



# career & education

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## Veterans Are Flocking To College As Wars Wind Down

TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) — Adam Fisher isn't your typical college freshman.

At 25, he's older than most of his classmates. He's married, too. And while most of his fellow students spent the past couple years in high school, Fisher was dodging bullets and roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now a civilian, Fisher is trying to make the transition from the battlefields to the classrooms of the University of Toledo.

About two months into a new mission, he is far from alone.

Some 1 million veterans and their dependents have enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities over the past four years, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. This influx of veterans has come with the drawdown of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and more generous financial incentives that generally cover a veteran's tuition, housing and books.

Many veterans face an array of challenges in making the transition to college life. Some are medical. Fisher, who heard the screams of a soldier burning to death and had a buddy die in his arms, participates in group therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder. He also has some hearing loss.

"It's hard for me to be around so many people," he said. "I don't like it. It makes me feel very uncomfortable." Other challenges are academic. Veterans often have to sharpen their math, reading and study skills after being away from school for so long.

They face cultural hurdles, too. While many other freshmen are testing their independence after moving away from home for the first time, some of the veterans back in school are supporting a family, working evenings and weekends.

Veterans also must navigate the VA bureaucracy to ensure that their tuition and other aid, such as housing or disability benefits, are paid on time.

Now, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are taking concrete steps to help them make the transition, the University of Toledo among them.

Nearly 400 veterans, including Fisher, are attending class this fall at the school. The president, Lloyd Jacobs, a former Marine, said they "bring strength to our culture, bring strength to our university that's unparalleled."

The American Council on Education says about 71 percent of some 700 colleges

and universities responding to a recent survey had an office or department dedicated exclusively to serving veterans. Before the Post-9/11 GI Bill kicked in, a 2009 survey put that percentage at 49 percent.

About two-thirds had clubs or organizations composed of veterans, double from the 2009 survey.

Student Veterans of America, a coalition of student veterans on college campuses around the world, has branched out from fewer than 20 campuses to more than 880 in recent years.

Michael Dakduk, the group's outgoing executive director, said colleges have adjusted to the wave of veterans by hiring people exclusively to serve them and their dependents. Schools also are establishing peer mentoring and tutoring programs. The extra resources give veterans the sense they don't have to face the challenges of college life on their own, he said.

The VA has placed counselors on 92 college campuses. The counselors connect students to local VA medical care and help them apply for other benefits.

About 500 veterans attend school at Florida State University, an increase of about 40 percent from the previous fall.

The school offers a class just for veterans called "strategies for veteran success." It's designed to boost their confidence and allows them to meet other veterans. The university holds a job fair for all students, but opens it up a day early for veterans on campus. It also allows students to defer many expenses, such as their books and meal plan, because of the time it takes to get VA payments processed.

Officials at Florida State and Toledo say they hope other students will learn from the veterans.

"They bring life experiences, they bring leadership skills, they bring discipline, they bring a maturity to the campus," said Reinhart Lerch, communications director for Florida State's student veterans center, which opened in 2011.

Toledo also opened its veterans' center in 2011. It's basically a one-stop clearinghouse for veterans or their dependents. At Toledo, they have a go-to person in military liaison Haraz Ghanbari, a lieutenant in the Navy Reserve.

When Mick Grantham, 43, enrolled at Toledo after back and neck problems forced him out of the Army, he plowed through his savings waiting for his disability ben-

efits to kick in. Ghanbari, a former photographer for The Associated Press, arranged for the local American Legion to provide Grantham with a \$500 grant. He pointed Grantham to a job opening with the university's grounds crew. He also nominated Grantham to be honored as the hero of the game at a recent Toledo football game.

Grantham is an example of the age and cultural divide that some student veterans face. He strongly believes his time in Afghanistan served an important purpose, and it has bothered him to hear some of the younger students criticize the war during his government studies class.

"I told them, 'You know, I lost nine friends. I've lost two since I've been home. Those guys didn't complain. We did our job. You can't tell me there's no reason for us to be there.'"

The VA is working with Student Veterans of America to study how well veterans fare upon returning to college. To date, there is little data on the issue.

One study, conducted in 2009, just before the Post 9/11 GI Bill kicked in, found that veterans entering college in the 2003-04 school year were more likely to have left school without getting their degree or certificate. But the difference was narrow — 39.5 percent for veterans versus 35 percent for nonveterans.

Veterans at Toledo said the transition always involves some adjustment.

John McCarter, 33, a former staff sergeant in the Army who left with a medical discharge after serving 13 years, said that memory loss is a problem. He has a traumatic brain injury and wears a hearing aid as a result of a roadside bomb that exploded under a vehicle he was riding in.

"I usually have to write things down. If I don't write them down, I'm probably not going to remember it," said McCarter, who hopes to become a sports journalist.

While there are adjustments they've had to make, many veterans also believe their military service gives them an edge in the classroom.

"I work 10 times harder than what I did in high school," said Fisher, who wants to get into the medical profession, perhaps as a pediatric nurse. "The Army gave me a sense of self-respect and confidence, and they really show you hard work does pay off."

■ Kevin Freking,  
Associated Press

## How To Get A GED

For various reasons, some students are unable to complete their high school education. After time, however, these same students may want to experience the recognition and job opportunities that a diploma can provide. Obtaining a General Education Development certificate, commonly known as a GED, is one way to realize those goals.

A GED is sometimes incorrectly referred to as a General Educational Diploma or the General Equivalency Diploma. However, GED is actually the equivalent to a high school diploma, which is called a GED certificate. It is an alternative document that proves an individual's academic competence.

Those who are seeking a GED must be ready to study and eventually pass tests that measure high school-level skills and knowledge. The time needed to

study during the GED process depends on the last level of school a student completed, that student's available study time and the time between now and when the student left school.

The next step is figuring out how to begin the process. Every state has its own GED requirements. The program may be overseen by the Department of Education, Department of Labor or another organization. Those departments' respective Web sites provide links to adult education classes where students can prepare for GED tests. There also may be GED testing centers that provide additional study materials. Visit the GED Testing Service at [www.gedtest.org](http://www.gedtest.org) to locate a testing center near you.

Some testing centers allow the test to be spread out over a few days, while others require the test be taken all in the same day

over the course of seven hours.

It is important for applicants to continue studying and practicing for the test until they take it. This includes staying current on the material because the test is tedious and most people do not wish to repeat it.

When students pass, GED certificates will be sent to them. Taking the test again is a possibility for those students who do not pass the first time around. Fortunately, only the portion of the test that you failed will have to be redone, not the entire test.

A GED certificate can open up opportunities to enter college and further your education. If you have not received a high school diploma, it may be advantageous to sign up for GED study classes and testing as soon as possible.

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