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More Mass. veterans in college

Campuses work to increase help as numbers rise

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 05, 2014



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LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Marine veteran Allen Iem pondered where to hang a Marine banner at UMass Lowell's new Office of Veterans Services.

The number of military veterans enrolling in colleges across Massachusetts has increased over the last three years, and the schools are preparing for more as troop withdrawals in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere return tens of thousands of military personnel to civilian life.

Local campuses are stepping up their support of veterans, setting up resource centers to assist with paperwork, fostering student veteran organizations, and boosting mental health counseling.

“In no time since the end of World War II are colleges going to experience the type of interest from veterans and ex-service members that we’re seeing now,” said Michael Barretti, a marketing professor at Suffolk University and a Marine veteran who cochairs the school’s commission on students who are veterans and active service members.

“And Boston is one of the most attractive places for

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veterans,” he said, citing the plethora of colleges and universities and the area’s job opportunities.

State officials said enrollment of veterans across public and private institutions in Massachusetts has risen by more than 13 percent in the past three years. They expect the numbers to increase further in coming years, though they did not have specific projections.

To respond to the increase, University of Massachusetts Amherst is exploring ways to better address the needs of its growing ranks of female student veterans. Bunker Hill Community College, which has the highest student veteran enrollment statewide, now offers two courses on the experiences veterans confront during war and on the home front.

Northeastern University, which enrolls the most veterans among the state’s private colleges, offers master’s degree programs in fields popular among student veterans, including homeland security and information protection.

“We view this as a real boon to our academic programming and to our local economy given that we’re training and educating the future workforce of the Commonwealth,” said state Education Secretary Matthew Malone, a combat veteran of the Persian Gulf War.

Student veterans can face unique challenges on college campuses, specialists said.

They’re often at least several years older than traditional undergraduates, and their life experience can make it hard for them to relate to their classmates. Many work full- or part-time jobs to help support a family or other significant financial obligations. Some suffer from physical or mental trauma.

But they also tend to have particular strengths that help them excel in the classroom and in careers. Military training often leaves veterans well-disciplined, motivated, and focused. Many have good teamwork skills and also know when and how to be a leader.

Public campuses throughout the state have established veteran support centers, known as “bunkers,” which feature academic and career counseling and other services and resources, Malone said. The centers help veterans adjust to campus life, a marked shift from the rigors of basic training or overseas deployment.

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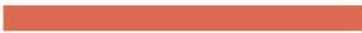
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Mass. colleges with the most enrolled veterans

	ENROLLED GI BILL RECIPIENTS	GRADUATION RATE	MEDIAN DEBT	DEFAULT RATE
Bunker Hill Community College	 624	10.9	\$5,200	13.6
UMass Boston	 621	37.9	\$17,258	8.8
UMass Lowell	 586	53.8	\$21,038	7.9
Northeastern University	 492	78.5	\$26,254	5.4
UMass Amherst	 461	70.4	\$20,500	5.1
Boston University	 427	83.9	\$25,000	2.5
North Shore Community College	 424	14.2	\$5,500	10.6
Massasoit Community College	 392	13.8	\$5,289	18.0
Bridgewater State University	 365	54.4	\$18,000	9.0
Bristol Community College	 350	15.9	\$3,800	16.1

SOURCE: US Department of Veterans Affairs

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“When you’re in the military, someone is expecting you. You’re pretty much told when and where to do things,” said Misty Kemp, the veterans’ center director at Bunker Hill. “When you come to a college classroom, that lack of structure can really be a hindrance for veterans.”

Kemp said Bunker Hill officials call student veterans in the middle of each semester to ask how they are doing and offer tutoring to those struggling academically.

Bunker Hill and other campuses work closely with veterans on the job search, hosting career fairs and posting a list of openings in veteran centers’ offices.

Schools have taken steps to help students feel more welcome socially on campus. Many campuses have social groups run by student veterans, and schools host various events and activities, including special orientations, flag-raising ceremonies, and formal dances, to help veterans feel welcome. Some colleges host special orientations for them.

Army Reserves veteran Michael Ruehrwein, who earned a master’s degree in creative writing this spring from Lesley University, said the transition from the theater of war to campus life can be dizzying. During his service, he worked in a hospital operating room in Iraq.

“When I first came back, it was a lot tougher just being in the classroom,” said the 28-year-old Bridgewater native, who wrote his master’s thesis about his transition from the military to civilian life.

“I was only 21, but it felt like I was a thousand years older. Hearing kids complain about stupid things [drives] you insane coming from a warzone.”

Under the Post-9/11 GI bill, veterans can receive coverage for some or all tuition and fees; a monthly housing allowance; and up to \$1,000 a year to pay for books and supplies. The level of benefits is based on how long they served. At schools in the government's Yellow Ribbon Program, students can receive additional financial aid. Some veterans can transfer unused benefits to their spouse or dependents.

Like other veterans, some who return to college said they've faced challenges navigating the bureaucracy of the VA, particularly in applying for and receiving benefits. Colleges are increasingly helping veterans to work through the red tape.

"We walk our veterans through the whole process," said Janine Wert, a former case manager for the VA who heads veterans' services at UMass Lowell, where veteran enrollment has soared from 550 in 2011 to 1,450 today. "Many don't need that level of help. But some of them do, and for the ones that really need it, it's so crucial."

Advocates for student veterans praised colleges for their efforts.

"Many schools are making changes for the better," said Marine Corps Reserve Sergeant William Hubbard, vice president of government affairs for Student Veterans of America, a nonprofit coalition of student veterans groups on college campuses across the world. "By and large, higher education has proven it is a good place for veterans, and veterans see the value of getting a degree."

At elite schools like Amherst College, officials said they, too, are taking steps to improve the experience for the handful of student veterans who attend.

Craig Velozo, a rising junior at Amherst, said he never envisioned himself studying at such a prestigious school. The Fall River native had dropped out of high school before eventually graduating. He enlisted in the Army at age 22, and his service included a year in Iraq. Now 29, Velozo, a member of the active reserve who is studying English, said his college experience has been invaluable.

"I know if I graduate from here it will set me up for a good future," he said.

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