UC SANTA BARBARA

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Leading From the Front

Nobody understands the needs of student veterans better than veterans themselves. That fact alone gives Mike Fogelsonger, the new director of UC Santa Barbara's Veterans and Military Services (VMS), a big leg up.

"I am both honored and thrilled to be taking on this new role and to be of service to those that have served and sacrificed," he said. "I feel my background as a veteran myself, using the GI Bill and transferring from a community college to a four-year university, has given me some insight into the support today's student veterans need."

VMS provides a variety of services to ease the transition from military to university life, and serves as a clearinghouse for resources on and outside the campus.

"I think we need to remember that these veterans voluntarily gave several to many years of their life to serve and protect our country," Fogelsonger noted. "In doing so, they missed the chance of being a 'normal' or mainstream student. Their military experience has provided them with maturity as well as leadership and team-working skills, which is great. However, as non-traditional students, they also come into college life older and with more responsibilities and concerns revolving around family, work, housing and finances. In addition, they are dealing with a very fluid GI Bill benefits program to pay for college that is constantly changing and never easy to navigate."

He also noted that many military family member students have unique challenges using the GI Bill as well as acclimating to college life after attending multiple schools across the country (and sometimes the world) with their veteran parents.

That’s something he’s learned from his wife, a former military “brat” whose father served in the Army and Air Force.

“Through her,” Fogelsonger said, “I also understand the challenges our military family students can come up against. Using my business and customer service background I will strive to make both veteran and military family students the ‘customers’ of the VMS and the focus of everything we do. Having an active, connected and well-funded VMS is the best way to make sure these groups can thrive and succeed in a college environment.”

As Fogelsonger prepares to take the reins at VMS, he said he has three immediate goals:

• Expand on the solid program put in place by his predecessors and stay focused on supporting veterans and military family students in their personal, educational and professional growth.

• Connect with other staff and faculty who share the goal of supporting these individuals.

• Reach out to local veteran organizations such as Pierre Claeyssens Veterans Foundation and the Veterans of Foreign Wars as well as UCSB Veteran Alumni to get them engaged with our current students.

UCSB is ranked No. 5 among public universities — and No. 10 overall — on the U.S. News and World Report's 2022 list of “Best Colleges for Veterans.”

A native of Harrisburg, Penn., Fogelsonger served in the Air Force as a crew chief for fighter jets. After completing his service he earned a bachelor’s degree from Temple University and stayed in the Philadelphia area for a few years until he was recruited to lead a sales team for a technology company in Santa Barbara in 2000.

“My wife and I thought we would stay for a few years and return to Philadelphia,” he said. “However, 21 years later, we cannot imagine living anywhere else.”

And now his latest assignment will ensure they don’t have to.

“I am truly excited to meet the current veteran and military family students on campus right now and learn firsthand what types of support they need to succeed,” Fogelsonger added. “I also look forward to continuing to build and expand upon the VMS over the coming years to be able to better serve future UCSB students.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.