

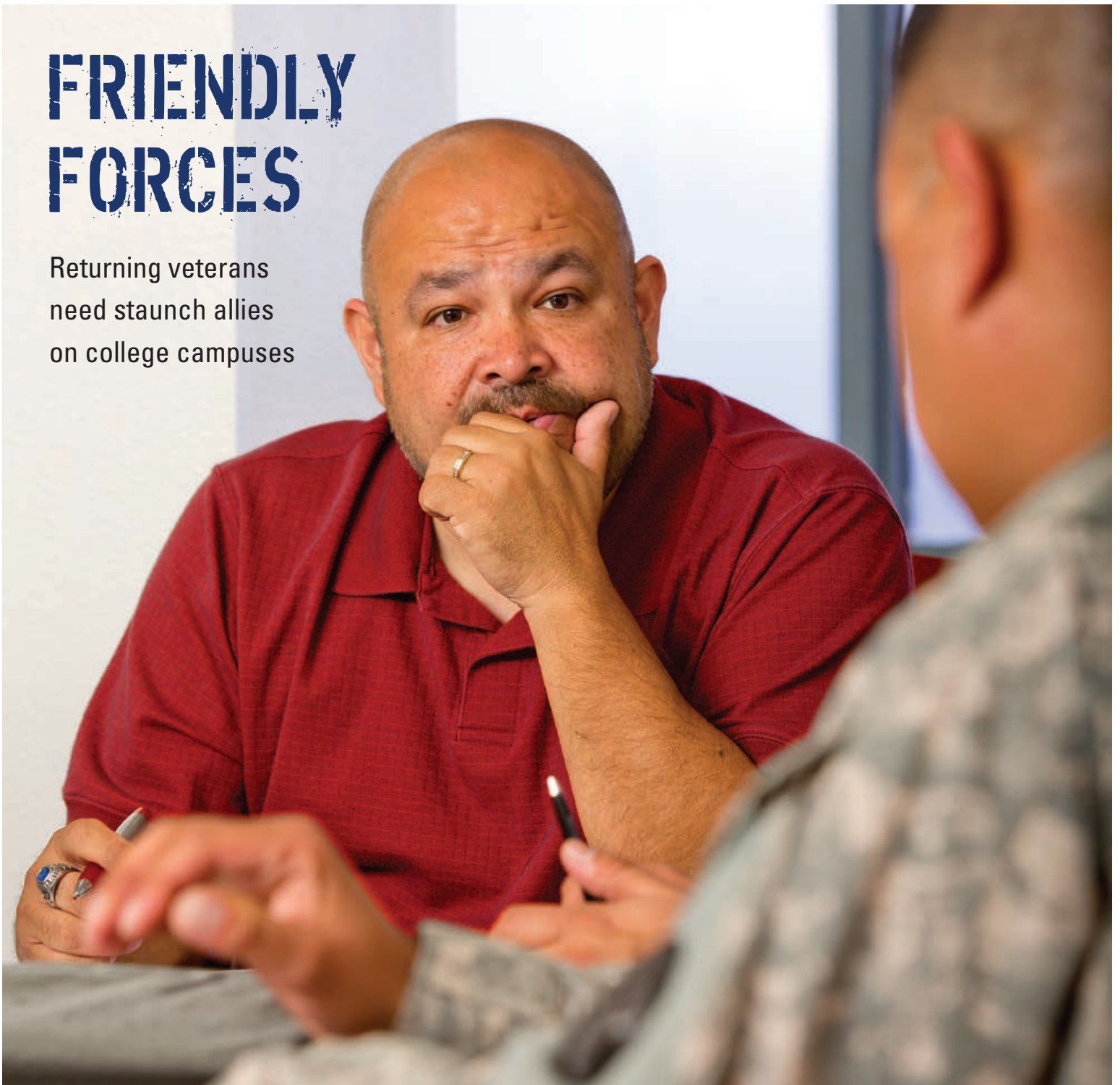
LUMINA FOUNDATION

# FOCUS™

Spring 2013

## FRIENDLY FORCES

Returning veterans  
need staunch allies  
on college campuses





## INSIDE



Army stress still lingers: Page 11



Ex-Marine rolling at Rutgers: Page 16



Family man with a plan: Page 29

**On the cover:** John Vasquez, a 20-year Navy veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, has struggled in making the transition to student life at El Paso Community College. "Every day I get up and fight my anxieties," he says.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**T**hese days, we're often urged to "support the troops" — and rightly so. The men and women who have chosen to serve this nation, to protect us all as Americans, certainly deserve our gratitude and support.

One way to show that support — an increasingly important way, given the demanding, dynamic nature of today's economy and society — is to ensure that veterans are prepared to succeed *after* military service. And for today's veterans — really, for anyone — preparation means education: high-quality, credentialed, college-level learning that equips students to prosper in the global economy.

Servicemen and women know this, of course. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, waves of returning vets are expected to enroll in America's colleges and universities. In fact, hundreds of thousands of them already have shifted from combat to campus, aided significantly by their education benefits from the post-9/11 G.I. Bill. These student veterans are a large and growing part of an encouraging national trend, the trend toward increased educational attainment.

But there are areas of concern as well. The fact is, the transition to college presents significant challenges to many returning veterans. These students are, in many ways, the *most* nontraditional of all nontraditional students. These soldier/scholars are set apart from their campus peers — by age, by life experience, by envelopment in the military culture, and all too often by a close-up view of war's horrors. Colleges and universities simply can't conduct business as usual and expect to properly serve these students.

To their credit, many higher education institutions are reaching out to student veterans, implementing programs and offering services specifically designed to help them succeed. That's what this issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* is all about: highlighting the institutions and programs that are working well for returning veterans.

In this issue, you'll meet several students who speak candidly about their transition to campus life, and you'll meet the people who are helping to ease those transitions. For instance, you'll read about:

- Ricardo Pereyda, a Tucson native and Iraq war Army veteran who barely survived the battle with what he called "an enemy *inside*" before turning his future around at the University of Arizona.
- Natasha Crawford, another recent Arizona graduate who says that — even now, a decade after her deployment to Iraq in the initial ground war — she struggles with stress.
- Scott Hakim and Patrick Greene, former Marine Corps comrades who served in the same unit in Iraq and are now attending college together at Rutgers University. Both have benefited from Rutgers' comprehensive approach to serving student vets.

Along with the stories of these and other student veterans, you'll also hear from several campus-based and national experts on veterans' issues, including Michael Dakduk, executive director of Student Veterans of America. Dakduk says many of the lessons colleges learn in serving returning vets can apply to other at-risk populations as well. "If we can get this right for vets," Dakduk insists, "we can get it right for all students."

There's also a wealth of information on our website, [www.luminafoundation.org](http://www.luminafoundation.org), where *Focus* offers many extra features, including a story that asks whether student veterans can actually be given *too much* extra support. We've also created a compelling, Web-based photo gallery of student veterans in which each photo subject answers the question: "What was the most difficult barrier you faced in making the transition to college?"

We believe all of this material — in these pages and on the Web — puts a much-needed spotlight on a rapidly growing and increasingly important population of postsecondary students. As a nation, we must serve these students more effectively — first, because we owe it to them; second, because they have so much more to give ... so much potential that higher education can help unlock.

A handwritten signature of Jamie P. Merisotis.


Jamie P. Merisotis  
President and CEO  
Lumina Foundation



# FOR LEGIONS OF MILITARY VETERANS, COLLEGE IS THE NEW FRONT

*By John Pulley*

In the winter of 2008, Ricardo (Rico) Pereyda prepared for his final mission with military precision. Behind the walls of his boyhood home, Pereyda placed blankets on the floor of his old bedroom. He wrote a letter of apology to his estranged wife and his parents, June and José. Then he lay on the floor, cocked a 9 mm handgun, placed the barrel of the weapon in his mouth and rested his finger on the trigger.



VETERANS  
MARINES



Ricardo Pereyda survived a “hellish, violent year” in Iraq’s Sunni Triangle, only to be haunted by the experience once he returned to the States in 2005. But Pereyda has turned it around and is now positioned for success — thanks, in part, to the programs for student veterans at the University of Arizona.

Pereyda hadn't been himself since returning from combat in Iraq. A member of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps, he and his comrades performed dangerous security missions in Baghdad, Fallujah and elsewhere in and around the region's Sunni Triangle. Pereyda's platoon operated at a "high ops tempo," the military term for a relentless pace of deployment. Teetering on the bleeding edge of war, Pereyda did his job and hung on. From February 2004 through March 2005, he encountered improvised explosive devices (IEDs), ambushes, mortar attacks and firefights. He bore witness to death and suffering at close range.

"It was a hellish, violent year, far beyond anything I ever experienced in the streets," says Pereyda, who grew up poor in Tucson, Ariz. "You name it, we got hit with it."

The unrelenting assault shattered Pereyda's psyche. Once back in the States, he began having panic attacks.

Pereyda sought relief in drugs, alcohol and isolation. "It was a miracle if I could get out of the house," he says. "I would get panic attacks just thinking about going outside. ... I had an enemy *inside*."

His wife left him, and he lost his house. With nowhere else to go, he moved back home.

Lying on the blankets, he shifted the handgun from his mouth to his temple and back again. Unable to fire the final round, he flung the weapon across the room, curled into a ball and sobbed. He couldn't bear the thought of his parents finding his lifeless body.

In the span of four years since that day, Pereyda has become a new man. In May he graduated from the University of Arizona with a bachelor's degree in public management and policy (with an emphasis on criminal justice and a minor in military science and leadership). He is the first person in his family to earn a four-year credential. He has received offers of jobs and internships.

Some 2 million men and women in uniform have returned or will return home in the next few years. Like Pereyda, many are veterans of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. As those wars draw to a close, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, airmen, sailors, Marines and members of the National Guard will enroll in college, enticed by education benefits provided by the post-9/11 G.I. Bill and other programs for veterans. College is an opportunity for them to reclaim and get on with their lives.

Yet the outlook can be as unclear as a battlefield enshrouded in the fog of war. A significant number of student veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury and other disabilities. Not all come to the desperate crossroads that Rico Pereyda reached, of course, but none of these veterans emerges unaffected. Most haven't been in a classroom for years. Almost all will struggle at times to negotiate the tricky transition from one distinct culture to another. For these warrior scholars, a college campus is a minefield.

"You go from a (military) bureaucracy that tells you everything to do to a (higher education) bureaucracy that doesn't tell you *anything* to do," says Cody Nicholls, 39, the University of Arizona's assistant dean for Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS). "It's a night-and-day shift in structure."

Colleges and universities are taking steps to clear the tripwires that imperil members of the at-risk veteran population. A few institutions have moved faster and more deliberately than most. The ones that have had the most success are those that have put in place comprehensive programs involving departments and offices across their campuses.

It isn't an easy undertaking. The relationship between colleges and student veterans is complex and evolving — with potentially huge benefits for both parties. Student veterans "bring diversity of a type that higher education says it desires," says Michael Dakduk, executive director of Student Veterans of America. Formed in 2008, the not-for-profit group is a network of more

than 750 campus-based chapters that work to develop "the resources, support, and advocacy" that military veterans need to succeed in higher education and beyond.

The emergence of veteran-friendly colleges and universities also raises a question of broader significance: If institutions can implement comprehensive programs that help student veterans succeed, can they help unravel the complex array of challenges that bedevil other at-risk groups? First-generation college students? Minorities? Students from low-income families? Students suffering from substance abuse? Students with mental or emotional challenges?

"If we can get this right for vets, we can get it right for all students," Dakduk says.

**"You go from a (military) bureaucracy that tells you everything to do to a (higher education) bureaucracy that doesn't tell you *anything* to do — it's a night-and-day shift in structure."**

**Cody Nicholls**  
Assistant dean, University of Arizona

Cody Nicholls (center) talks with student veterans, including Natalia Baez Alvarez, who was deployed in Afghanistan and Greece while serving in the Air Force. Nicholls, assistant dean for Veterans Education and Transition Services (VETS) at the University of Arizona, understands vets' need to find people they can trust on campus. As an Army Reservist who served in Iraq and Kuwait, Nicholls has "walked in the same boots."





Dan Standage — who served 10 years in the Marine Corps, referring to it as “a calling” — lost his sight more than a decade ago in a rare reaction to a routine vaccine. He now works as an advocate for student veterans, saying: “Vets with disabilities need to see other vets with disabilities who are successful.”



## “I DIDN'T LIKE COLLEGE KIDS”

Growing up on the south side of Tucson in the 1990s, Rico Pereyda was a self-described troublemaker who was bored with school. College seemed unattainable and undesirable. “I knew I couldn’t afford it, and I didn’t like college kids,” says Pereyda. “It wasn’t in my future. I didn’t picture myself in college.”

Having been kicked out of several schools, he dropped out in 1999, his sophomore year, and took a job on a construction crew with his father. “I was happy working with my hands in the sun,” he says. Then came the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Pereyda quit his job to enlist in the military. A Navy recruiter turned him away, however, citing Pereyda’s failure to complete high school.

Determined to serve his country, Pereyda earned a diploma and enlisted in the Army. He survived boot camp and joined the 554<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company, based in Stuttgart, Germany. His platoon, the 230<sup>th</sup> MPC, deployed to Iraq.

Looking back on it, Pereyda says his descent into hell likely started on a day when everything went wrong. His platoon had been rerouted from its scheduled mission and ordered to guard a convoy of gas tankers that had been disabled in an attack. While on guard, he and his men fired on an insurgent truck driver who had failed to heed warning signals. Pereyda stuffed the man’s many wounds with gauze and loaded him into an evacuation helicopter. In a second shooting that same day, a 50-caliber round sheared off the side of a local man’s face — in full view of his grandson. Later, a Molotov cocktail transformed the disabled tankers into “infernos.” Before the day was out, Pereyda had learned that a buddy had been injured — a buddy whose platoon had taken the mission from which Pereyda’s had been diverted. The soldier had been hit by chunks of burning shrapnel that “lodged in his right temple, popped out his eye and nearly cleaved his arm.”

That horrible day was one of many for Pereyda. In fact, midway through his tour of duty, Pereyda’s platoon had lost half its men. And the fallout from those losses didn’t end when the tour did.

After he returned home to Tucson, Pereyda’s panic attacks worsened. “I knew I had to do something to get out of the house,” he says. His solution, in 2005, was to enroll at a local community college. When a biology instructor gave him a study sheet intended to help students prepare for the first exam, Pereyda assumed it was a comprehensive overview of the type he had been given in advance of military tests. He was dismayed to find that the exam included questions not covered by the guide.

“I looked at it as the professor setting me up for failure,” says Pereyda, who bolted the classroom without completing the exam. “That’s how I started in the academic world.”

In 2009, Pereyda’s circumstances began to improve. A Veterans Affairs (VA) counselor who had worked with him for several years suggested that he check out the University of Arizona. The institution had recently



**Rutgers University student Walfrin (Wally) Batista displays an image of his unit when it was deployed last fall in response to Hurricane Sandy. Many student veterans, including Batista, are in the Reserves and have been called to duty while attending school.**

established veterans programs designed to help students like Pereyda to reach their education goals. There was even a new veterans center, a modest outpost that occupied a tiny room in the Old Main building. If you put half dozen people in the center, “it was packed,” Nicholls recalls.

Despite Pereyda’s misgivings, he began taking classes in the spring of 2010. “I never dreamed I would be coming here,” he says. “I was a very nontraditional student — in every sense of the word.”

## VETERANS CENTER IS CRUCIAL

Creating veteran-friendly campuses requires high-level administrative support, buy-in from faculty and staff, and accommodations that make campuses more accessible to student veterans. Successful programs typically feature an on-campus coordinator of student-veteran programs and veteran-specific orientations for new students. To be most effective, those elements must be embedded in an institution’s infrastructure, says SVAs Dakduk.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of veteran-friendly colleges and universities is having a place on campus where student veterans can congregate and gain access to vital resources, according to Dakduk and others. Pereyda says Arizona’s veterans center was a second home, a place

where he studied, fraternized and did volunteer work. Without it, he likely wouldn't have made it to graduation.

"I was very much a raw nerve," says Pereyda of those first weeks and months on campus. He likens his initial experience at the university to jumping off a high dive into an ocean of 40,000 students. "Talk about the deep end. ... I clung to the veterans center."

For many of the approximately 1,000 University of Arizona students who have served in the military, a chasm seems to separate them from their non-veteran peers. The age difference alone can be significant, of course. But as the saying goes: It's not just the age, it's the mileage. Traditional college students are away from home for the first time and eager to gain a measure of worldliness; veterans who have deployed multiple times to war zones halfway around the globe can be world-weary. A traditional college student might be concerned about conflicts with a roommate, while "a housing issue for us is somebody becoming homeless," says Nicholls, an Army Reservist who served in Iraq and Kuwait. "We've had veterans camp out on a sofa (at the veterans center) until they get back on their feet."

Most important, the centers are places where veterans make connections with men and women they can trust because they have "walked in the same boots," Nicholls says. "Trust is a big thing for veterans. When you're walking down the streets of Fallujah, you don't know who is friend or foe."

Pereyda met men and women at the veterans center who shared his experiences. "What helped me was another veteran saying, 'C'mon, you can do it,'" he says. Two of these encouraging voices were those of Dan Standage and Matt Randle — two veterans who had made the transition years earlier and are now focused on easing the path for others.

Standage grew up in Arizona in a family of eight kids. On Veterans Day 1990, his senior year of high school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps. It was "a calling," he says. The following spring he earned a high school diploma, becoming one of only two siblings to do so. "We were expected to work for my dad," Standage says. "We were never expected to graduate."

In Okinawa, Standage married and had two sons. A routine vaccine for Japanese encephalitis caused a rare reaction that destroyed Standage's optic nerves. Having served his country for a decade, Standage returned home in 2001 — blind, divorced and with custody of his sons. Years of despondency followed. In 2004 he gained admittance to a VA rehabilitation center for the blind and began the process of reclaiming his life.

The center's leaders offered Standage a job but rescinded it when they learned that he lacked higher education credentials. His second wife, whom he had met at the center, discovered that his disability qualified him for vocational rehabilitation education benefits, and Standage enrolled at the University of Arizona.

He was grateful to be in college, but frustrations mounted. Lack of public transportation meant that



**Matt Randle, who as an Army Reservist was part of the invasion force in Iraq in 2003, later battled through campus barriers and earned a bachelor's degree in 2011. He's now in law school and does advocacy work on behalf of student veterans. "The point of a service member getting an education is to set them up for success down the road," Randle says.**





**Maralynn Bernstein, known as Mama Bear to many vets on campus, is a veteran services coordinator in the registrar's office at the University of Arizona. She works hard to explain government education benefits, pointing out: "There is really bad information out there."**

Standage was "stuck at the library" for long periods each day. He was "ticked off (and) antisocial," he says. The experience wasn't unique. If anything, it was an extreme version of the disorientation experienced by thousands of men and women who arrive at the university each semester. "Every new student who comes to this campus is blind," he says.

Standage persevered, though, and in 2008 he became active in the growing national movement to create veteran-friendly college campuses. He began to understand the power of role models. "When I saw a blind guy struggling and going to college, I knew I could do it too," he says. "Vets with disabilities need to see other vets with disabilities who are successful."

In high school, Matt Randle was the kid labeled "college material." Selected for gifted programs, Randle served on the student council and made the football and

wrestling teams. Fascinated with history and the military, he yearned to be "part of something bigger."

In 1998, on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, Randle enlisted in the Army Reserve. He completed basic training during the summer after his junior year and became an active-duty soldier following graduation. In 2003, he was part of the force that invaded Iraq.

Combat was "the very best ... and the very worst," recalls Randle, 32, who served as a medic. "The friendship, camaraderie, brotherhood and family I had over there compares to nothing else. ... (But) I lost friends over there. I saw humanity at its ugliest, human life at its least valuable. There's no way to adequately prepare oneself for that." He was among the first wave of soldiers to return from fighting in Iraq. He came home suffering from PTSD, "a non-visible disability, one that not many people in higher education have been exposed to."

At his first step in higher education, a community college near his home, Randle encountered a college that was not ready to support student veterans. "They didn't even know how to process my G.I. Bill," he says.

For two years he took classes alongside 18-year-old kids with whom he had nothing in common. Randle posted a 3.9 grade point average, yet he felt unmoored. "I got fed up. I was lost. I was angry. I wasn't going to school for any other reason than I thought that that was what I was supposed to do," says Randle, a burly, bearded redhead with eyes hidden behind sunglasses. "I felt like a foreigner in my own home. I felt like an alien."

When his father died, Randle moved home to help his mother, who works for the University of Arizona. He found a job doing advocacy work on behalf of veterans, which he enjoyed. Opportunities for advancement arose, but Randle lacked a degree. "I hit a wall," he says. "I couldn't move further in my career."

In the fall of 2008, Randle enrolled for a single course at the university, encouraged by then-President Robert Neal Shelton. "The president of the university sought me out," recalls Randle, sounding incredulous more than four years later. "If you have earnest support from the top, you can move mountains."

In 2011, Randle earned a bachelor's degree in family studies and human development. He married and enrolled in law school. He expects to graduate in May 2014. "I hope to continue to serve," he says. "I would like to run for office."

**"Across the veteran population, we do an amazing job of taking care of each other and a piss-poor job of taking care of ourselves."**

*Matt Randle, Army Reserve veteran and University of Arizona graduate*

## 'FRIENDLIES' DOT THE CAMPUS

In many ways, Randle and Standage got through college the hard way. Prior to 2008, the University of Arizona had no programs for promoting veterans' success. Since then, it has advanced toward President Shelton's goal of becoming the most veteran-friendly university in the country. The university created the VETS program, which draws on assets from across campus to support men and women who served in the military.

You'll find stalwart supporters of veterans in the registrar's office and the offices of admissions and financial aid. They show up at the disability resource center and at health services. Student veterans call them "friendlies."

"Parts of this campus are incredibly helpful," says Randle. "Parts are less aware of the help they could give."

Maralynn Bernstein, a veteran services coordinator in the Office of the Registrar, is a friendly. Some student veterans know her as Mama Bear. A few years ago, she realized that the customer service her office was providing vets "wasn't what it should be." Drawing on her background in retail sales, she revamped the office and became an advocate for student veterans. One goal was

to make sure that the university's vets understood government education benefits that can be "extremely complicated."

"There is really bad information out there," says Bernstein, recalling a veteran in medical school who thought he had used all of his benefits to earn an undergraduate degree. Bernstein investigated and found a provision in the law that allowed this student an additional 12 months of benefits — a \$26,000 discovery.

"It was like the coolest thing ever," she says. "If they don't have to worry about where their money is coming from, they can focus on their studies."

Another "friendly" on campus is Michael Marks, lead psychologist for the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System. Acclimating to civilian life is an arduous process that receives too little attention and too few resources, he says. It takes about a year for enlistees and newly commissioned officers to adjust to military life. The notion that three days in a military transition program will prepare vets for civilian or college life is preposterous.

During a counseling session with three Iraqi vets who were "frustrated, irritated" and at risk of dropping out of school, Marks hit on the idea of creating a resiliency program that would help student veterans ease into campus life. "Measures of resiliency are better predictors



**Natasha Crawford (center), a nine-year Army veteran, earned a bachelor's degree in May from the University of Arizona. Even so, she admits she's still battling some of the demons that stem from her service in Iraq. Here, she joins other members of the campus Student Veterans of America chapter (including Rico Pereyda and Jessica Barnes [right]) at a campus event.**

of retention and graduation" than grade-point average, test scores or class rank, says Marks, who for more than 35 years has worked with veterans who have experienced trauma.

He collaborated with Phil Callahan, professor emeritus of educational psychology, to develop a three-course program called Support of Education for Returning Veterans (SERV). The curriculum seeks to develop resiliency, leadership and empathy, among other skills. The program also trains student veterans to teach others as a means of becoming more effective learners themselves. Student veterans who complete the three-course SERV program have a retention rate of 95 percent, Nicholls says.

As a group, vets are notoriously reluctant to seek help. They tend not to identify themselves as disabled, and they are loath to use resources that they think could help someone else. "There's a team mentality," explains Amanda Kraus, assistant director of the university's Disability Resource Center. "That's how folks are socialized. The priority is your team or group. It's not the individual."

Randle agrees. "Across the veteran population, we do an amazing job of taking care of each other and a piss-poor job of taking care of ourselves," he says. "We struggle to admit that we need the help. To overcome that requires a great deal of courage."

Kraus' office is responsible for determining the aids and accommodations that student vets need to compensate for disabilities. These aids fall into three broad categories: testing, course substitution and electronic course materials. Qualified students can get extra time to complete exams or permission to take tests in places with minimal distractions. They can substitute a language requirement if they've suffered a traumatic brain injury or if the language itself — Farsi, for example — triggers a stress response. Electronic course materials can compensate for loss of vision, hearing or concentration. Some students require the services of a note-taker.

Federal law requires equal access, but not everyone embraces the accommodations that make access possible. "There are skeptics among the faculty," Kraus acknowledges.

Randle neutralizes the naysayers with compelling statistics. Less than 1 percent of the population will serve in the military, yet 25 percent of the country's homeless population has served; unemployment among veterans is higher than joblessness in the general population; and the suicide rate among veterans is several times the national average, he says.

"Those things are connected," concludes Randle. "The point of a service member getting an education is to set them up for success down the road."

Women who are hesitant to show weakness while on active duty can be even more reluctant than men to seek help when they arrive on a college campus. Natasha Crawford, 31, a straight-A high school student, earned her diploma in 1999 and attended college for one year at





**Michael Marks, lead psychologist for the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System, leads a group session in the veterans center on the Arizona campus. (Clockwise, from left:) Steve Timlin, Todd Crane, Amy Rogers, Richard Brown, Nick Kandis, Marks, Eddie Kwan and Natalia Baez Alvarez. Marks, who has worked 35 years with veterans who have suffered trauma, helped create a resiliency program to help student veterans adjust to campus life.**



**Stephen Abel (right), a retired Army colonel, directs the Office of Veterans & Military Programs & Services at Rutgers University. Here he confers with Marine Corps veteran Andrey Volfson and Patricia Larkin, who served in the U.S. Coast Guard. Abel says his office has worked nearly three years to ensure that “the veteran’s point of view is always considered” at Rutgers.**

Albany State University. Crawford followed in her father’s footsteps and enlisted in the Army, where she served from 2000 through 2009.

Military service changed her, she says, especially deployment to Iraq during the initial ground war, which was “pretty rough” and “really scary.” She became irritable and earned the nickname Pit Bull. “I was drinking a lot,” she says. “I wasn’t sleeping.” Crawford’s way of coping was “to be tough and never show weakness. I did my job and took care of my soldiers,” she says. “I’ve never gone to seek the help that I need.”

She resumed her education, in 2009, at the University of Arizona. That first year was a period of adjustment. She slept with a gun by her bed and constantly scanned the environment for danger. This mindset, known as “hyper-vigilance,” is common among combat veterans. Sufferers tend to be uncomfortable in crowds, don’t like to be in classrooms with people at their backs, and prefer to sit near exits.

Crawford adjusted to college life, befriended non-veteran students, and in May she earned a bachelor’s degree in nutritional sciences. Still, the stress lingers. Sometimes Crawford “shuts down” or snaps at her partner, whom she married in March.

“Eventually I’ll do something about it,” she says.

## VETS HELPING VETS

In December, the University of Arizona’s veterans center moved into a new space of 3,800 square feet. Nicholls, the assistant dean, shows a visitor the computer lab, a lounge and a quiet area where students unwind. He talks about the “vets-tutoring-vets” program and a résumé-writing course. He points toward a display of military patches and nameplates. “In the military, your job defines who you are,” he explains.

Undergirding everything at the center is a belief that veterans are most qualified to help veterans. “You can look in a vet’s eyes and get a pretty good idea of how they are doing,” says Nicholls.

When new student veterans arrive on campus, someone from the center escorts them to their first destinations, which often includes a stop to register their G.I. Bill benefits. This stop is at an office “clear across campus,” says Standage, who earned his bachelor’s degree in rehabilitation in 2009 and a master’s degree in visual impairment in December. “A lot of the vets fresh out of combat say it (the escort) reminds them of going outside the wire (in a combat zone) and having a hand on a buddy’s shoulder.”

For Randle, helping veterans provides a “sense of



purpose." A few years ago he undertook a "mission" to make it easier for veterans to get the classes they need. At a time when many students take six or more years to earn a bachelor's degree, the G.I. Bill's education benefit covers a maximum of 36 months of tuition, plus stipends for books and housing. Users must adhere to an approved education plan or risk losing benefits. Closed classes can cause huge problems.

Veterans "are tightly constrained in how we use our education benefits," Randle says. "The (new) G.I. Bill is the only form of federal education assistance that has specific class requirements tied to it."

Randle and others suggested that the university allow veterans to register for classes before other students, an idea

that wasn't immediately embraced by the administration. "Every time we were told 'no,' we called two more people," Randle says. Perseverance prevailed, and now student veterans get a one-week head start on registering for classes — a perk long enjoyed by the university's student athletes.

Efforts to promote the success of student veterans seem to be paying off. The four-year graduation rate at the University of Arizona is 40 percent. For student veterans, it is more than 50 percent. One possible explanation for the disparity is the degree to which on-campus veterans programs, including the veterans center, make it easy for students with military backgrounds to be part of something that has meaning for them. "The more active you are on campus, the more



**Rob Bright, a former Navy intelligence specialist, now serves as assistant director of Rutgers' Office of Veterans & Military Programs & Services. Here, at the entrance to Veterans House on the Rutgers campus, Bright talks with Caitlin McCarthy, a four-year Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq.**

**Former Marines Scott Hakim (left) and Patrick Greene used to be brothers in arms, serving in the same four-man unit in a truck patrolling Iraq. Now they're brothers on the Rutgers campus. Greene, a Florida native, opted for the New Jersey university on Hakim's recommendation, knowing he'd have the support he needs to succeed.**







**Karen Stubaus, Rutgers' vice president for academic affairs and administration, and Dick Edwards, executive vice president for academic affairs, are committed to ensuring that their university serves as a model for how to serve student veterans.**

likely you are to persist," Kraus says.

Persistence is also important to Stephen Abel and Rob Bright, veterans who serve their comrades on a campus far from Arizona's. In fact, persistence and precision dominate their days at Rutgers University — right down to their morning coffee routine.

On the second floor of Veterans House on the edge of the Rutgers campus in New Brunswick, N.J., Bright, a former Navy intelligence specialist, carefully selects coffee beans roasted no more than three weeks earlier in nearby Highland Park, just across the Raritan River. He mixes 36 grams of beans (deconstructed in a burr grinder) with 910 grams of water (heated to 195 degrees Fahrenheit), strains the steeped mixture through a Chemex filter to remove bitterness, and pours the simmering liquid into a preheated cup. The result is a smooth brew with a real punch: three times the caffeine in a pedestrian cup of java.

"We love coffee," says Abel, a retired Army colonel who directs the Office of Veterans & Military Programs & Services at Rutgers.

Abel and Bright, the program's assistant director, are a detail-oriented (and well-caffeinated) team. They have

to be. Managing a comprehensive program that helps student veterans attain their academic goals is a demanding and endless task.

Before the veterans office was created in the summer of 2010, Rutgers University had no student veterans program to speak of. Since then, Abel and Bright have used their boundless energy and their obsession with detail to build a campus-wide support system for veterans that is among the best in the country.

Relying heavily on a "boots on the ground" strategy, this pair has worked for almost three years to win the hearts and minds of would-be allies. They have established "high-level connections," enlisting campus officials who can do the most to help veterans, Bright says.

The duo is everywhere. There is no significant board or committee at the university that lacks Abel or Bright as a participant, including the committee to select a new vice chancellor for student affairs. At Rutgers, "the veteran's point of view is always considered," Abel says.

Headquarters is Veterans House, a three-story structure with dormer windows, a gabled entryway and a covered front porch ringed by white-painted railings. An American flag snaps in the breeze, and a visitor half



Members of a group called RU SERVS, Rutgers University Services Education Resources for Veteran Students, meet weekly on campus to make sure vets' needs are being addressed. (Standing, from left): Stephen Abel, Will Madigan and Rob Bright. (Seated, clockwise from lower right): Patricia Larkin, Kimberly Bruss, Andrey Volfson, Stephen Newberry, Thomas Hazlett Jr. and James McGuinness.



**Kathryn Loder-Murphy, a disability services coordinator at Rutgers, reviews a class assignment with Carol Baillie, a junior who is a Coast Guard veteran and now serves in the Coast Guard Reserve. Loder-Murphy makes regular visits to Veterans House to talk with former service members. "I'm far more successful being on their turf," she explains.**

expects to find an apple pie cooling on the window ledge. Nothing about the place suggests the rundown fraternity house that the university bought and refurbished a few years ago.

Veterans House serves multiple functions. It is a command center; a place where student veterans gather to study and socialize; and a hub for bringing critical university services to veterans. "It's a place that breaks down the confusion and what can be the harshness of a large university," says Karen Stubaus, vice president for academic affairs and administration. "It produces a comfort level and helps (student veterans) navigate the bureaucracies."

The very existence of Veterans House speaks to the institution's regard for students with military backgrounds. "If you don't have leadership that is committed to (a veterans) program, even having a dedicated staff won't solve the problem" of recruiting veterans who succeed in college, says Dick Edwards, executive vice president for academic affairs. The way Rutgers serves veterans is "perhaps a model for other universities." Indeed, a number of other institutions already have inquired about its veterans programs, including UCLA, Washington State, Indiana and Penn.

One of the program's first clients was Scott Hakim, a Purple Heart recipient who suffered a traumatic brain injury while serving with the Marine Corps in Musa Kala, Afghanistan. His platoon was trying to seize a hill when a "daisy chain" of hidden IEDs detonated. If not for a hard rain that had compacted the sand and deadened the explosion, the blast — and Hakim's injuries — would have been much worse.

After completing his service and enrolling at Rutgers, Hakim encountered typical difficulties. He arrived on campus knowing no one, and he discovered that he had little in common with younger, traditional undergraduates.

A mediocre student in high school, Hakim had to take developmental courses in math and English before enrolling in for-credit classes at Rutgers. His brain injury makes it difficult to concentrate and retain information, a deficit that he overcomes with Marine-instilled discipline. In other words, he does whatever it takes.

"If I read it and I don't get it, I read it eight more times until I do," Hakim says. "A three-hour lecture is nothing compared to a 12-hour patrol in Afghanistan." Veterans House also introduced him to the university's disability office, which arranged for him to take tests in a "reduced-distraction environment."

Hakim and other student vets grapple with financial issues. The post-9/11 G.I. Bill covers most of his education expenses, but funds disbursed by VA to cover housing costs are "almost always late, and the book stipend is never enough to cover (the cost of) books," says Hakim, who also suffers from post-traumatic stress and Crohn's disease. He covers financial gaps with income earned as a work-study supervisor at Veterans House.

Overall, leaving the Marines to attend Rutgers "was a culture shock," Hakim admits. Still, he has thrived. His grade-point average hovers around 3.8, and he says he wants to attend law school.

Hakim understands that his experience at Rutgers is atypical. Marine Corps buddies who attend other institutions tell him they "are not getting the same support." In fact, he says, "most have nothing like this at all."

## PROGRAM A BOON TO ENROLLMENT

As Rutgers has earned a reputation as a veteran-friendly institution, its enrollment of vets has surged. In the summer of 2010, Rutgers knew of 446 veterans on campus. Today the office supports about 2,000 men and women who have served in the military.

Patrick Greene grew up in Tampa, Fla. His parents told him and his brother that only one of them could go to college. Patrick enlisted. Generations of men in his family had served in the military, including his grandfather, a Marine.

Greene served in the Marine Corps between 2007 and 2011. He met Hakim at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, during infantry school. They wound up in the same company, the same platoon — even on the same “fire team,” the four-man unit that shares a truck. In Iraq, the friends went on patrols together, executed raids, swept for IEDs, and chased after smugglers of military equipment.

Greene’s military service is now funding the education that his parents couldn’t afford to give him. When the time came to select a college, he opted for Rutgers, urged to come there by Hakim. He knew that he would get the support of a fellow Marine and an institution that had shown its commitment to veterans.

“I knew that going to school on my own — in a state where I didn’t know anybody — wouldn’t work,” he says.

The veterans programs at Rutgers were designed to fix glaring problems. In 2008, two students spoke up at an open forum and told then-President Richard McCormick that the university was not doing enough to recruit and serve student veterans. “They were incredibly eloquent about how sucky we were,” recalls Kathryn Loder-Murphy, a disability services coordinator.

Among their grievances, veterans complained about a university policy requiring all new undergraduates to live in freshman dormitories. Veterans as old as 50 found themselves living with kids who were asking the vets to buy them cigarettes.

Since then, modifications to Rutgers’ housing policy allow veterans to live in housing for graduate students. “These men and women are more mature and don’t fit into an 18-year-old dormitory,” Abel says. “Veterans are focused on their academics.” (In a recent academic term, only 19 of the approximately 2,000 student veterans at Rutgers received an academic warning.)

Rutgers’ steps to aid veterans were also a response to broader concerns, including those voiced in 2010 by Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki. He warned then that the low second-year retention rate of the nation’s student veterans was wasting public funds and undermining the intent of the post-9/11 G.I. Bill. At Rutgers, where the total cost of a four-year degree tops \$200,000, dropping out is costly.



**Will Madigan, president of the RU SERVS group, meets with Patrick Love, Rutgers University’s associate vice president for student affairs. Love says university staff and faculty need to understand that newly arrived veterans must be seen as arrivals from “another culture.”**



**Arvis C. Jones, director of student leadership and campus life, talks with service members in her office at El Paso Community College. She says more advisers are needed to help give student veterans “a full understanding of their options” when it comes to education benefits available to veterans.**



Across the nation, more than 800,000 veterans have already used post-9/11 benefits to attend college. Total outlays could reach \$90 billion within 15 years. Precise data about student veterans' persistence and graduation rates are hard to come by; colleges haven't done a good job of collecting and sharing the data.

That may change soon, however, thanks to a recent agreement between the VA and the National Student Clearinghouse. In January, Shinseki announced that the two organizations will share and compare their data on the success rates of service members who use the G.I. Bill at colleges and universities. SVA leader Michael Dakduk, who helped broker the deal, insisted that this new transparency would benefit millions of student veterans.

"Having that information (on graduation rates) is critical," Dakduk said when the deal was announced. He pointed out that reliable data on the success of student vets "is what we need to find out the value of the G.I. Bill and especially to combat stories and speculation that veterans are not succeeding in college."

For the two-man support team at Rutgers, failure is not an option. "This office exists for academic success," Abel says. "Our goal is to have every vet who starts here graduate."

Early on, Abel and Bright realized that helping veterans succeed was largely a matter of smoothing out the transition to an alien environment. They had to make vets feel that they belonged. "Rutgers is a big, bad liberal university," Abel says. "The anxiety was whether they would feel welcome."

Patrick Love, associate vice president for student affairs, likens the experience of a newly arrived veteran on campus to that of international student — except the veteran is far less recognizable.

"When someone comes up to me with a heavy foreign accent, I anticipate that they are on unfamiliar ground," Love says. "When we send students on study-abroad (programs), we prepare them for the culture," he says. But when a veteran arrives in New Brunswick, "staff doesn't recognize that they're talking to someone from a different culture."

Abel and Bright have persuaded Rutgers staff that veterans deserve the same consideration given to foreign-exchange students. They determined that it was important to bring services directly to veterans, especially academic advising. Mike Beals, vice dean for undergraduate education, volunteered to counsel student veterans himself. He has learned that veterans' varied academic backgrounds preclude a cookie cutter approach



**Mike Beals, Rutgers' vice dean for undergraduate education, volunteered to serve as an academic adviser to student veterans. He's learned that some vets have trouble shifting gears after service and learning to chart their own course on campus. Often, veterans "are used to being told what to do," says Beals; they often need help in creating an academic plan that is a "mosaic rather than a linear path."**



**Tom Krause served in the Marines, ending a five-year stint by helping guard the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, Ukraine. His transition to campus life began early, in the form of regular correspondence with Stephen Abel at Rutgers. During his final six months on duty, he corresponded regularly with Abel and calls Abel's advice "a turning point" in helping him enroll.**

to counseling. He was also struck by the difficulty some student veterans have in shaking off the military mindset. "They are used to being told what to do," says Beals, and so need to be shown that devising an academic plan is more of a "mosaic rather than a linear path."

Elizabeth Rollins, manager of compliance in the university's financial aid office, says that "having a central location for veterans is paramount. ... Access is really key when working with veterans."

Much of the work done by Abel's office to support veterans happens before they arrive on campus. Tom Krause completed five years of service in the Marines in Kiev, Ukraine, where he guarded the U.S. Embassy. During his final six months on duty, he corresponded regularly with Abel.

"He gave me that warm-and-fuzzy feeling," says Krause, who at the time was deciding between going to college and staying in the Marines to pursue a career in special operations. Abel's genuineness and grasp of facts "was the turning point" in Krause's decision to seek a bachelor's degree. "Steve knows everybody," Krause says.

Engaging with veterans before they arrive on campus also helps to identify issues that can undermine academic achievement, including social isolation and traumatic brain injuries, "the signature wound of recent conflicts," says Mary Kelly, a mental health counselor at the university.

"We catch a lot of them because of Steve's efforts to connect with them before they even get to campus," she says. Kelly counsels students at Veterans House whose fear of being labeled makes them reluctant to seek help at the university's counseling center. "We can't treat the people who don't show up," she says.

Kathryn Loder-Murphy, the disability services coordinator, also keeps regular office hours at Veterans House. Being close at hand makes it easier to find solutions to veterans' problems. "I'm far more successful being on their turf," she says. She also knows that the human touch isn't the only kind that can help veterans. That's why Rutgers was the first university to have a service dog on campus trained to help sufferers of post-traumatic stress.

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHALLENGES

Creating veteran-friendly institutions is particularly difficult for community colleges. Two-year institutions enroll the majority of students who have performed military service, yet they frequently lack resources they need to help vets.

John Vasquez, a 48-year-old career Navy seaman who suffers from PTSD, can vouch for those challenges. Two years ago, a counselor at VA's Vocational Rehabilitation office in El Paso, Texas, informed Vasquez that the government would pay for him to attend El Paso Community College (EPCC). Given his dwindling career options, Vasquez jumped at the opportunity. "Go to the VA office at the school, and you'll be taken care of," the counselor told him.

Vasquez wandered into a maze on the Valle Verde campus, where he was "pushed from office to office." For hours he sought someone who would help him. Exasperated, he was heading for the exit when a member of the staff saw his distress and intervened. She ushered him through the bureaucracy and helped him to enroll.

Vasquez served in the Navy for 20 years, retiring in 2004. (His sons, 24 and 26, are Marines who recently returned from Afghanistan.) Back in the civilian world, he "worked a lot of in-between jobs," but the economy worsened, and even menial work at auto parts stores and construction sites disappeared. College seemed his last, best hope. His goal is to earn an associate degree in business management, maybe a bachelor's — something that will lead to a good job.

It hasn't been easy. He doesn't relate well to younger students, and he's had to take developmental algebra. Back in a classroom for the first time since graduating from high school in 1982, Vasquez has enough struggles without the added stress of dealing with a college infrastructure that at times has let him down.

"A lot of schools will say they are veteran-friendly because they've got a VA office, but that is as far as it goes," he says. "Someone needs to do something to better the system for student veterans."

"Every day I get up and fight my anxieties," he says. "A lot of vets fall. I'm afraid that someday I might fall."



**John Vasquez, a 48-year-old Navy veteran, admits he's had difficulty making the adjustment to college life. "A lot of schools will say they are veteran-friendly because they've got a VA office, but that is as far as it goes," he says.**



El Paso native Fernando Martinez, a seven-year Army veteran, admits he “got bamboozled” in his efforts to properly use his post-9/11 G.I. Bill education benefit. “The challenge is to get the right information,” he says. “There should be more veteran advisers and a counselor for veterans.”

## THE BENEFITS PUZZLE

Frank Guerra, 66, served in the Air Force from 1966 until 1970. He enrolled at EPCC in 1974 and began advising EPCC students three years later. At the time, education benefits were straightforward. Veterans could go to college on the Vietnam-era education G.I. Bill. Their dependents could use the benefit for college if the veteran were completely disabled or dead. Since then, things have become more complicated, Guerra says.

Amendments to the original G.I. Bill of 1944 provide more choices: the Montgomery G.I. Bill, the Montgomery vocational rehabilitation program, the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (DEA), the new Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP), programs for Reservists (Chapters 1606 and 1607). And now there's the post-9/11 G.I. Bill, which is the most popular and the most complex of them all.

“That program has really grown,” says Raul Lerma, executive director of EPCC's financial aid office. He

describes the program, officially the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, as “detailed.” The challenge for the college is sharpening students’ “understanding of the program and guiding them through the maze,” he says. “It’s an ongoing process.”

Fernando Martinez, an El Paso native who served in the Army from 2003 to 2010, says he and other veterans frequently opt to use the post-9/11 G.I. Bill education benefit, even though it’s not always the best option. Martinez says he made a selection without considering all of the details and implications. “I got bamboozled,” admits Martinez, a former car salesman. “The challenge is to get the right information. There should be more veteran advisers and a counselor for veterans.”

Arvis C. Jones, director of student leadership and campus life on EPCC’s Valle Verde campus, agrees that there is a need for more advisers. “When there is not enough staff or time to spend with the individual, it’s difficult to impart the information to them so that they have a full understanding of their options,” she says.

Delays in disbursing benefit checks issued by the VA are another source of friction. Failure to pay tuition on time can mean student veterans are dropped from classes. VA’s bureaucratic missteps put “schools in an

adversarial relationship with the veterans,” says Terra Benson, director of admissions and registrar at Pima County Community College in Tucson.

## FROM BOMBS TO BOOKS


Martin Fennelly, 28, enlisted in the Army in 2004 and learned to dispose of bombs. Detonating ordnance, even from a distance of 100 yards, often means that “you get the crap knocked out of you,” says Fennelly, who stopped counting the number of disposals after 100. Doing his job resulted in a traumatic brain injury, hearing loss in one ear, vertigo, tinnitus, dizziness, migraine headaches and short-term memory loss.

In 2010, out of the Army and unable to find a job, Fennelly used the vocational rehabilitation benefit to begin taking classes at EPCC. He expected to struggle a bit. At Johnsonville High School in upstate New York, he had been “average in every way,” finishing 25<sup>th</sup> in a class of 50 students. What he didn’t anticipate was that the college would struggle too.

“It’s really tough,” says Fennelly, who criticizes



El Paso Community College graduate Adrian Acuña (left), who used his VA benefits to help pay for his degree, got help from a number of people on campus — including Francisco Guerra (center), assistant director of veterans affairs, and Raul Lerma, executive director of EPCC’s financial aid office.

A person wearing a red jacket is seen from the side, looking out over a mountain range at sunset. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, with a bright sun low on the horizon. The mountains are silhouetted against the light sky.

Congress for offering financial incentives to veterans without providing the funds that colleges need to properly serve these students. "This is probably the largest amount of veterans they've had. There are growing pains."

Fennelly says his monthly housing allowance is tied to the number of days he is in school that month, a calculation that had him scrambling to pay rent during the holiday break. "Christmas is pretty tough on veterans going to school and using their benefits," he says. "Those are the things they don't tell you."

Fennelly, who has a wife and three children, earned his associate degree in May. He intends to pursue a bachelor's degree at the University of Texas at El Paso or New Mexico State University. He dreams of a job in the medical field that will allow him to afford a house, a car and college for the kids. "I just want to make enough to provide for my family," he says.

He knows that college is the best way for him to reach that seemingly simple goal. And, to their credit, officials at EPCC are working to help him get there. Still, like hundreds of other institutions all over the nation, EPCC lacks the resources necessary to support truly comprehensive services for military veterans.

In fact, despite the oft-voiced national pledge to "support our troops," programs like those at Rutgers and the University of Arizona are very much the exception, not the rule.

"A lot of other campuses around the country have failed," says Arizona's Dan Standage. "I talk to a lot of guys (from other campuses), and they don't feel like anyone cares about them."

Rico Pereyda certainly remembers that feeling. But now he's one of the lucky ones. On a balmy, late-winter day, under a wide blue sky, Pereyda sits at a patio table on the Arizona campus and talks about the strides he's made since coming to college. "The most rewarding thing I've done here is help other people," he says.

That realization about his recent past has helped Pereyda focus on the future. With his bachelor's degree now firmly in hand, he ruminates on the concept of service — on what it means to live a fulfilling life. And his immediate concern is one that hits close to home: He's working to empanel a group of experts to examine suicide among veterans.

*John Pulley, a professional journalist for more than two decades and a former staff writer for "The Chronicle of Higher Education," is a freelance writer and editor based in Arlington, Va.*

**Martin Fennelly is doing all he can to create a bright future for his wife and three children, including his son Martin Roy, 1. Fennelly, 28, defused bombs while serving with the Army in Afghanistan. He recently earned his associate degree from El Paso Community College; he hopes to pursue a bachelor's and land a job in health care.**





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