

Student Veterans Helping Student Veterans

The University of Kansas' Student Veterans of America chapter aids or assists veterans and their dependents through their college education

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Over the past few years, groups of college students across the country have made it their mission to provide military-affiliated students with the advocacy and resources needed for a successful college education and post-graduation careers.

The University of Kansas (KU) Student Veterans of America (SVA) chapter, located in Lawrence, Kan., is one example.

SVA chapters nationwide advocate for improvements to student-vet benefits while helping vets attending their specific college navigate the complexities of academic life.

“SVA isn’t like any other college organization,” 2018-19 KU SVA President Omar Williams said. “We are not a fraternity or a sorority. We are very professional. We have the ability to network with people across the country that we otherwise might not be able to meet and have the opportunities that other student organizations don’t have available.”

According to SVA, its 1,583 chapters at campuses nationwide advocate for more than 700,000 military-affiliated students. VFW and SVA have been official partners since signing a memorandum-of-understanding in 2013. The two groups attend each other’s annual conventions, and VFW selects 10 SVA members annually to participate in a fellowship program.

Williams added that he is always trying to show student veterans and military-affiliated students the “value” SVA can have. He said this includes offering roles as leaders, advocates for veterans policy and the social members of various college organizations.

Advocacy for Veterans

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Williams, 25, was born in Arkansas and raised in Wichita, Kan. He enlisted in the Navy in 2012 after high school and became a corpsman. He served in the emergency room at Naval Hospital Jacksonville in Florida for two years, then finished aboard the USS America in San Diego. He was discharged from active-duty in July 2017, but before getting out, he applied to KU to start attending in the 2017 fall semester.

“Initially, I was in pre-nursing — as a corpsman, it just made sense,” Williams said. “But, prior to joining the service, I wanted to be an attorney. So that’s what I’m working toward.”

Williams is now an English major and said he wanted to work on his writing skills before heading to law school.

“In the military, I learned punctuality, meeting deadlines and professionalism,” Williams said. “I absolutely learned how to be a professional in the military, and that trickled over into my academics.”

Williams has been married for four years and has a 3-year-old daughter. But having a wife and child at home, as well as attending school full-time, has not stopped Williams from being heavily involved in SVA.

He said he has been involved with KU’s chapter since he started attending the university, which is one of the top military-friendly schools in the country. The University of Kansas was among the top five for the second year in a row.

“I started really getting involved after I went to the SVA National Conference,” Williams said.

He added that the conference, which took place in San Antonio in January 2018, was “inspirational” and that he was stunned by all the advocacy work SVA does for veterans.

Williams also said he receives advice from past KU SVA presidents, such as J.R. Cadwallader, a member of the VFW Department of Kansas and Marine Corps veteran who served in the Iraq War in 2009 and the Afghanistan War in 2011.

“I’m now in more of an advisory role with KU’s SVA,” said Cadwallader, who was president in 2016-17. “I try to answer any questions that any members might have about the past few years SVA has been around.”

Currently attending KU for a Master of Business Administration, Cadwallader said that being in the military gave him the “discipline” to attend college.

“I never in my life thought I would go to college,” Cadwallader said. “I now see how valuable and important an education is.”

SVA: Not Just for Veterans

SVA does not just serve student veterans but all military-affiliated students. This includes students who are members of the military — active-duty, reserves or National Guard — as well as students in the Reserve Officer Training Corps and students who are spouses or dependents of military members and retirees.

One dependent involved in KU SVA is Brandon Decker, 20, who is attending KU for degrees in political science and philosophy. Decker is the son of two retired Navy chief petty officers.

“I’m involved with SVA because it advocates for veterans and for veterans’ rights on campus,” Decker said. “When I advocate for veterans, it’s as if I’m advocating for people like my parents. It doesn’t benefit me, but it benefits people like my parents who served in the military.”

Decker currently is KU SVA’s student senate representative. His role with SVA is to give the organization information on what other groups, as well as KU, are doing on campus.

Another student, Kylie Coffelt, helps with KU SVA’s social media presence. Coffelt, 19, is the daughter of a retired Navy chief petty officer. She is KU SVA’s vice president of media and is studying unified early childhood education.

“I was asked to join because they needed help with their social media pages,” Coffelt said. “I’m here to help with SVA’s mission, and to help get events going and to spread the word about them.”

Coffelt and Decker said they enjoy being around SVA students because veterans typically take school seriously.

“It’s motivating to see someone like Omar, who has a family, getting their school work done on top of being a parent,” Decker said. “When I see that, it makes me think, ‘Why can’t I get my work done, too?’”

Coffelt added that since a lot of the SVA members are older and have been in school longer, they help her find resources for her own needs. She said she does the same for newer student veterans.

Williams said he believes KU SVA takes advantage of having nonveteran students participate in the organization.

“They just bring a completely different perspective to the table,” Williams said. “Having members who are a little more involved with the younger college students and organizations helps us get the word out about our program and our activities.”

An Annual Fundraiser

In November, KU SVA hosted the KU Vets Day 5K in Lawrence. The event aims to raise funds for student veterans on campus. A record 451 participants registered in the 2018 run and walk.

Proceeds from the event went toward supporting KU SVA, the school's veterans alumni network and KU's Lt. Gen. William K. Jones Military-Affiliated Student Center.

Since implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which VFW helped write, and now the Forever GI Bill, which VFW helped pass, campuses and organizations have opened military-affiliated student centers nationwide. At the University of Kansas, the Lt. Gen. Jones Student Center opened in March 2017 thanks to fundraising efforts by KU SVA.

The center helps military-affiliated students at KU find campus resources and obtain VA education benefits. The center also aims to help students transition from the military to school and from school to post-graduation careers.

Williams said he would not be the student he is today without the experience he gained from his five years as a sailor, and that he wouldn't be in school without the GI Bill.

"It's amazing to know that all these resources are here and all these people are fighting for you, so we can have things such as the Forever GI Bill," Williams said. "I wouldn't be where I am today without that legislation, and VFW and other organizations are the reason for it."

This article is featured in the 2019 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.