



The Warrior-

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

As a U.S. Marine, Hector Alicea survived one of Afghanistan's deadliest combat zones in the Sangin District of Helmand Province. But when it came time to plan his future, the former sergeant faced a new battle.

"I wasn't the greatest high school student; I struggled a lot," says Alicea, who hopes to become a psychologist and enrolled in a community college near his hometown of Shelton, Conn., soon after leaving active duty. "I was intimidated by the idea of having to go to graduate school, write a dissertation, and get my doctorate."

Last summer, he came to the University of Oklahoma to take part in the Warrior-Scholar Project, an academic "boot camp" designed to help enlisted military veterans get the most out of their G.I. Bill benefit by building a skill bridge between military service and college success. The Warrior-Scholar Project, or WSP, started at Yale University in 2012 with nine veterans and is supported largely by private funds. OU became one of 11 WSP sites nationwide in August 2015 and one of

OU engineering graduate student Nate Ferraro serves as the first director of OU's Warrior-Scholar Project and is helping his fellow former service members transition from the rigors of military life to the challenges of academic life.

Photo by Hugh Scott

BUILDING A BRIDGE
BETWEEN MILITARY SERVICE
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CAMP THAT HELPS U.S.
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SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS.

Scholar Project

only three public universities, with peers at such private institutions as Georgetown University, Harvard and the University of Chicago.

"I knew I was capable of doing so much more and going a lot further with my academic success, so I decided to take a look at it. Once they got me hooked, I thought, 'I have to do this,'" Alicea says.

WSP strives to mesh the strengths of military experience with those of leading universities and focuses on building strategic skills in analytical reading and college-level writing, alongside tactical skills in such areas as note-taking, test preparation and time management. Veterans' transitional and support needs also are pillars of the program, says OU alumnus and WSP Executive Director Sidney Ellington.

Ellington has a foot in both military and higher education as a retired U.S. Navy Commander and senior Naval Special Warfare (SEAL) officer who earned three degrees from OU and a master's degree in national security from the Naval



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Home safe from one of Afghanistan's deadliest war zones, former U.S. Marine Sergeant Hector Alicea traveled from Connecticut to Norman to participate in the Warrior-Scholar Project. "The WSP helped me realize I'm not alone in this," says Alicea, who hopes to earn a doctorate in psychology and serve veterans suffering from PTSD.



Postgraduate School. He also served as director of Teach for America's Military Veterans Outreach and Support Initiative, which links enlisted veterans with teaching in at-risk public schools.

"The military culture is very unique in that everything is done for the service member so they can concentrate on accomplishing the mission," the native of Fairfax, Okla., says from his Washington, D.C., office. "You leave an environment where it's all about team and go into the civilian world. Veterans don't understand how the game is played in the civilian world because the culture outside the gates of a military base is so different from the culture inside. The transition can be very, very difficult, especially if you are talking about veterans who have spent an extensive amount of time in combat."

But military service also produces strong character traits. "We look at veterans as civic assets, team builders, leaders, technicians. They are problem solvers," Ellington says. "The way to tap into this incredible talent and skill set honed through life-changing experiences they've had during military service is by elevating veterans into leadership roles. They need a good education, and for the enlisted person, that can seem like an insurmountable challenge."

Nate Ferraro understands that feeling all too well. Now an OU engineering graduate student, Ferraro went straight from high school to the U.S. Navy for four years. He entered his first college classroom at Penn State University just four days after leaving the military.

"I was terrified for the first week," he admits. Ferraro's experience made him the perfect choice as the first director of OU's Warrior-Scholar Project. His many tasks included recruiting several of the university's most inspiring professors to teach seminars and daily writing workshops, attracting volunteer staff, and arranging housing and food service. Ferraro also trained at Yale and observed their WSP in action.

"Over the course of seven days, the Warrior-Scholar Project addresses all of the transitional issues I had to struggle through during the first year of college and learn by trial and error," he says. "If we can minimize the fear and stress for veterans by teaching them how to cope with or overcome obstacles before school even starts, that's one of the best things we could do."

Not to say that fear – or at a minimum, nerves – was absent in August, when OU's first 11 Warrior-Scholars were thrust into a whirlwind of intense academic experiences. Most had not seen a classroom for at least six years, and one had not been



Photos Provided

The Warrior-Scholar Project helped former U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Angelika Woods re-enter college while balancing academics with motherhood and marriage to an active-duty soldier. “I thought what an awesome opportunity it would be,” says Woods, who left the military when 1-year-old Amor was born. “I didn’t want someone else to raise my daughter.”



in school for 24 years, yet they dove into a regimen of nightly readings that included Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, Robert Dahl’s *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, and Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The readings fueled daily seminars of penetrating, heady discussions led by top OU faculty. Afternoon essay writing and editing sessions with professors and undergraduate student assistants often stretched into evenings, when reading began again.

“I knew I was going to be pushed, but the Warrior-Scholar Project was a wake-up call,” says Alicea. “I spent more time looking over Tocqueville and Dahl than I’d spent in my entire previous semester of study. But I love being challenged.”

“One of the biggest strengths that vets have is they tend to be relentless and won’t give up on something until it’s completed,” Ferraro says. “Every person has some degree of mental toughness, but veterans tend to be on the upper limits of that spectrum. They also have a global perspective that many traditional students don’t have. Their experiences can enrich learning for everyone.”

Those experiences, formed by years of service and sacrifice, added a unique layer of gravitas to discussions on freedom and

democracy during the first WSP seminar led by Wilfred M. McClay.

“I remember thinking how remarkably philosophical this group was, in the sense that they were interested in asking big-picture, reflective questions. Few undergraduates have sufficient life experience for a lot of ‘big’ questions to be meaningful,” says McClay, OU’s G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty. Seminars also were taught by Norman campus Provost Kyle Harper, Honors College Dean David H. Ray, David Ross Professor Emeritus David W. Levy, and Gene and Elaine Edwards Family Chair in Law Michael Scaperlanda.

The Warrior-Scholars didn’t shrink from tough answers, either. “The professors challenge what you read,” says Santos Ramirez, a former Air Force sergeant and medic studying biology at OU in hopes of someday becoming an emergency room physician. “You come in with a certain perspective and you leave with something else.”

In addition, WSP students leave with a kit of academic tools. Foremost is an analytical reading process nicknamed “Ninja Reading,” which teaches students how to deconstruct texts through annotation and extract the most critical infor-



mation. “It’s using the layout of the book to your advantage,” Ferraro says.

Angelika Woods has taken full advantage of Ninja Reading. A former Army staff sergeant now majoring in sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso, Woods had completed online courses while in active service as an air battle management system operator. But she had not been in a traditional classroom for nine years. “Going back to school on campus was going to be different for me. I wanted to focus on how to study and was willing to take whatever the Warrior-Scholar Project could give me,” says the future social worker.

As the mother of a 1-year-old daughter and wife to an active-duty Army sergeant, Woods was especially concerned about juggling child care with academics. And like many for-

“We look at veterans as civic assets,” says Warrior-Scholar Project Executive Director Sidney Ellington. The retired Naval Commander and Navy SEAL has strong OU ties as a triple alumnus who met his wife (two-time OU graduate and former instructor Toni Caldwell Ellington) while both were Athletics Department student employees in the 1980s. Their youngest son, Blair, also is an OU alumnus.

a social media support group of tutors and more than 300 alumni.

“The WSP helped me realize, ‘Hey, I’m not alone in this,’” says Alicea. “There are other people like me in school who deal with the same issues, and the resources are there for us. Issues

aren’t going to affect us in the classroom – if anything, they’ll help us. That was comforting.”

As Alicea, Ramirez, Woods and their WSP classmates wound up their first semester at colleges across the nation, Ferraro was preparing to recruit the next wave of Warrior-Scholars. OU will welcome as many as 15 veterans to an extended program featuring one week each of humanities and STEM-based learning. OU

and Yale were the sole universities chosen to pilot the STEM curriculum, which is focused on physics.

But Ferraro says the most gratifying result of the WSP may be more intangible than readiness to tackle the humanities or the sciences. “The difference in confidence levels was amazing. It was like night and day,” he reflects. “The program shows veterans their hidden potential.”

Confidence and potential have given Afghanistan combat veteran Hector Alicea a new mission in life. “I’m very motivated. Before the Warrior-Scholar Project, I didn’t have that,” he says. “Now, I want to attack college head-on.”



Anne Barajas Harp is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.

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mer service members accustomed to a life of rigid structure, she struggled with time management. “My hardest adjustment since I’ve been out of the military has been figuring out my own schedule. Ninja Reading has helped me make decisions and take what I needed from each material.”

All aspects of converting from soldier to student can be stressful for veterans. WSP participants attend daily presentations on adapting to a new life and are pointed toward resources ranging from scholarships to PTSD counseling. “The ultimate goal is to make veterans aware of all the transitional issues they’ll face so they’re not blindsided,” Ferraro says, adding that OU has nationally been considered one of the best universities for veterans. WSP graduates also have access to



Hugh Scott

OU has tradition of veteran support

“Serving veterans is part of the history of OU,” says Nate Ferraro, Warrior-Scholar Project director and Pat Tillman Scholar. Indeed, anyone familiar with the university’s roots knows that Oklahoma Memorial Union and the Gaylord Family–Oklahoma Memorial Stadium were named in honor of those who fought and died in World War I. OU’s Norman campus also features memorials to students, faculty and staff who have died in each of America’s wars.

But many may not know that OU offers a full range of veterans programs that serve as a living tribute and a roadmap for success to the university’s nearly 480 veterans and 1,000 military-affiliated students. In fact, for two years in a row, OU has been named both a “Best for Vets College” by *Military Times* and in the “Top 10 Best Colleges for Veterans” by *USA Today*. Here are a few reasons why:

OU Veteran Support Alliance: This volunteer support group has trained more than 500 faculty and staff members as “Green Zone” allies, providing a safe place for active-duty service members and student veterans to discuss issues and learn about resources. The VSA also sponsors special events for veteran students, faculty and staff and supports the Student Veterans Association.

OU Student Veterans Association: A student-led organization, the SVA sponsors regular events such as November’s Veterans Recognition and Appreciation Week, the Sooner Salute Graduate Ceremony, and tailgate parties to welcome visiting student veterans. SVA members also sponsor “RED Fridays” encouraging Sooners to wear red and Remember Everyone Deployed.

Pat Tillman Foundation University Partner: Based on its veteran-friendly atmosphere, OU was chosen to recruit and submit candidates for the prestigious Tillman Military Scholars Program, which provides veterans and their spouses with educational and living expenses not covered by the GI Bill. Tillman, who died in Afghanistan, gave up an NFL career to serve as a U.S. Army Ranger after 9/11.

Children of Fallen Patriots Partner: OU is one of only five universities nationwide to partner with this foundation, which provides scholarships and educational counseling to children who have lost a parent in military service.

Veteran Scholarship Opportunities: Including the Chevron Student Veteran Engineering Scholarship, the Hugh Reynolds Armed Forces Scholarship, the LaVerne Noyes Memorial Scholarship, the Miller Family Scholarship and the Vietnam Memorial Scholarship.

For a complete list of OU veteran services, visit http://www.ou.edu/veterans/veteran_student_services.html.