

GROWING VETERAN POPULATION FINDS FRIENDLY SERVICE

By Mike Journee

WALK THROUGH THE QUAD ON ANY GIVEN CLASS DAY AND ABOUT ONE IN 12 FACES YOU SEE WILL BELONG TO A VETERAN OF THE U.S. MILITARY.



They include John Chambers, who knows first hand how intimidating arriving on a sprawling college campus is for a recently discharged veteran. That's why the Army veteran created a student club for veterans two years ago.



"I didn't have a clue," says Chambers, a senior history major looking to be a teacher. "But my advisor told me about the Veterans Services Office. It showed me how important it is to get them help from the moment they step on campus."



An estimated 1,700 students on campus have served their country in uniform, giving Boise State one of the highest ratios of former or active soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines in the nation – and it's growing every semester as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down. Additionally, Boise State serves several hundred dependents and spouses of veterans who are eligible for federal benefits under recent versions of the G.I. Bill. Those facts have given the



university's efforts to support veterans on campus added emphasis in recent months.

This deeper focus will build on an already solid foundation, which includes the student club started by Chambers, that has earned the university a "military friendly" designation from G.I. Jobs magazine three years running.

Another of the reasons for Boise State's success with veterans is R.K. Williams, the administrator of the Veterans Services Office. Himself a 20-year veteran of the Air Force and a Boise State alumnus (theatre arts, '93), Williams is Boise State's expert on federal G.I. Bill benefits and usually among the first university officials veterans meet face to face when they come to campus.

"My goal is to make their experience at Boise State as stress free as possible to give them the best chance possible to succeed," says Williams, a national leader among his peers through his leadership of the National Association of Veterans Program Administrators. This fall, he helped more than 1,100 veterans take advantage of G.I. Bill programs at Boise State.

"The G.I. Bill benefits are at the

center of what we do," says Steve Woods an associate registrar who coordinates a working group of administrators, faculty members, students and veteran support groups on campus. "But the times are telling us that we'll need to do a lot more than that."

The group coordinated by Woods, which includes many veterans, is a growing cadre of professionals looking for ways to improve the academic, campus and private lives of student vets or their benefit-eligible family members. For example, Woods teaches a new class specifically designed to provide veterans with insight into campus life and culture.

Depending on their needs, vets



JOHN KELLY



Veteran Services coordinator R.K. Williams is focused on serving Boise State's large and growing veteran population, including John Chambers, left.



can tap into a variety of programs to help navigate the red tape of federal benefits, locate services like academic counseling and tutoring, tap into community resources geared toward ex-military personnel, find medical or mental health support, if their situation warrants it, or simply provide a social network of other veterans to hang out with.

Veterans Upward Bound, a federally funded outreach program,

helps vets with tutoring in basic math, English and computer skills, as well as academic counseling, career interest inventories and development of typical college skills, like how to study and deal with exam anxiety.

The Wyakin Warrior Foundation, a growing non-profit group that provides four-year scholarships, business-focused interpersonal skills training and peer mentoring from student and off-campus volunteers to severely wounded soldiers, is building its presence at Boise State as a pilot program for offering its services on college campuses across the country.

New office space in the Boise State Alumni Association building

on University Drive will allow the Veterans Services Office and the Wyakin Warrior Foundation to share space and give veterans a place on campus to gather informally. And an agreement currently under negotiation with the Veterans Administration could bring a federal program called VetSuccess to campus as well, providing on-campus counseling support to student veterans.

It is all a part of an increasing understanding at Boise State that veterans – already a significant part of our student body – are a huge part of the university's campus life.

"We see these students in class every day," says Steve Woods. "It's part of our culture."