

Campus group helps students make transition

By Tory Brecht

What started last summer with a couple of college student combat veterans reaching out to others in the same boat at the University of Minnesota, may spread to campuses nationwide.

Andy Davis, a Minnesota political science and geography major and veteran of conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq, is president of the Veterans Transition Center on the university's Twin-Cities campus. He and a handful of other students from the college's pro-soldier support group called Comfort For Courage, decided more needed to be done to help reintegrate returning soldiers.

The center serves as a refuge for veterans, who often feel alienated from other students, and it also offers assistance in connecting with Veterans Affairs officials on topics ranging from securing GI bill payments to dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder.

"There is a massive dropout rate for combat vets returning to college," he said. "They often face an age gap, an experience gap and a maturity gap with other students."

Davis said the military tries to help returning soldiers but often doesn't do a good job. The center has a mentoring program where Twin-Cities business leaders who are also veterans come and talk to returning soldiers, giving them strategies and advice on how to get on with their lives.

The center has been a hit with veterans, and has the full support of the university, he said.

It's also starting to attract attention from academic officials around the country.

"We've been contacted by the University of Iowa, Florida State University, the University of Southern Connecticut and the University of Wisconsin-Superior, asking about the program," Davis said. "It's something we'd like to see come to more colleges and universities."

It's sorely needed, Davis said, because soldiers coming back from the Middle East face some unique problems.

"In World War II, for example, the combat soldier was on the front lines for an average of four months, while over in Iraq, they're on the front lines for about a year," he said. "We're also fighting an enemy that doesn't wear a uniform and we're sometimes fighting women and children at times. We're also starting to see a polarized homefront, like we did in Vietnam."

And while anti-soldier sentiment isn't as strong as it was in the 1960s and 1970s, it's not enough to just slap a sticker on your car and buy a drink for a soldier in the airport.

"We give them a hug, throw them a homecoming celebration, and think it's just fine," he said. "But some of these problems can pop up a year later or five years later."

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