

THE DIAMONDBACK

Veteran peer advisers ease transition to university life

By Darcy Costello

It's human nature to want to open up to people who share common interests, experiences and backgrounds, and for incoming student-veterans, it's no different.

But when student-veterans enroll in a university, they're often older than the average student



and less likely to know other incoming students. They've also been out of the school environment for several years: All these are factors that could affect their college experience, student-veteran Luciano Dimino said.

With this in mind, the university's new Peer Advisors for Veteran Education program pairs incoming veterans with peers at this university — someone who has made the transition from military service to university life and can help to ease the incoming student's entry.

"There are a lot of factors that could be at play unique to veterans — things another veteran might have been through and can help with, things they'll understand more than other people," said Dimino, a senior accounting and information systems major.

The program began at the University of Michigan as a partnership among that university's Depression Center and psychiatry department and Student Veterans of America.

Now, there are PAVE initiatives at seven institutions across the country, including this university's chapter. PAVE leaders chose to reach out to colleges with defined veteran communities, said Dimino, a leader of this university's program and peer adviser.

This university already offers an extensive veteran center on the campus and provides scholarships and other resources, said Brian Bertges, veteran student life coordinator.

About 800 student-veterans are enrolled at the university. About 30 of them are regularly active in the veteran community, and PAVE leaders will see another 30 "once in a while," Dimino said — an amount they hope will change with the new program.

The program is optional, but leaders said they hope to eventually assign everyone a peer adviser during their student-veteran orientation. Bertges sees the program as an asset to the veteran community, an additional way for student-veterans to gain access to the university's resources and communicate with people who have shared experiences.

"That peer-to-peer connection, that's the greatest aspect of the program. It's so much easier for students to connect with other students than anyone else," Bertges said. "PAVE is really a way for them to make a community at the university and know they're not alone."

At this semester's orientation — the first since PAVE came to the university — six interested peers joined the program, and a few more have joined since the semester started, said Katrina Browning, a peer adviser.

So far, the PAVE leaders have made weekly communication with peers, usually via email. Dimino said he strives to keep interactions informal to make students comfortable with asking any question they may have, avoiding a "Big Brother" relationship.

Since the start of the semester, he has tried to ease the transition process for the incoming students, including helping one with the business school application process.

"The student was going to apply to the business school but didn't realize the competition — I mean, I've heard horror stories of kids with 3.8 GPAs being rejected. It's a limited-enrollment program, so having the entire package together is so important," Dimino said, adding that he also helped the student to navigate the major-declaration process.

Ensuring that incoming student-veterans know they can come to peer advisers with any question they have is one of the most important — and the most difficult — aspects of the program, said Browning, a senior anthropology major.

"The veterans have been out on their own, living independently," she said. "A lot of times, they want to get in, get out and not waste time."

The PAVE program seeks to make their time as fulfilling as possible, opening the door to the university veteran community, answering questions and making sure students know there is help available.

"It's really important that we let them know there are resources to help and that there's nothing wrong with seeking out assistance," Browning said. "It's OK to ask for help."

About the author

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