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UW-Madison makes an unlikely ally: the military

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The University of Wisconsin-Madison, which saw some of the fiercest Vietnam War protests in the nation, is shedding its long-standing antimilitary image by hiring a military historian and teaching a new course for military officers.

The university also has improved services for veterans after hiring an assistant dean with a military background last year.

"It really is a group effort to reach out to the military in a way we never have before, at least not in the last 20 to 30 years," UW-Madison history professor Jeremi Suri said. "We've actually in the last few months, out of circumstance, made enormous headway. ... We're getting beyond this really silly notion people have that we're antimilitary."

The image dates to the 1960s and '70s, when the university was a hotbed of Vietnam War protests. In 1970, four student radicals used a car bomb to destroy a building housing the Army Mathematics Research Center, killing a young scientist.

Suri is teaching the online course on the history of U.S. war and 20th-century diplomatic strategy to military officers this summer. His graduate assistant, retired Capt. Scott Mobley, commanded a Navy ship in the first days of the Iraq war in 2003 and helped develop the course.

Mobley said he received lots of interest in the course and more than two dozen Army, Navy and Air Force officers signed up.

They include Joshua McAuliffe, a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army who is an intelligence officer at a military prison in Iraq. The 25-year-old from Potosi, Wis., uses free time at Camp Bucca to listen to online lectures and do course reading and homework.

"I am taking this course to better understand the historical backdrops that have led to the United States using military intervention," he wrote in an e-mail. "I hope through a better understanding ... I will come out as a better leader, one that is informed and able to speak intelligently on the subject."

Suri said he hopes to provide a new model for educating military employees if the class offered over the Internet is successful.

"If we can be educating officers out there, I'm idealistic enough to believe we'll do a lot better job as a country," he said. "The idea is to give military officers a firmer historical grounding in the kinds of issues they are confronting

every day — the problems of cultural difference, counterinsurgency, problems with nation-building."

His outreach hasn't gone unnoticed. Roger Hertog, a conservative-leaning philanthropist in New York, agreed to donate \$200,000 to the university in February to help Suri's efforts. "Jeremi is someone who tries to do new things — witness this whole reaching out to the military online," Hertog said.

Suri also led the search for the university's new military history professor, which ended in the April hiring of Maj. John Hall, a historian who had worked in the Future Warfare Division of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command in Virginia.

Hall's position is supported through a donation from the late historian Stephen Ambrose, a UW-Madison alumnus best known as the author of "Band of Brothers." He created an endowment in 1996 to support the job after the school's longtime military historian retired. The school received about \$500,000 when Ambrose died in 2002.

The university had kept the position open until now, prompting accusations that liberals on the faculty were deliberately blocking the hiring of a military historian. The university denied that, saying it did not want to fill the position until the endowment was worth more and it had money to pay the professor's salary.

A search started in 2006 failed to find a suitable candidate. The second ended with the hiring of Hall, 36, an expert on the history of U.S.-Indian military and diplomatic relations in the Great Lakes region.

"I think a lot of people see me as being perhaps uniquely capable of bridging whatever divide exists between the military and the University of Wisconsin," Hall said.

James Kurtz, commander of a local Veterans of Foreign Wars post, recalled being angered by anti-war protests in Madison after he returned from the Vietnam War in 1967, an especially turbulent time on campus. But this year, he served on the committee that interviewed Hall, who he said would provide a valuable viewpoint for the faculty.

"This is a very positive step," he said.

Military groups also have praised the university for hiring retired Army Lt. Col. John Bechtol last year as an assistant dean of students to serve veterans, who are enrolling in greater numbers.

Bechtol has helped the school's 650 veterans find benefits, sped up processing of financial aid by months in some cases and resolved disputes with students called to active duty. He said he is working to change the negative perception many veterans have of the school.

"They say, 'They don't like veterans in Madison' and I tell them that's not the case at all," he said.



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