

Helping war vets acclimate to college

by [E.J. Montini](#) - Jun. 17, 2008 12:00 AM
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When I was in college in the mid-1970s, there no longer was a military draft, Vietnam War protests had become passé and had been replaced by streaking (running naked in public), and among the baby-faced freshmen taking introductory classes were a number of what we called "old guys."

They had only five or six years on the rest of us, and were still under 25, but they were much more grown-up. They had been in the military, often having served in Southeast Asia, and now they were taking advantage of the GI Bill.

But surviving a college campus required different skills than surviving a jungle war zone, and most of the vets I knew didn't make it.

They had a few laughs over the first few semesters but couldn't quite adjust to university life. It had been years since their last math class, composition course or science lab.

They had endured hardships that punks like us could not have imagined, but getting through the freshman foreign-language requirements or even the "dummy math" offered to liberal-arts majors proved to be too much for them. So they dropped out.

Robert Mena knows exactly how that is and doesn't want the same thing to happen to this generation of vets. He's the director of the Veterans Upward Bound program at Arizona State University.

"We're a federal program that is totally free," he said. "We can help vets get into college or technical school and offer them the classes in English, math and computer skills that will allow them to succeed. But we have one big obstacle."

Veterans don't know about it. Not enough of them, anyway.

"I know how tough it can be to re-enter the classroom after you've been away for a while," Mena said. "It happened to me. And it happened to a lot of veterans. We don't want it to happen again. That's what this program is all about."

Veterans Upward Bound was founded specifically to reach those veterans who are "first-generation" college entrants, men and women with no one in their families to help them get through the university experience. But it's open to all veterans of all wars.

"There is no time limitation on our program," Mena said. "We work with any vet. The problem for a lot of veterans has been that simply getting into college doesn't bring with it any guarantee that they'll succeed. We

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want to try to make that happen."

The Veterans Upward Bound office is located at 1270 E. Broadway Road, Suite 122, in Tempe. The phone number is 480-965-1292. Mena said that, if necessary, someone from his office will come out and meet with an interested vet.

"We have tests that can show us where a veteran stands," he said. "We offer day and night courses. And it's an open-entry/open-exit program. You can start when you want and end when you want. And, again, it's free. This is something veterans have earned."

Eventually, Mena is hoping to offer classes for vets online, but that isn't available yet.

In the meantime, he's doing whatever he can to get the word out. He visits clubs like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion. He goes to military bases. He hands out fliers. And he sends the occasional note to writers like me, hoping maybe for a little free exposure.

The young Vietnam vets I met in college didn't talk about their trouble adjusting to the academic world, and never said a word about the country owing them anything. And being kids, we were too dumb to recognize that we did owe them.

We're older now. We know better. And through programs like Upward Bound, at least some of our military veterans may get what they deserve: a second chance.

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