After 22 years of military service, Todd Kennedy was ready to face a new challenge: earning a college degree. The retired U.S. Marine Corps First Sergeant was 40 years old when he took his first college course in the fall of 2011.

Though Kennedy admits being a little apprehensive at first, the veteran of military operations in Iraq (two tours), Somalia and Afghanistan quickly realized that he had valuable insights gleaned from a lifetime of rich experiences to share with his much-younger classmates at California’s San Diego State University.

“After a few weeks, any anxiety I had went away,” says Kennedy, who is pursuing his degree in history while working full time at SDSU as veterans coordinator in the Joan and Art Barron Veterans Center. “I realized that I am here to learn. As a veteran, I have a different set of life experiences than most traditional college students. So I had that confidence coming in—if the professor asked a question, I wasn’t afraid to raise my hand to answer. And if I got the answer wrong, it just didn’t bother me. It was a good transition for me.”

Kennedy is like thousands of other veterans, active-duty soldiers and reservists who currently are enrolled in college. Their numbers have significantly increased over the past few years, thanks in large part to the implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009. The benefit offers eligible students generous coverage of tuition and fees, a stipend for books and supplies, and a monthly housing allowance. Additionally, these benefits may be transferred to spouses or dependents.

“Institutions have not faced such a significant influx of veteran students on campus since World War II,” according to the report, From Soldier to Student II: Assessing Campus Programs for Veterans and Service Members, published in 2012 by the American Council on Education (ACE) in partnership with AASCU, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and National Association of Veteran’s Program Administrators (NAVPA).

As more than 2 million troops return home from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the numbers are expected to continue to rise. Are American colleges and universities equipped to serve these students?
A New Mission

Veterans and active-duty military students bring many talents and skills to their campus communities. But they also have unique needs that set them apart from traditional college students. Many of them, like Kennedy, went straight from high school into military service. They may need to refresh their academic skills, especially in English and math, to meet the demands of college coursework.

The military environment is very structured and disciplined. Military students are accustomed to high expectations and a high level of responsibility, and it may be difficult for them to ask for help. In contrast, the college environment offers more free time, with students solely responsible for balancing their study and leisure time. This can be a difficult adjustment for some military students.

Veterans also may face challenges related to injuries sustained in combat, including traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and physical disabilities. Many also have experienced the devastating loss of comrades.

“Military and veteran students have training and experience that qualifies them for a wide range of high-wage, high-demand civilian careers,” says James Cronin, vice president of military partnerships at University of Maryland University College (UMUC). “They need the proper planning and academic advising to optimize their military experience and put them on a path toward a degree and career success.”

While more and more campuses are establishing one-stop resource centers for military students, these programs cannot operate in a vacuum. Collaborations across campus, with departments such as admissions, financial aid, mental health services, academic advising, and disability services, are crucial.

SDSU serves more than 3,000 student veterans, active duty, reservists, and their dependents each year in a city that is home to numerous military bases and facilities, including Marine Corps Camp Pendleton, Naval Bases Point Loma and the U.S. Coast Guard Station San Diego. The university offers an array of programs and support services for students who are veterans, active-duty military, reservists and dependents through The Joan and Art Barron Veterans Center—from processing GI Bill benefits to navigating the sometimes-complex academic system.

“Student veterans bring a sense of maturity, leadership and support to the campus and surrounding community,” SDSU President Elliot Hirshman says. “Many take on the role of mentor and often serve in leadership positions within student organizations, as well as advocating a multitude of philanthropic ventures within the San Diego area. We are proud of these students and the contributions they make to our university.

We’ve made it our priority to offer the best services possible to help them achieve their educational goals so that they can continue to lead in their communities after graduation.”

The university features the nation’s first on-campus Veterans House, providing a venue where student veterans can gather to study, socialize and support others who share common backgrounds and experiences. The university also offers six apartment units, called The Stacks, which veterans are given first priority to rent.

“These spaces give the veterans and other military students a place where they can belong,” Kennedy says. “It’s that sense of commonality based on shared experiences, shared language, shared background. That’s one of the things we’re most proud of here on our campus.”

SDSU’s Troops to Engineers program provides networking opportunities for military students pursuing degrees in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. The group boasts a 100 percent success rate in matching students with internships.
The university also offers a semester-long, college readiness class just for new veterans and other military students to hone academic skills, such as writing a paper, using the library, applying for scholarships, and writing a resume.

UMUC, which offers most of its classes online, was the first university to send faculty overseas to teach active duty military personnel stationed in Europe. Today, more than one-half of the university’s 93,000 students are military-affiliated and enrolled in classes at over 150 locations worldwide. A Military Veteran Advising (MVA) team at UMUC includes over 40 staff members specially trained to provide direct assistance to military and veteran students. They are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“We have been teaching and supporting military veterans since 1947,” says Cronin. “It’s in our DNA!”

UMUC student Gregory Barber, a U.S. Air Force veteran, understands the challenges of balancing the duties of active service, the rigors of college classes, and the responsibilities of a family. During his 20 years of active service, Barber earned an MBA and a bachelor’s degree from UMUC, as well two associate degrees from the Community College of the Air Force. Since retiring as a technical sergeant in 2008, Barber has been pursuing a second master’s degree in cybersecurity from UMUC.

In 2012, Barber helped start the VeteransSuccess Club at UMUC to support veterans, active duty service members, reservists, and their families through online groups and face-to-face meetings. Topics of discussion range from concerns related to transitioning out of military service to career opportunities, GI benefits and academic struggles. The club, which has drawn more than 360 online members, also has organized community service projects.

“The club was meant to be a forum for veterans to talk to each other,” says Barber. “It provides a way that veterans and other military students can interact with each other and become aware of the programs and resources available at UMUC. It is a relaxed environment where members can come to discuss their concerns or just to have a conversation about what’s on their mind.”

That type of peer support is important for helping military students adjust to life on campus. At George Mason University in Virginia, veterans and military students may participate in Battle Buddies, a mentorship program that pairs new students with upper-level students who are pursuing the same major or have similar career interests.

“Everyone has a place on a college campus, and creating that sense of community is really key to increasing retention and making students feel like part of the community,” says Jennifer Connors, GMU’s director of military services.

Many colleges and universities, such as Metropolitan State University of Denver, offer new student orientation programs specifically for veterans and other military students. Along with providing the usual information about campus policies, registering for classes, and facilities on campus, MSU Denver’s
While more and more campuses are establishing one-stop resource centers for military students, these programs cannot operate in a vacuum. Collaborations across campus are crucial.

veteran-military orientation offers military-specific information about GI Bill benefits, adjustment concerns, and how to connect with relevant services on campus.

“We’re giving them information and content that’s important to them,” says Braelin Pantel, associate dean for student engagement and wellness. “And by bringing them together as a group, we give them the opportunity to develop friendships and camaraderie with other veterans and military students.”

MSU Denver also hosts a special commencement ceremony and breakfast each spring just for veteran and military graduates. Along with their degrees, graduates are presented with a special MSU Denver Commencement Challenge Coin Medallion to recognize their service to the country, as well as their academic achievements.

The faculty and staff who encounter and work with military students also should be educated about the particular needs of this population. California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) established the VET NET Ally Program to promote awareness about the experiences and needs of veterans and military students. Its goal is to develop a network of faculty, staff and administrators who are committed to cultivate a welcoming and supportive campus environment for the university’s military students.

VET NET Ally participants attend a four-hour seminar that offers a glimpse into military culture and language, explains the challenges of transitioning from the military to college life, and describes campus initiatives supporting veterans. The sessions include compelling, first-hand accounts of military experiences shared by a student panel. Participants who complete the program become “allies,” as indicated by the VET NET Ally decals they are given to post prominently in their workspaces.

“We recognize that university campuses in the U.S. have not always been welcoming to military folks, and they have a history of being inhospitable, at best, to veterans—especially during the Vietnam era,” says Marshall Thomas, director of veterans affairs services. “We want veterans to know that we’re here to help them. We support them while they’re here reaching their educational goals. And it’s my role to advocate for student veterans on campus.”

Off-Campus Partners

Colleges and universities may be able to extend their outreach efforts to veterans and military students by participating in federally funded programs. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, partners with 94 campuses across the country to offer VetSuccess, an on-campus service that provides counseling and referral services to assist veterans in the transition to civilian life and to answer questions about GI Bill benefits.
benefits. SDSU, UMUC, CSULB and GMU all participate in the program, providing office space for the VA counselors assigned to work on their campuses.

MSU Denver participates in a similar program—Veterans Upward Bound (VUB)—funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Federal TRIO programs. VUB helps veterans prepare for and transition into higher education by offering college readiness courses in a variety of subjects, including English, math and science, and assistance with completing college applications and financial aid applications. The university also hosts a full-time Americorps volunteer to oversee the Veterans Leadership Corps, a career readiness program sponsored by Campus Compact of the Mountain West.

“Military students tend to be mission-focused,” Pantel says. “They want to earn their degree and then get a job. These services help them to make that happen.”

Creating A Culture of Success

The White House and Congress have, in recent years, made great efforts to ensure that veterans, active-duty military personnel, reservists, and their families receive the support they need to earn a college degree. In 2012, for example, President Obama released an executive order establishing principles of excellence for working with this group. And last year, he announced the “8 Keys to Success,” challenging educational institutions to adopt best practices in support of educational success for returning servicemembers. For campuses without designated services for military students, Connors says it’s time to start.

“We’re at a turning point, where services for veterans and other military students are not just a nicety anymore,” Connors says. “It’s now an expectation that every institution has at a minimum a designated person on campus—if not a whole office staff—to support veterans and military students. It’s important to invest time and money to provide resources for them. Conduct focus groups or surveys to get a clear definition of who your students are and set up a service office that meets those needs.”

When Thomas facilitates veteran student panel discussions, he is impressed that many of the students credit a specific person on campus for guiding them through the transition from military life and boosting their success in the academic world. That inspires him to continue advocating for them, and hopes to see more and more colleges and universities across the U.S. fully embrace veterans and military students.

“Veterans are enriching our academic environments, so welcoming them and helping them to be successful is in everybody’s best interest,” Thomas says. “If you look back to post-World War II, when veterans came back home and went to college—it changed the face of education. The colleges and universities weren’t sure at first that they would fit in, but they found out these were awesome students. They went on to build a freeway system in the U.S. and to send us to the moon. They came back and built the country. We have an opportunity to support the veterans now, and I think they’ll do amazing and great things.”

Karen Doss Bowman is a writer based in Bridgewater, Va.