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More colleges develop classes on how to treat war veterans

By Gregg Zoroya, USA TODAY

Universities are creating classes to train students in how to treat combat veterans and their families suffering from war-related mental health problems.

As psychologically wounded troops return from the wars in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#), the initiatives range from workshops to semester-long graduate courses, such as one on military culture next year at the University of Washington-Tacoma. The [University of Southern California](#) is starting a master's program in which students will interact with holographic images of troops in distress.

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"I think across the nation, a lot of schools of social work have concluded that we need to do something," says Jose Coll, director of USC's military social work program, which offers a degree that emphasizes treating veterans.

In addition to treatment methods, the classes teach military culture, the combat experience and what military families endure. That's a way of life that's mysterious to many new behavioral health students, educators say.

"This is sort of cultural awareness education," says James Martin, a retired Army colonel and [Bryn Mawr College](#) professor who has worked on several programs.

"Anyone we treat, it's important to understand their culture," says Jeffrey Pollard, director of counseling and psychological services at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

One in three Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, a mild traumatic brain injury or some combination of all three, according to a RAND Corp. study released last year. The level of combat has declined in Iraq, but it's reaching record levels in Afghanistan, where 65,000 U.S. servicemembers are in combat. Nearly 2 million have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The new programs are driven in part by students who want to treat servicemembers, veterans and their families, says David Riggs, executive director of the Center for Deployment Psychology at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md.

"They very much feel a desire to help," Riggs says. "Some of them have personal connections, or are parents of people who are in the military. Or somebody from their home town has been deployed, and they've seen them come back and have difficulties."

The center developed a one-week course for civilian mental health workers last year to teach them about combat deployments from the soldier's perspective, the treatment of PTSD and stresses on military families.

More than 750 mental health providers enrolled across the country, Riggs says. Among them was Pollard, who is passing along what he learned to counselors at George Mason who offer therapy to combat veterans attending under the G.I. Bill.

A graduate course called Social Work Practice with Military Personnel and Veterans will be introduced at the University of Washington-Tacoma next year. A four-course graduate certification program in military culture and counseling is being offered this year at the University of South Florida in Tampa, says Herbert Exum, chairman of the Department of Psychological and Social Foundations.

The University of North Carolina is exploring introducing new curriculum on military culture for its social work graduate students and an internship program at nearby Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, says [Bill Ayers](#), an assistant professor in social work.