Number of military veterans swells at NYC universities
Local schools offering an array of services for returning vets.

By Steve Garmhausen

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The transition from the battlefield to the School of General Studies at Columbia University unfolded with dizzying speed for Richard Baldassari.

"I flew from Afghanistan to Germany to orientation, and then I was in class," said Mr. Baldassari, a native of Fair Lawn, N.J., who served in the Air Force for six years. "It was a whole new kind of keeping my head above water."

Columbia was prepared for former military members such as Mr. Baldassari. The school did all it could to smooth the way, from helping him find an apartment to working directly with government agencies to get his veterans' benefits moving.

As service people return from Iraq and Afghanistan, more are entering local universities. At City University of New York, veteran enrollment has doubled in the past two and a half years, to 3,000-plus. Columbia has 350 vets, more than any other Ivy League school.

DESIRABLE STUDENTS
To attract veterans and give them a hand after they're enrolled, universities are enhancing academic, financial and medical support services. School officials say veterans are desirable students, as the skills they gain in the military often translate into high academic achievement and subsequent professional success.

But there's another reason to help veterans move into higher education, said Wilfred Cotto, a Navy vet who four years ago became CUNY's first coordinator for veterans affairs.

"They put their lives on the line," Mr. Cotto said. "The least we can do when they come home is to make them feel welcome."

Despite the boost, vets can face difficulties in making the shift. Accustomed to functioning in a hierarchical organization with explicit orders and rules, many struggle to adjust to the comparatively unstructured environment of college. And though the open scorn of the Vietnam period is virtually absent from campuses today, veterans encounter criticism of their former missions.

For instance, Mr. Baldassari said that many of his fellow students let him know that they oppose U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"I find my views and opinions are vastly different from my peers'," he said.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION
SOLDIER ON
3,000 VETERANS enrolled at CUNY, double the number in 2008
Hostility does flare on occasion. In early April, student representatives and faculty leaders at Columbia voted to end the Vietnam-era ban on the ROTC. But during a town hall meeting before the vote, a student who had been awarded a Purple Heart was jeered when he defended the military.

Still, the extra assistance from schools more than compensates for any awkwardness on campus, according to veterans.

Columbia, CUNY and New York University actively recruit veterans at all levels. They thrive academically and inspire others,
according to Alison Goggin, director of M.B.A. admissions at NYU's Stern School of Business.

“A lot of students in the program look to these students as mentors or leaders,” Ms. Goggin said.

Stern has a new veterans scholarship program, funded by an anonymous donor, that covers two years of tuition for the M.B.A. program. Ms. Goggin said that “multiple” scholarships will be awarded annually but that the number will vary. The business school also has a one-year, $25,000 scholarship program for veterans.

At each of CUNY's 23 campuses, counselors are available to guide veterans through enrollment and registration, make sure they know about special benefits and help them with academic, administrative or personal matters. Like many colleges, CUNY waives application fees for veterans.

Universities also offer veterans particular physical and mental health support services. Columbia, for example, recently created a health-services liaison for physician and therapy referrals.

Some services aren't used much. Though many vets of the Middle Eastern theater suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, veteran students appear largely free of PTSD's most debilitating symptoms, said Peter Awn, dean of Columbia's School of General Studies.

“Some students have had serious issues,” Mr. Awn said. “But we're finding that they're not dramatically different in terms of their psychological needs.”

**SUBHEAD: MONEY MATTERS**

**BECAUSE OF CHANGES** to the GI Bill, federal aid to veterans at private institutions such as Columbia and NYU will be reduced as of the fall semester.

Both schools are moving to assist vets—for example, with the Yellow Ribbon scholarship program, in which the government matches school contributions of up to $7,000 a year. But school funds are limited.

Columbia is helping vets access **subsidized loans, scholarships and other aid** to meet annual undergraduate tuition and fees of about $40,000. Peter Awn, dean of its School of General Studies, said it's impossible to predict how the revisions may affect veteran attendance or enrollment.