

## A place at the U helps smooth vets' return

They've endured wartime experiences that their classmates haven't. That can open a gap that the vets' center wants to close -- or prevent.

**Dan Wascoe**, Star Tribune  
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He has parachuted into Iraq, been shot at by a young boy and an old man and served three Middle East stints as an Army Airborne Ranger.

So when 24-year-old Andrew Davis, now a junior majoring in geography, listens to other students at the University of Minnesota, he brings a perspective that most of them don't share.

"When somebody freaks out about a test that's coming up in three weeks," he said, "I think that I had a week's notice to go to Iraq."

Same goes for Ross Holtan, a 24-year-old sophomore and Army veteran, who said he has been struck by what he considers relatively petty concerns of many students around him.

Such a gap could alienate veterans from the rest of the student body, Davis said. That's one reason he and Tony Richter, a finance and accounting junior, last summer proposed a Veterans Transition Center at the university.

In an unusually quick institutional response, the center will be opened Nov. 14 in the basement of Eddy Hall, the counseling center on the Minneapolis campus.

Davis half-jokes that his persistent phone calls "annoyed people into submission."

### **'Potential for misunderstanding'**

But Jerry Rinehart, vice provost for student affairs, said Davis and Richter made "a very compelling case" that there is "potential for misunderstanding" between younger students and veterans with war experience.

Last year, he said, 423 university students, 107 of them women, received G.I. benefits (some could have been children of veterans or enrollees in the Reserve Officers Training Corps).

"How [the returning servicemen] respond to normal life is a concern," Rinehart said.

He also said he wants to halt early signs of higher dropout rates among veterans since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. That could be caused by call-ups of reservists and National Guard members to active duty, he said, but he's not sure.

Another purpose of the center will be to help vets get help more quickly under the G.I. Bill.

"The VA [federal Veterans Administration] is not seen as a youth-based organization," Richter said.

Holtan said his own application has been delayed so long that he might not be able to afford to register for next semester.

Kelly Simer, a doctoral student in education, is helping furnish and decorate the vets' center. The emphasis is on nature pictures, plants and neutral colors.

"We've tried not to make it look like a military recruiting center -- not a lot of red, white and blue," she said, partly because some vets "might be angry or upset" over their former military service.

She said she has sensed awkwardness among students when they learn her husband, Joshua, is in training for duty in Iraq. She is three months pregnant and said he could be gone for two years.

"People don't know what to say," she said. "Should they feel bad or be supportive?"

The center should become "a place where veterans will feel comfortable," she said. That could well include Joshua in a couple of years.

Davis estimates annual operating costs at \$25,000, but Rinehart said it's not clear how much support beyond a room and a phone the university will offer: "At this point we need to see the needs and demands."

Such evidence could come from students like Davis, who said he has been shot at by a 9-year-old boy and an 85-year-old man. "That's a huge group of people to be afraid of," he said.

Richter said he wants the center to be more than a gathering place and a service office. He hopes it will help vets "tap into the vibrant culture" at the university and make contacts that can lead to mentoring and social opportunities.

"Supporting our troops doesn't end when the troops come home," he said.