

Soldiers, Vets Turning to Online Education

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DENVER - Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and recovering from a grenade attack, Iraq war veteran Ian Newland wanted to pursue a business degree after his discharge from the Army last year. What he didn't want to have to do was set foot in a classroom.

And thanks to the Internet, he doesn't have to.

The world of online higher education has given thousands of vets like Newland - and active-duty soldiers - the opportunity to work at their own pace.

"Being online, I can work on my college work at 3 a.m. if I'm feeling rambunctious," said Newland, 28, who often does homework when he can't sleep.

Online education is increasingly attractive for military veterans, according to Denver-based Jones International University, a Web-exclusive institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. About 350 current or former soldiers are pursuing a degree at Jones, three times the number last year. The university has a total of 2,000 students.

"Being fully online, we go to wherever that service member goes," said Bruce Ricketts, vice chancellor for military programs for JIU, which has pursued military students. Some students keep up with their classes from Iraq and Afghanistan. "A deployment doesn't mean that your education necessarily has to stop," Ricketts said.

Other universities with online programs that accommodate service members and veterans include American University, the University of Phoenix and Troy University, according to Eduventures, a research and consulting firm specializing in higher education.

Jim Selbe, assistant vice president for lifelong learning at the American Council on Education, said about 50 percent of active duty service members receiving tuition reimbursement from the Department of Defense are taking online courses.

In fiscal year 2007, Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force personnel took more than 710,000 online and traditional courses, according to the council's most recent data.

Richard Garrett, program director and senior research analyst at Eduventures, said an estimated 10.5 percent of students at schools nationwide are enrolled in online programs.

Newland, who grew up on a farm northeast of Dayton, Ohio, was wounded while serving with the 26th Infantry Regiment out of Germany on Dec. 4, 2006. An insurgent threw a hand grenade through the gunner's hatch of his Humvee on patrol in Adhamiyah, northeast of Baghdad.

Spc. Ross McGinnis, a 19-year-old from Knox, Penn., dove on top of the grenade, taking the brunt of the explosion and shielding other soldiers. McGinnis was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Newland said about 40 pieces of shrapnel hit his legs, arms and face. He suffered a brain injury, short-term memory loss, stuttered and started seeing words backward, as if he was dyslexic.

Newland returned to the States and found out about Jones International University after Sentinels of Freedom, a San Ramon, Calif.-based nonprofit that serves severely wounded soldiers, awarded him a four-year scholarship, placed him in a home in Denver and got him a job at a realty company where he handles phone calls in the information technology department.

Newland said he still limps, uses a cane and had to learn to type with only one hand. Initially, getting an online education seemed far-fetched, given his limited background in computers.

"Yesterday, I wrote three papers and took around 50 phone calls," he said. "Plus, I'm reading about four textbooks at a time."

Mike Conklin, executive director of Sentinels of Freedom, said taking online courses is often the best way to go when disabled soldiers leave the military. Some have been blinded, others paralyzed, and others have full-time jobs.

"All of these guys have reasons for why the classroom is not where they want to be right away," Conklin said.

Newland, who is married and has two children, said the flexibility of being able to write papers on renewable energy sources and space exploration while working allows him to spend more time with his family.

"I could do it after I came home from work," Newland said about his course work, "but I'd be sacrificing something else."