military conflicts around the globe are enormous: 155,000 on active duty and 55,000 deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and surrounding regions. They also account for 404 of the 1,820 deaths as of July 2005 (Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, July 2005).

Army studies and the New England Journal of Medicine ("Combat Duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems and Barriers to Care," Vol. 351, No. 1, July 1, 2004) agree that one out of every six veterans currently returning from active duty fits the criteria for symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Sustained combat in close quarters, the hallmark of the war in Iraq, may well lead to many cases of PTSD. This is one factor that makes this combat situation decidedly different from many other conflicts. There are no safe places or well-defined front lines in Iraq. In the urban terrain, in situations in which it is difficult to differentiate civilians from insurgents, soldiers never feel safe. They never relax and their adrenaline levels remain on overload. While a heightened level of adrenaline permits impressive physical feats, the body cannot sustain this overload for long periods of time without problems.

Returning soldiers may find it difficult to adjust to peaceful settings, or they may be triggered unexpectedly into panic attacks by sights and sounds that bear even remote resemblances to war-time conditions.

Many of the personnel involved in these conflicts have interrupted their college educations to serve their country. Soldiers as young as 17 are spending one or two tours of duty in these conflicts before resuming their college educations. The challenge that confronts us is clear: how do we provide support services before, during, and after our students are confronted with what may be the most traumatic experiences of their lives? Secondly, how do we, as student affairs officers, provide a successful transition from the military experience to the college environment?

Several resources are available for veterans, starting with an institution's counseling center. We strongly recommend that counseling center staff members obtain training in the complicated issues that face veterans prior to creating services for them. An excellent source of support and training comes from the Vet Centers, not to be confused with the Veterans Administration. The Vet Centers were established by the Veterans Administration in 1979 to work with combat vets and their families. They are staffed by licensed mental health counselors who are veterans. (To contact Vet Centers in your area, visit www.va.gov/res/vetcenterdirectory.htm.) At Westfield State College, the Vet Center staff not only provide an in-service training for counselors, they also offer a support group. During the first Veteran Talk Group, students openly expressed gratitude for offering such a session. One man said it was the first time he had ever talked about his combat experience; he was a veteran of the first Gulf War. We encourage students to use our counseling services, but we also give them the address and phone number of the local Vet Center.

Dialogue must be opened between veterans and the greater campus community. Vet Center counselors have noted that civilians need to talk with vets and vets need to talk with civilians. One cautionary note: the overwhelming political view on many college campuses is not in favor of our military presence in Iraq or Afghanistan. Liberal faculty members, without meaning to do so, may shut down discourse that differs from their political opinions.
Recent combat vets tell us that they often feel silenced in the classroom because their views may differ from those of seemingly liberal professors. Student affairs administrators can take a leadership role by moderating panel discussions or by meeting with all members of the campus community to suggest them on the idea that their political statements may have an effect. The discussion must be made between beliefs about the war and beliefs about our students who have served in combat. Our campus hosts a monthly Brown Bag Forum that is well-attended by faculty. Such forums are the perfect opportunity to open discussions with faculty members about this complex topic.

Listen to Your Vets

In closing, we share lessons we have learned from vets on the Westfield campus:

- Soldiers who are students need to feel in contact with the college community while they are overseas. They welcome friendly emails and letters.
- Some veterans find it extremely difficult to sociatalize when they return to the United States. One veteran spoke of camping in Vermont for two weeks instead of the transition home.
- Veterans feel fundamentally different from their peers in college. They feel older and many have little patience for the frivolity of campus life.
- Veterans become frustrated over the lack of positive communication about what the military is doing in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Veterans struggle with a lack of identity; they find it impossible to slip back into their old roles.
- Romantic relationships may not endure the long expanse of time spent in active duty. Dating relationships can be complicated by the psychological transformations and a result of combat experience.
- The insensitivity of people who ask difficult questions bothers veterans. Unless people are truly prepared to hear answers to such questions, they should not ask.

The veterans and the clinicians from the Vet Center tell us again and again that any effort we show active duty students is appreciated more than we will know. As senior student affairs officer, it is our duty to put the proper mechanisms in place on our campuses to assist these students with their readjustment to campus life.

---

Arthur R. Jackson, Ed.D., is the vice president for student affairs at Westfield State College in Massachusetts and an adjunct associate professor in the School of Education.

Jacqueline Sheehan, Ph.D., is the director of counseling at Westfield State College in Massachusetts and a licensed psychologist.