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### A Million Strong: Helping Them Through



University of Maryland University College

Chief Warrant Officer Justin Hutchinson at the education center of University of Maryland University College at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.

By JAMES DAO  
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THE class was humanities, the book under discussion Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." Suddenly an alarm blared and 20 students, some calm and some not, filed out of the makeshift classroom. Kandahar Airfield in southern Afghanistan was under rocket attack, again.

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Jabin Botsford for The New York Times

Travis L. Martin, an Iraq veteran, teaching "Introduction to Veterans Studies" at Eastern Kentucky University.

The students, most of them uniformed troops, repaired to a cramped bunker where a few continued discussing the book. There, they waited for an hour until the all-clear sounded. Class was over. "We've been through so many of those that you grow callous to it," Chief Warrant Officer Justin Hutchinson recalled via Skype. "For most of us, it was like a cigarette break."

The incident typifies the untypical world of higher education for active-duty troops and veterans. This year, more than one million service members, veterans and their families will take college courses financed with federal tax dollars. Their experiences will be more complicated than those of their fresh-faced civilian peers.

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As often as not, they float in and out of college like nomads, juggling deployments, families and jobs. If they are in service, they take classes at night or on weekends, studying between combat patrols and 12-hour duty schedules. If they are veterans, they are probably in their late 20s or early 30s and relearning the rules of civilian life after years of martial discipline. Some have physical injuries or mental health issues that can strain their ability to study. And with 15 years to use their post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits, many will take their time graduating.

Many will be like Mr. Hutchinson, who has been taking classes for 12 years in multiple countries and is just now nearing completion of a bachelor's degree in cybersecurity through the University of Maryland University College, an arm of the University System of Maryland that has been educating troops on bases (and now online) under contract with the Pentagon since 1949.

In Washington, questions abound about how all these students are faring. The White House went so far as to issue an executive order last year in response to reports that colleges, particularly for-profits schools, were cashing in on the G.I. Bill by aggressively marketing to veterans and not providing the support they needed to complete their studies. Last month, President Obama signed into law legislation requiring colleges to be more transparent about how they serve veterans. The call to action: provide students with better information before enrolling, and get them through once they do.

It doesn't help that figures on graduation and retention for veterans are spotty. Surveys show that a majority of colleges don't break out the data. If they do, they don't release it. And the government has not tracked when, or whether, military and veteran students actually graduate.

"There is very little data as relates to persistence and completion for veterans," said Bryan J. Cook, director of the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education. "The primary source of data for all students is one that looks at a small sample of first-time, full-time students, a group which most veterans do not fall into."

That may soon change. In January, the [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) announced a partnership with the [National Student Clearinghouse](#), an independent agency, and the [Student Veterans of America](#), an advocacy group, to collect data on veteran students. Federal agencies are also creating new metrics that reflect military and veteran students' tendencies to attend multiple colleges and to take more than four to six years to graduate.

That data is becoming more crucial as Congress enters a contentious debate this year over reducing the federal deficit, a debate that may include talk of trimming spending on veterans' education. Since the G.I. Bill took effect in 2009, 877,000 people, mainly veterans and their dependents, have received benefits costing the government \$23.7 billion. More than \$10 billion is expected to be spent this year on veterans, plus about \$560 million on tuition assistance for active-duty troops.

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*James Dao is national correspondent for military and veterans affairs at The Times. Will Carless contributed reporting from San Diego.*

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