

# Indiana Statesman

## Veterans face college, readjustment when returning home

By Robin Wildman

Published: Thursday, February 4, 2010

Updated: Thursday, February 4, 2010

When Matthew Orlando first walked into Michael Caress's office last summer, he had not had steady employment since returning from a 10-month stint in Iraq.

Six months later, he is well into his second semester as a legal studies major at ISU and boasting a high GPA, his education funded with his veterans benefits.

"He is using education benefits exactly as they are meant to be used," said Caress, ISU's veterans benefits coordinator. "So many veterans don't do that—don't realize what they do have eligible to them."

Only around 8 percent of returning veterans take full advantage of their available benefits, Caress said. And the benefits that are quite substantial: full tuition plus a monthly stipend, which can range from \$300-1,000.

Part of the problem is the near-overwhelming amount of paperwork veterans face when applying for funding. In addition to the annual FAFSA, veterans seeking aid must also fill out a NOBE (Notice of Basic Eligibility) and decree-plan among others.

"It's like jumping through a thousand hula hoops," Orlando said.

That's where Caress comes in. He works with ISU veterans making sure they don't miss anything when navigating all the complicated forms, Web sites and deadlines.

"Without him, I would be lost in the dark," Orlando said.

Even without the red tape, returning from a deployment is stressful.

The readjustment from a rigorous, hyper-alert military lifestyle to relaxed civilian life can be difficult, sometimes triggering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Orlando has been diagnosed with PTSD, but he said disagrees with the diagnosis.

Caress said this is not uncommon among veterans.

Orlando said driving was the biggest adjustment when returning home, which is unsurprising given that he spent his time in the war working security for convoys driving across Iraq.

"Driving was a little bit of an issue," Orlando said, "because over there you are so used to watching intently for roadside bombs and stuff. So when you get back, you're looking for stuff like that when you

should be paying attention to traffic, and you're not."

The bombs he most frequently encountered were IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) made from detonators attached to leftover explosives and placed along roadsides to blow up other vehicles.

Crowds can also make returning veterans like Orlando uneasy.

"You're kind of watching everybody," he said, "looking for somebody who looks like they are doing something wrong, even though they're not."

Situations like this led senior business administration major Jessica Ellis to start ISU's Student Veterans Association last year.

Ellis said the organization can help veterans transition back into civilian life by bringing them together with "people who understand their struggles."

"We definitely needed to have a group," she said. "We are different than a lot of students."

The group consists of both retired and active military members, many of whom have been disabled during the war.

Ellis said experienced veterans serve as mentors for those who are just starting out.

"It's really neat to hear their experience," she said.

ISU veterans will soon have another place to gather, as well, in the form of a planned veterans resource center, which will be located on the ground floor of the John T. Myers Technology Center.

The center will have information regarding benefits as well as special computers that can read military ID cards, saving the students a trip to the armory.

In addition, the center will serve as a meeting place for veterans.

"People in the military like to connect with other veterans," Caress said. "[They'll be able to] just talk and be at ease with other veterans."

ISU is very supportive of veterans, Ellis said. Last year, her guard unit was called to Iraq just a few weeks before the end of the semester; however, deployment overseas didn't stop her from finishing classes.

"All my professors were awesome about letting me finish up online," she said. "ISU is very military-friendly."

E-mail Jessica Ellis at [jellis8@indstate.edu](mailto:jellis8@indstate.edu) for information about the Student Veterans Association or Michael Caress at [michael.caress@indstate.edu](mailto:michael.caress@indstate.edu) for veterans benefits information.