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## Making the transition from warrior to student

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"In Iraq and Afghanistan I was in charge of 13 other soldiers," said Andrew Davis, a 24-year-old former Army Ranger who's now a junior at the University of Minnesota. "Now my biggest responsibility is whether or not I study for a test that's three weeks away."

That, in a nutshell, sums up the transition soldiers must make from "the streets of Baghdad to Washington Avenue," Davis told a veteran's transition seminar last week. He should know; Davis has done remarkably well in doing just that.

After six years in the Army, including two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, the St. Peter native came home to go to college. But like a lot of veterans, including Minnesota National Guardsmen who interrupt their education to serve their country for a year, he ran into a bureaucratic nightmare.

This is one issue that the Minnesota National Guard is trying to address with its unique program, "Reintegration: Beyond Reunion." In addition to counseling for its soldiers, the Guard provides training for college administrators, educating them on veterans' benefits and the unique challenges veterans face as they return to school.

It wasn't always this way. Colleges were particularly adept at serving veterans during and immediately after Vietnam, when campuses were full of vets and the VA had a representative on every major campus. But as veteran enrollment declined, some schools lost the expertise they had in serving them. Both colleges and the Veterans Administration have been slow to ramp up along with the wars on terror in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Case in point was Davis' first semester on campus in 2004. The U gave him a financial waiver until his G.I. Bill claim was processed. The VA still hadn't processed it by the end of the semester and Davis' account was frozen, making it impossible for him to register for classes. That's a conundrum that a lot of vets face. As a result, about 25 percent of vets at the U drop out. At some campuses across the country, the number is as high as two-thirds. Soldiers simply get frustrated with the red tape.

Davis found that unacceptable, so he set up the Veterans Transition Center ([www.comfortforcourage.com](http://www.comfortforcourage.com)), a one-stop benefits shop for veterans at the U. He also badgered the VA into regularly sending a benefits counselor to campus. While the center is a godsend for veterans, getting it up and running wasn't without its challenges.

The U initially wasn't interested in helping him. So Davis framed the issue in this way: "You're willing to use student activity fees to give space and money to the campus gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender group, but won't even give office space to veterans?"

The U eventually gave him a tiny space in Eddy Hall, but it was up to Davis to find the \$27,000 he needed to run the center. He tapped every private source he knew, including the Minnesota Defense Alliance, a consortium of local companies with defense contracts.

Davis, who will soon announce his candidacy for the Minnesota Legislature, also got Gov. Tim Pawlenty involved. On Dec. 19, the governor's office announced a number of enhanced benefits for veterans, including in-state tuition rates and money for county veterans service offices. Davis heavily influenced that initiative.

With the U office running well, Davis is spreading his good works. He's in the process of setting up a satellite office at St. Cloud State University and other University of Minnesota and MNSCU campuses. He's also helping the Minnesota Guard in its efforts to educate administrators and vets. Unfortunately, Minnesota, which prides itself on being progressive, is anything but when it comes to veterans' benefits.

For instance, Illinois gives its veterans free tuition at state schools. And neighboring Wisconsin offers five times the benefits that Minnesota does, Davis said. Minnesota is also one of the worst states in giving veterans credits for their time in service. When Davis applied, the U gave him 9 physical education credits for his six years as an Airborne Ranger. If he'd gone to school in Georgia, he would have started with three times as many credits.

But for Davis, this is about a lot more than credits and financial aid forms.

"Our state has a moral obligation to these veterans," Davis said. "We owe them this much for the sacrifices they make for all of us."

Amen.

**Up next:** The cultural and social challenges vets face on campus.

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