For James Miller, a Marine infantry platoon leader, moving from combat to campus was no easy ride. “I wasn’t this nervous going into Iraq the third time,” he remembers. So when he found Mike Campbell he was vastly relieved. Campbell, director of military services at George Mason University and a former marine himself, guided Miller to GMU’s on-line application process while Miller was still in Iraq. And when he arrived on campus, the two men met face-to-face at the campus veterans support center where they could work out the details of the new GI bill, coursework, housing and more. “He’s there specially for my needs,” says Miller. “I didn’t have to completely change my language, it was a marine talking to a marine about going to college.”

Miller is one of an estimated 2 million veterans returning to the U.S. from Iraq and Afghanistan, eligible for Post-911 GI Bill funding that covers full tuition and expenses at in-state rates. Veterans Affairs estimates as many as 150,000 of these servicemen and women are in college this fall, a 25 percent increase over last year.

Much attention has been focused on how to serve these veterans. Last April, the American Council on Education (ACE) teamed up with Wal-Mart to give $100,000 Success for Veterans Award Grants to 20 institutions with model veteran assistance. In July it joined four other organizations, including AASCU to publish “From Soldier to Student: Easing the Transition of Service Members on Campus.” The report surveyed existing services to help colleges and universities better understand what works best and how much is already being done to address the unique needs of returning veterans.

Successful programs recognized by the ACE-Wal-Mart grants include veteran-specific orientation programs, standards for awarding credit for
military training and experience, faculty and staff training, outreach, academic advising, one-stop support offices, expanded psychological services, veteran employment training, peer mentoring, supplemental instruction, transition services and other programs.

Beyond these foundational services, colleges and universities vary in approach. “There really is a great diversity in what colleges and universities provide in terms of programs and services for their veterans,” says Kathy Snead, Consortium President and Director of Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), which co-produced the ACE report. And that, she says, is as it should be. “It’s difficult to say that everybody ought to do X, Y and Z.” Snead recommends that before they start spending a lot of money, institutions consult with the veterans themselves, perhaps creating focus groups to determine the most pressing issues on their individual campuses. “Have some straight talk about what it is they need,” she says. “Certainly the veterans that are on the campus right now can tell you both the good news and the bad news.”

Patrick Shields, coordinator of veterans affairs at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey, agrees and adds that student veterans “keep us on a true line to make sure that we are always focused on [their] needs.” Stockton is one of the institutions that received ACE-Wal-Mart grant money, through the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJSCU).

One-on-One

The kind of personal service Miller encountered is turning out to be one of the most important things institutions can provide. At San Diego State University that meant going the extra mile for veteran marine Nick Popaditch. Administrators first encountered Popaditch at a retreat designed to train university administrators and faculty to deal with wounded veterans. Popaditch, who suffered a blast to the head and lost some of his hearing and sight, needed help pushing his application through. “With people calling people, it went right to President [Stephen L.] Weber,” says Putnam. Now Popaditch, who wrote the book *Once a Marine* about his experiences in combat and in recovery, is a successful student and author, a spokesperson for returning vets and an involved mentor in the Student Veterans Organization at SDSU.

But service doesn’t always mean getting to the president’s office—just to the right office. “Dedicate your resources to handling individual students, dealing with all the issues they have, and getting them to the appropriate places,” advises Markie Campbell, vice president of enrollment management at the University of Maryland University College. She calls this “relationship-based advising.” Typically, veterans are already stressed by moving from military to civilian life. “They don’t want to be passed around,” she says. And she should know; UMUC has been serving military personnel for almost 70 years. The school will use ACE-Wal-mart grant money to implement a web-based veterans service model to complement existing services.

Begin with Admission

Service should start right away—at admissions. At Stockton, veteran status is marked during the admissions process, and the Veterans Affairs office follows up immediately. “That gives us a rapport with that veteran right from the beginning,

“I wasn’t this nervous going into Iraq the third time.”

—James Miller, a Marine infantry platoon leader, describes his move from combat to George Mason University.
instead of just catching them on the fly,” says Shields. Snead, with SOC, says this is particularly important as many veterans are first generation college students, and may not have been focused on college attendance back in high school. Even during the application process, they may need help filling out forms completely, and by deadline. If they are returning to college after a deployment interruption, they may still need help—and the common policy of requiring them to reapply is being challenged more and more.

After admissions, separate veteran orientations have been implemented at a number of schools so that vets can focus on benefits and housing for families, rather than information targeting younger students. Part of the orientation process might also include remedial work to bring vets up to speed. George Mason University is applying for the Department of Education’s Upward Bound program, which is designed to “knock the rust off,” says Mike Johnson, who runs GMU’s Office of Military Services. “You’ve been in the military for 20 years, you can’t even remember Algebra II,” he explains. The course is not credited, but prepares students for college; most students take it for 90 days but it is available for an entire year.

No Longer a Combat Zone

The challenges in the transition from military to civilian life are more than just bureaucratic. On a practical level, the military is self-contained—health care, dental, housing, even food is part of the package. And the chain of command is imminently clear: soldiers know who they report to and where to go with problems. On a university or college campus, not only are vets feeling the stress every new college student encounters; they’re also leaving the familiar structure of the military. Here they’re pretty much on their own—until they find that veterans affairs office. “It can be very daunting,” says Johnson.

Other transitions go deeper. Many soldiers are returning from combat, and echoes of their experiences are sometimes hard to shake. Whether it’s full-blown post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) -- creating mood swings, depression and a tendency to isolate themselves—or just hypervigilance, it is important to recognize that veterans’ needs may be different from those of a young person enrolling in college straight out of high school. George Mason is looking into a program similar to the one offered at Cleveland State University: veterans there can enroll in vet-only classes, through a program called Supportive Education for the Returning Veteran (SERV). The idea is that veterans return from war feeling as though they must protect and defend—so in a classroom situation where they don’t know the other students, they may feel as though they have to protect half the class, and guard against the possibility of enemies hiding in the rest of it. By placing them with other veterans, they can more easily concentrate on learning, and gradually move into general population classes as their psyche catches up to the reality of university life.

A Place to Land

Key to a successful veterans program is a central location where vets can come for information, or to meet others like them. Many campuses have offices where they disseminate information about navigating the GI Bill benefits, pass out information about counseling services, advise veterans on academic schedules, arrange tutoring and act as a liaison to supporting campus offices like housing and student affairs. Some have lounges complete with couches, offering social space as well as administrative help.

“Really what you need is a one-stop shop,” says Johnson.

At Montclair State University in New Jersey, the Veterans Center helped ground a young female veteran returning to school. “Even though she had been to the university before, she was still anxious
about getting started again,” says Denise Rodack, veteran coordinator at Montclair. The student had been demobilized that summer, so turnaround time before fall classes was very short. Rodack welcomed her to the Office of Veteran and Military Resources, a “home-base” for veteran and military services, got special permission for her to take the classes she needed to pick up where she’d left off (though the classes had already filled), and directed her to a veteran-specific orientation, where she met another female veteran. “Knowing there is someone there for them” makes all the difference, says Rodack. Montclair is one of nine institutions within the NJSCU, which won one of the ACE-Wal-Mart grants.

Veteran housing can be key as well. SDSU established what they believe to be the first student veteran housing, a fraternity-style, two-story home with wide-screen television, pool table, office, patio furniture and a courtyard. President Weber himself signed the three-year lease on the place, which opened last August. Of the housing project and the rest of the extensive veterans programming at SDSU, Weber says: “Veterans need a sense of belonging that encourages them to participate in campus life. We need to create a culture and a place in which they can flourish. We have made promises to them that must be kept.”

Welcoming Vets to the Community

Tending to veterans’ unique needs does not mean separating them from the entire college or university experience. Campus communities are increasingly drawn in to contribute what they can in the transition process. At Stockton, a Veterans Advisory Board is “an all-star lineup” of administrators, military representatives and student veterans, says Shields. SDSU has a campus-wide Troops to College Support Committee of key offices that work with veterans, including psychological and career counseling, disability services and financial aid. At Hunter College, social work interns contribute heavily to a program that has expanded from three to seven campuses in the City University of New York system. The office uses a combination of the interns, professional staff and student veteran mentors.

In fact, the student mentors have been key to the success of a number of these programs. They often staff the phones at the Veterans Centers, or informally advise one another in the student veterans clubs that sprout up as a result of their inclination to gather together. “It’s about relationship,” says SDSU’s Putnam. “They really just want to take care of each other, just like they did when many of them served in combat. “When they’re out there, they’re just going to take care of the guy or woman next to them and get them home. When they come back I think they’re wanting to do the same thing.”

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