Since the drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan, record numbers of veterans have enrolled in college. While schools like UB are taking steps to ease the transition, the experience of student vets indicates the leap from combat to campus is still great.

Reporting to Class

Jessica Goodell figured she would make a smooth transition to college.

She had been an “A” student in high school, graduating sixth in her class. She had played saxophone and varsity basketball throughout. But well beyond academics or extracurriculars, Goodell had proven her mettle—under the grimmest circumstances imaginable.

Rather than pursue a college education straight out of high school, she had enlisted with the Marine Corps. Volunteering for its Mortuary Affairs Unit, she was deployed to Iraq, where she recovered and processed the remains of fallen soldiers.

Certainly, she could handle the rigors of community college.

“I was excited to be a student again,” recalls Goodell, now 31 and a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at UB. “I was completely oblivious to the possibility of there being any sort of difference between me and other students. But I realized, almost instantly, that I was not like the people sitting next to me.”

For one, Goodell continued to follow military protocol while at Jamestown Community College, arriving to class 15 minutes early as her classmates struggled in just as late. While they texted during class, she hung on to her professor’s every word. “I was taking community college seriously, whereas a lot of people at that phase are not necessarily serious about their education,” she says. “When a professor told me to do something, it was comparable to orders: I was given this assignment, and it will be done.”

With that mindset, Goodell thrived academically. She continued to excel after transferring to SUNY Fredonia. While there, she began collaborating with one of her community college professors on “Shade it Black,” a critically acclaimed memoir of her deployment and its aftermath that was published in 2011.

But assimilating into the student body? That was another story altogether.

“I’d dealt with a lot in Iraq, and I did not want to share it,” says Goodell, who continues to experience the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “As a result, I didn’t connect well with other students. I didn’t have a lot of friends. I didn’t socialize. I didn’t like crowds—and I’m still that way. I show up on campus early, when no one is on my floor. I go right to my office, close my door and work in isolation.

“I never miss deadlines,” she adds, “but if I’m anxious about an assignment, my default is PTSD, and I’ll avoid it. I won’t respond to my research adviser. She refers to it as me ‘going off the grid.’”

STORY BY NICOLE PERADOTTO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS LEVERE
“I was completely oblivious to the possibility of there being any sort of difference between me and other students. But I realized, almost instantly, that I was not like the people sitting next to me.”

JESSICA GOODELL
Goodell is one of an estimated 300 veterans in UB's student body. Like the Chautauqua, N.Y., native, many of these nontraditional students have started, or resumed, their college studies after deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan or both.

With the recent drawdowns in those war zones, the number of vets using their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits nationwide has skyrocketed. Over the past four years, some 1 million veterans and their dependents have enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In response, academic institutions are stepping up efforts to help vets find their footing. A 2012 survey conducted by the American Council on Education found that about 71 percent of 700 colleges and universities had an office or department dedicated to serving veterans—up from 49 percent before the Post-9/11 GI Bill was enacted in 2008. Student Veterans of America, the nonprofit umbrella organization for student veterans' groups, had 20 chapters when it was formed in 2008. Today, there are 950.

Despite increased resources for veterans, many are still making an uneasy transition from the battlefield to the books. The shift is hardest, of course, for those dealing with deployment-related injuries, disabilities and mental illness. Conditions such as PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI), at the very least, compromise one's ability to concentrate, study and learn. At worst, they can lead to depression, substance abuse or suicide.

Even those who manage to come home without injury struggle to adapt. When veterans arrive on campus, they're armed with leadership skills and real-world experience well beyond that of their civilian counterparts. But rather than leverage these traits, many stick to the periphery, detached from professors and peers. After years in the military's rigidly structured hierarchy, they find their order-following, rank-respecting group mentality at odds with the emphasis in higher education on independent thinking, individualism and informality. Coming to grips with gritty war experiences against an ivory tower backdrop, veterans often find that they can't identify with—much less trust—their younger, unseasoned classmates.

Shaun Boadi, 26, says he feels a lot older than his peers—not so much in years but in experience. The Newburgh, N.Y., native enlisted in the Army in 2010, after being expelled from UB for poor grades. He spent three years with the Army, including an 11-month deployment to Iraq, where he served as a combat engineer.

Today, whenever Boadi notices his classmates skipping lectures or taking their studies lightly, he's tempted to share the cautionary tale of his expulsion from UB: "I want to tell them that it's not going to end up anywhere good," he says. "But they probably wouldn't listen."

Instead, Boadi tends to keep company only with other veterans, though he does make an exception for his roommate. "He's more levelheaded than most of them. With other students it's like we're in two different worlds."

D an Ryan (PhD '97), head of Veterans Services at UB, hears comments like these all the time.

"The mindset of your typical 18-year-old student is very different from the life experiences that these folks have had," he says. "These veterans have seen things that none of us would ever seek out, and they're sitting in class next to somebody who is freaking out because they got hot chocolate on their Uggs. They're not accustomed to this kind of attitude, so we're trying to help them build patience."

With an ever-growing number of veterans joining UB's student ranks, the university is attempting to build a more nurturing environment for those who have served. The effort began in earnest in early 2013 with a survey of student veterans. The results confirmed what many had already suspected: UB was failing vets on several fronts.

"It was hard for veterans to find the support that is here for them," Ryan acknowledg-
how members initially formed as a Student Association club, but ended up breaking ties with the SA.

"Except for a couple of people, we just didn’t see eye to eye with the SA whatsoever," he says. "We didn’t want to fundraise, and we didn’t want to have mandatory community service, even though we do a lot of it. We just wanted to be a group where we get people together. But when we tried to talk to the Student Senate, they didn’t get it. They’d say, ‘I’m in charge, and this is what it is.’ They said that to very alpha individuals, to put it mildly.”

Soon thereafter, the UB student vets successfully applied for recognition as a chapter of the Student Veterans of America. "Now the SA can’t touch us,” Hays says. "We’re our own association. We don’t take orders from anybody else.”

Although the UB Veterans Association maintains a Facebook page, when members recruit, they tend to go about it the old-school way: cruising the campus and finding their own in a crowd.

“I can pick [veterans] out easily,” Hays explains. "They have a certain look, a certain calm demeanor—or it’s in their posture. They might have a pin on their backpack that you’ll recognize. A lot of them have beards because you can’t wear them in the military.”

In the case of Brian Roy, 26, the giveaway was the gray, tactical-looking book bag slung over his shoulder as he shuffled through the Student Union.

“It turned out to be a good thing that Josh found me, because it’s nice to be connected to other people who share your experience. But in general, I’d rather not call attention to the fact that I’m a veteran,” says Roy. "I don’t need people to come up to me and thank me for my service, and I don’t need to get into a discussion where someone doesn’t like the war.”

Another reason Roy prefers to maintain a low profile is that it helps him stay focused on academics. As with Boadi, Roy struggled with his classes the first time he attended UB, in 2006. “There was a transition going from high school to college that I didn’t expect, and I wasn’t mature enough to handle it,” he says. “I didn’t know how to study, and I definitely had too much fun the first time I was at UB.”

With a 2.5 grade point average after three years in college, Roy decided it was no longer worthwhile to continue amassing student debt. Following in his older brother’s footsteps, he enlisted in the Army.

He describes his first deployment, to Iraq in 2009, as uneventful. "It was during the drawdown, so we were mostly picking up garbage. It wasn’t what we were trained to do, which was combat.”

Roy’s second deployment, to Afghanistan in 2012, was anything but. His base was shelled at sunrise.
and sunset. When his unit went on truck patrols, he used a metal detector to sweep the ground for improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—a job he says he learned "pretty much on the spot." Once, the truck he was in was hit by an IED. "It wasn't major," he says, "because no one lost limbs or lives."

While Roy and his unit were engaged in a firefight with insurgents that June, a friend in his battalion was shot and killed. "He was still alive when he got into the helicopter, but we could all tell that he wasn't going to make it. We still had to carry on with the mission."

Back at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Roy suffered from headaches, a lingering side effect of the IED blast. He was irritable, had trouble sleeping and lacked confidence. All the same, he was eager to return to UB. "Most people just want to get the heck out of the Army, but I wanted to make sure I was getting all that I could get out of it before I went back to college, so I didn't end up in the same place I was when I was 18," he says. "I wasn't messing around."

During sessions with a military social worker, Roy played memory games to improve his study habits, learned breathing exercises to help him relax and get a good night's sleep, and mastered the Cornell note-taking system. "Now I'm locked in my room studying and watching lectures—stuff I didn't do the first time around," he says. "I'm getting all A's and B-pluses."

For every student veteran, like Roy, whose military experience gave him the focus needed to succeed in college, there's one like Justine Bottorff, whose ability to concentrate on her studies was taken away.

A senior nursing major and UB rower who served as an Army medic during two deployments to Iraq, Bottorff, 26, had meticulously charted her academic path while still in the Army, with an eye toward attending medical school. But things fell apart for the Herkimer, N.Y., native soon after she started classes at UB that fall.

"I had always been smart. In high school, I was on the honor roll and in the National Honor Society. I did really well on the SATs. But then I came to college, and I couldn't focus on anything."

Although Bottorff was never seriously injured during her deployments, she'd been close enough to several explosions to be jolted by them. Combined with several hits to the head that she'd suffered while jumping out of planes during Airborne training, she was left with a mild case of TBI.

"I was angry at the Army because they'd messed up my brain and I couldn't learn anymore," she says. "I was angry because I'd gone from feeling intelligent to feeling stupid every day. I was angry because all of my experience in the Army amounted to 18 general

"I don't need people to come up to me and thank me for my service, and I don't need to get into a discussion where someone doesn't like the war." BRIAN ROY
elective credits at UB. And on top of it, after putting tourniquets on bleeding limbs and helping insert chest tubes in Iraq, here I was sitting with 18-year-olds in Chem 101 drawing Lewis dot structures. I thought, “This isn’t interesting. This isn’t what I wanted to do. I hate everything. I hate everyone.”

Bottoff considered dropping out, but her mother and her academic adviser talked her down. So instead, she went about the hard business of reevaluating her dreams. Since her first-semester grades had taken her out of contention for med school, Bottoff set her sights on nursing.

With help from UB’s Office of Accessibility Resources, she’s adjusting to the effects of TRI as well. During lectures, classmates take notes for her. She also uses an Echo Smartpen, a ballpoint pen that records everything she writes or hears, allowing her to replay lectures simply by tapping her notes. To minimize distractions, she takes all of her exams at the accessibility office, and receives extra time to finish them.

To cope with stress and anxiety, Bottoff attends counseling sessions at the Buffalo Vet Center, which is staffed by fellow vets. She’s also in a support group for female Iraqi War vets there. Asked why she doesn’t avail herself of campus counseling, she says, “It’s easier to talk to other veterans. I don’t have to explain every acronym I use or explain why I was frustrated with my first sergeant. They understand.” It’s a common feeling among the student vets at UB, and also the reason that the most valuable resource for most of them has been the UB Veterans Association—the student veterans club run by and for student veterans.

“The first time I even met a veteran at UB was the fall of my junior year, when the student veterans club started,” she says. “It would have been so nice to have people to connect with when I first got here—people who get what a chow hall is or a first sergeant or a platoon or a company. People who get me.

“With other people,” she adds, “I feel like I have to justify my experiences. With them, I never do.”

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The Duty Phone
For UB’s military students, help is just a phone call away

UB’s military students formed the UB Veterans Association last year with the mission of helping their own. So when several members read in the news that some 22 veterans take their own life each day—a suicide rate significantly higher than that in the civilian population—they knew they had to do something about it.

That something took the form of a crisis line for student vets.

The duty phone, as it’s called, is a cellphone manned by six students, all veterans or active duty military personnel. The phone passes hands on a weekly basis, with the designated call taker pledging to keep it close at all times and to abstain from drinking.

“In the military, every company has a duty phone that you can call 24/7 in case of emergency. So we thought, with veteran suicides being what they are, how can we reach out to veterans at UB?” says Josh Hays, the association’s former president.

UB Veterans Services foots the bill for the duty phone, which is believed to be the only one of its kind on a college campus. (“Stars and Stripes” magazine recently reached out to the association, having never heard of a duty phone in a university setting before.) Students advertise its number on business cards that they pass out at meetings and at other campus gatherings for vets.

Those responsible for taking calls receive peer-counseling training through UB Counseling Services if they’re veterans, or through the military if they’re active duty.

While vets tend to balk at sharing their struggles with civilians, these students say they’re more apt to open up to like-minded individuals who can relate to their experiences, both in the military and at UB.

“This phone lets them know that if you need somebody to meet with or talk to, we’re always here,” says undergraduate Shaun Boardi, who served in the Army for three years and is now the Veterans Association’s vice president. “We’ll come find you on campus if you need help. We don’t want anyone left behind.”