

UC Irvine

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Veterans are coming home to UCI



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New initiatives help **student veterans** adjust to campus life

When Jack Williams IV '12 first arrived at UC Irvine as a transfer student, he felt – like many veterans – out of step with his fellow undergraduates.

He'd served four years in the U.S. Marines, including an eight-month tour of duty in Iraq. Most students he met came to UCI straight out of high school or community college. He knew the stress of war; his combat unit was hit twice by improvised explosive devices and exposed to enemy fire. His classmates knew the stress of finals week. Even casual conversations could be challenging.

"They usually didn't know what to say to me. They'd ask, 'Is going to war like [the video game] 'Call of Duty'? Every once in a while, if they'd been drinking, someone would ask, 'Did you kill anyone?'" recalls Williams, who never had to fire his weapon in combat. "They're trying to find common ground, but it's not there."



Williams presses the flesh at a picnic for incoming law students in Aldrich Park this summer.

Last year, Williams started UCI's Alpha Psi Omega veterans fraternity so that he and other Anteaters who did have that common ground could connect. The group fosters the kind of camaraderie and shared values they experienced in the military. It's one of several new initiatives at UCI to ease veterans' transition to academia.

The university recently established a separate office for Veteran Services where students can go for assistance with their GI Bill education benefits and other academic, personal or housing needs. (See related story.) The move gave veterans a much-needed physical space of their own, says office coordinator Adelí Durón.

In April 2011, UCI adopted a groundbreaking policy guaranteeing on-campus housing for enrolled veterans, who – additionally – may choose graduate housing despite their undergraduate status.

"Most of our veterans are between the ages of 25 and 32, and many have families," Durón says. "A couple graduate communities allow for families, and some of our students just want to be around people their own age."

UCI also grants veterans and military students priority registration for classes. This helps them maintain a full course load, which they need to qualify for their education benefits.

"We're seeing more and more institutional backing," Williams says.

The UCI student body currently includes about 140 veterans, reservists and active military service members, and their ranks are growing as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wind down and they return to civilian life. For many, coming home can be a shock.



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"It's strange how quickly the culture moves," Williams says. "When you're divorced from it for four years, it's difficult to relate to people and enjoy what they do. There's a feeling that things are much more serious than how other students regard them."

Veterans, he says, tend to be more focused on academics and careers.

Before joining the Marines, he studied journalism at a local college in his native Georgia, intending to follow in the footsteps of his father, Jack Williams III, a newspaper editor. He completed three semesters with a lackluster 2.3 grade point average.

"Not very impressive," Williams admits. After leaving the service, he excelled at Saddleback College and UCI, graduating summa cum laude in June with a history degree. He's now a first-year student at the UCI School of Law.

"I took school seriously. In the military, we get the kind of discipline and training we need to succeed," Williams says. "Most veterans are active learners. They're more pragmatic than other students. They ask questions. They want to know how what they're learning in the lecture hall pertains to real life. They don't just sit in class nodding their heads."



Steve Zilius / University Communications

Williams and other law students attend a mock oral argument between defense attorney Lauren Johnson and Orange County Senior Deputy District Attorney Cameron Talley (shown).

Still, veterans enjoy extracurricular activities too, which is why he figured a fraternity would be a bigger draw at UCI than the Veterans Student Union it replaced. The union had just a few members; about 15 men and women have joined Alpha Psi Omega and organizers hope their numbers will grow as word of the group spreads.

"A fraternal model builds an esprit de corps, like we're used to in the military," Williams says. "UCI is so big that you tend to get swallowed up if you don't get involved in a group. One of our fraternity members told me he hadn't made a single friend or gone out since leaving the Marine Corps. For veterans, the best thing is to be around other veterans."

Fraternity president Max Samhammer, a fourth-year student majoring in criminology and psychology & social behavior, says he felt out of place at UCI until joining Alpha Psi Omega.

"When I first started going here, I kept to myself," says Samhammer, who served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan with the Army, then spent another two years in the National Guard. "I didn't identify with most of the students on campus. After serving and being deployed, you don't feel you're on the same level as other 18- to 20-year-olds. They have different priorities."

Alpha Psi Omega helped him fit in and gave him a purpose.

Besides enjoying pub nights, baseball games, beach outings and other social activities, fraternity members participate in volunteer projects such as assembling care packages for troops and assisting at homeless shelters for veterans.

"Before we started the fraternity, the community here wasn't that strong," says Alexander Louie '12, last year's Alpha Psi Omega co-president. "Students chose not to self-ID themselves as veterans. There weren't social outlets or incentives to step forward."

One sign of their growing strength is the annual Veteran Appreciation Dinner, launched by Veteran Services three years ago to honor graduating seniors and welcome newly admitted students. At the 2012 dinner, in May, Williams was named Veteran Student of the Year, and Louie was designated Military Student of the Year.



The dinner gives veterans a chance to remember those killed or missing in action. It's frustrating for them when civilians appear unconcerned about military conflicts or current events.

Fraternity members also celebrate veterans' sacrifices and accomplishments through such events as Veterans Week in November and a Memorial Day display at the UCI Student Center.

"People don't know what veterans have done," says Louie, who was a California National Guard reservist while earning bachelor's degrees in nursing science

and public health sciences at UCI. "There's no attention paid to the fact that there are people out there fighting."

The growing camaraderie among campus military students and veterans becomes painfully apparent when they lose one of their own. Williams spoke at the funeral of Army Spc. Ricardo Cerros '09, who was killed Oct. 8, 2011, by enemy forces in Afghanistan.

"The fact that he was a graduate of UCI speaks volumes," he told those assembled. "It's a testament to the kind of people drawn to serve." ●

Kathryn Bold, University Communications



Steve Zylus / University Communications

During law school orientation week, Williams listens intently to attorneys engaged in a mock oral argument.

A place of their own



"When we got our own office, it made us feel there's a place for us at UCI," says Gladys Rojas, an Air Force reservist and Veteran Services peer adviser who will complete a bachelor's degree in political science this fall. "If new veterans get lost on campus, we can show them around, so they're not just thrown in there with a bunch of 18-year-olds."

The office provides veterans and military students with information on their education benefits, on-campus housing and preregistration for classes.

"We're here to help veteran students reach their goals," says Adelí Durón, Veteran Services coordinator, noting that local community colleges already have separate offices for veterans because they have larger military student populations. "This will increase veterans' interest in UCI. Hopefully,

we'll have the number we should have, being so close to Camp Pendleton."

Veteran Services launched a four-hour education program called VetNet Ally that increases awareness of veterans and military culture among the campus community. The office also offers confidential referrals to counselors; mentoring with a veteran faculty or staff member; a quarterly newsletter; and a resource guide.

"Other veterans understand where you've been and where you're coming from," Rojas says. "Everyone who has been deployed or lost someone understands what it is to serve. They know the risks. You understand you may not come home. It's something service members share."

UCI Veteran Services moved into its own location in the Student Center to provide a welcoming environment for veterans, reservists and their dependents.

For those who have served, it's a friendly outpost: In September 2011, UCI Veteran Services moved from the campus's Center for Service in Action to its own space in the Student Center.

Michelle S. Kim / University Communications