

From Combat to College: Lambda Chi Alpha Needs to Welcome Veterans

Two veterans prove that Lambda Chi Alpha can serve as a new home for student veterans who may face challenges transitioning into civilian life.

The first time Steven Downey (Akron 2016), a veteran who had served in the Army for six years, walked into the Lambda Chi Alpha chapter house at the University of Akron, his expectations were low.

"I had a very Hollywood view of fraternities. I was thinking these kids will be immature," the former Ranger said. After speaking with a few members, Downey was amazed by the friendship he encountered and felt an immediate bond with the men of the chapter.

As a considerable number of veterans return from combat and enter onto college campuses, they may face unique challenges in adjusting to this new life. At the same time, the fraternity and sorority community can continue to grow by recruiting and retaining these men and women who have already demonstrated the core values associated with Greek Life while serving in the military.

Downey and Marcus Steiner (Indiana State 2015) are two examples of veterans who have succeeded in their post-military careers thanks, in large part, to their affiliation with Lambda Chi Alpha. Their relationship with the fraternity has been mutually beneficial: the fraternity has offered them camaraderie and a support structure similar to the military and, in return, the veterans have given significant value to their respective chapters.

"[Lambda Chi Alpha] was incredible. I found brotherhood," said 26-year-old Downey. "It almost knocked me on my ass. The friends that I had made and the bonds and the relationship - I was not expecting that."

Veteran Stories

Steiner, for reasons similar to those of Downey, did not expect to join a fraternity after his two year military career ended.

At Indiana State University this Army veteran was approached by two Lambda Chi Alpha Educational Leadership Consultants. They asked him if he would like to get involved with the fraternity as a founding father of the Iota-Epsilon colony. He accepted the invitation and later became the first president through the re-colonization efforts.

During Steiner's tenure as president he enjoyed watching the young colony grow. At first the colony was in constant contact with representatives from the Professional Staff of Lambda Chi Alpha. As time went on, the undergraduate members learned to be self sufficient.

"We were able to pull together and didn't need to lean on [International Headquarters] as much. We'd grown into our own organization," Steiner said.

Downey grew up hearing stories about Lambda Chi Alpha from his father, Raymond "Skip" Downey (Akron 1972), his uncle, Glen Pamer (Akron 1980), and his godfather, Nick Carpas (Akron 1972). After leaving the military, Downey worked for Lifebanc, an organ and tissue recovery center that provides hospitals with organs and tissues that patients need to survive. Despite his well-paying job, Downey felt like he was missing something and decided to enroll at the University of Akron and subsequently became a brother of Lambda Chi Alpha.

Veterans Flood Campuses

Similar to the post-war spike that occurred in the decade after World War II, when approximately 2 million veterans received their degrees through the GI Bill, new generations of veterans are seeking educational opportunities on campuses across North America.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), since mid-2009 the Post-9/11 GI Bill has benefited more than 860,000 veterans, service members, and dependents. During the fiscal year 2012, Post 9/11-GI Bill beneficiaries were enrolled at 3,600 institutions.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill was introduced in 2008 and pays full tuition and fees for veterans attending state public schools. It is capped at a national maximum rate for private institutions.

The potential benefit for veterans returning to college is enormous. After WWII, American soldiers returned from combat and traded in their knapsacks for book bags. These men and women of "The Greatest Generation" would become leaders in the fields of engineering, education, business, and science and spur the nation into economic growth because of the education they received through the GI Bill.

Today the transition from military to civilian life on college campuses doesn't come without significant challenges. Veterans can face Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, and issues of fitting in with faculty and younger undergraduate students who have an entirely different background than those of seasoned veterans.

Downey, who said he was diagnosed with PTSD in 2006, said he had problems adjusting to civilian life. He found it helped him to have like-minded people around. His father told him to accept the disorder, but to not let it define who he is.

"It was one of those moments, when I was like 'he's right' and I really started focusing on that idea and that concept. It made my life infinitely better," he said.

According to a 2012 report called "Soldier to Student II," conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) in partnership with Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), while colleges have doubled their enrollment of veterans over the last three years, they lag in the training of faculty and staff to be sensitive to the unique problems veterans face.

"Given an environment where less than 1 percent of Americans have been in the military [and] serving on active duty over the past decade of conflict, continuing effort is needed to educate members of the campus community on how to best help these students acclimate to the campus environment," the report states.

Just as the "Soldier to Student II" report suggests, Downey admits there have been times when he was frustrated by what he encountered on campus.

"Colleges for the most part are very liberal-minded. Liberal or conservative, I don't care, but sometimes I hear things and I get very angry," he said. "I keep my mouth shut and I never say anything."

Surviving College

Several studies suggest that, due to the challenges that thousands of veterans in college face, drop-out rates are higher for veterans than non-veterans.

The Student Veterans of America (SVA) recently researched the issue of student veteran drop-out rates after a study was published by the Colorado Workforce Development Council. It claimed an estimated 88 percent of veterans will drop out of school during their first year.

The SVA report looked at two alternative surveys: a 2010 National Survey of Veterans (NSV), and an American Community Survey (ACS; U.S. Census Bureau).

Through their research, the SVA concluded that the drop-out rate for veterans was not as high as previously reported by the media, but that there was still room for significant improvement for retaining student veterans.

"While both the 2010 NSV and ACS report potentially high student veteran post-secondary completion rates, there remains a potentially large proportion of student veterans, approximately 30% - 40%, not completing their post-secondary programs," stated the March 2012 SVA report.

A New Home

In light of these large issues that veterans face upon returning to college campuses, questions need to be raised about how the fraternity and sorority communities may serve as places that might ease the transition from the military to college.

Steiner said he would suggest joining Lambda Chi Alpha to other veterans. He's witnessed other veterans struggle with the transition into civilian life and he believes the fellowship of Lambda Chi Alpha can help with that struggle.

"I don't want to say you get same kind of camaraderie (as you get in the military)... but the fraternity lets you continue the same values that you had in the military," he said.

Inspired to do more to help veterans like himself, Downey joined the Akron chapter of Student Veterans Administration and now serves as its president. He is currently working with the university president, the dean of students, and other officials at the university to promote Greek Life for veterans.

"The brotherhood and the sisterhood of the military transitions [veterans] into the brotherhood and sisterhood of Greek Life," he said.

Downey's main challenge is to abolish the stereotypes that surround the fraternity and sorority world - the same stereotypes that first made him hesitant to visit the Gamma-Alpha chapter house. He sees the initiative of strengthening Greek Life's outreach to veterans as a winning outcome for the Fraternity and Sorority Life office, the University of Akron, and the student veterans.

Showing Respect

Steiner and Downey agree that the one thing people can do to enhance their treatment of veterans is to simply show a veteran respect.

"A veteran is not all that different from a Regular Joe. Most of them just went out and did what they saw as right to their service to our country in the way they felt they could do it the best," Steiner said.

Downey echoes this sentiment.

"Not every vet is Rambo. Not every vet sees combat, but every veteran is owed respect. I don't care what awards you pin on your chest, or what you've done or where you've been, either way I owe you my respect," he said.

It's at the Lambda Chi Alpha chapter houses that these veterans have been able to find that respect among their peers.