

Veterans Welcome at Ohio State

At one of the nation's largest universities, more than 3,600 veterans are students or teachers and this mindset has made its Student Veterans of America chapter a vital resource

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Since its formal partnership in 2013, VFW and the Student Veterans of America (SVA) have worked to advocate for improvement to benefits for student veterans around the world.

Both veterans' organizations are led by veterans serving their communities and other veterans. The Ohio State University SVA chapter Vets 4 Vets is just one of the more than 1,500 chapters helping to provide a cohesive environment for military veterans. Making campus life better for veterans and military-affiliated students is a top priority.

Lonny Heft, the Vets 4 Vets chapter president and Army veteran, said the organization's mission is to support veterans, service members and their families in their transition from service into higher education and beyond.

On Nov. 8, Vets 4 Vets organized Flags on the Oval. Volunteers distributed small U.S. flags to students, staff and faculty who are veterans. The flags were then displayed on the school's "Oval," a popular gathering place in the heart of the Ohio State University campus.

"It's been going on for at least five years," said Heft, who served in Iraq twice with 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Abn. Div. between 2006 and 2008. "Each flag represents a Buckeye, student or faculty, who is a veteran or currently serving in the military. We do this to give a visual representation of how many veterans there are on campus."

Ohio Student Veterans Conference

Heft, who expects to graduate next year with a bachelor's degree in accounting, said there is a "high number" of veterans on campus.

According to Ohio State's Office of Military and Veterans Services, more than 1,800 veterans

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attend the school. Also, more than 1,400 of its faculty and staff are veterans, and some 400 students are enrolled in the ROTC program. This is one of the reasons why Vets 4 Vets is organizing its biggest event yet.

In the vain of SVA's National Conference, or NatCon, Ohio State University will be the location in February for a state-wide student veterans' conference. SVA NatCon, much like VFW's national convention, brings student veterans from around the world together to learn about SVA and opportunities open to them.

"Last year was my first year at SVA's NatCon, and I thought it was a great event," Heft said.

Heft added the only "obstacle" about the event is the cost to go. He said it costs at least \$1,000 for a student to attend to SVA's annual NatCon.

"After going to this, my thought was, 'Why don't we do one for Ohio?'" Heft said. "It will be a lot easier for students in Ohio to attend it and at a lower price. But, it will give the same benefits as if a student attends the national convention."

On Feb. 1, student veterans from campuses all over Ohio will meet at Ohio State University for a "state conference," according to Heft.

VFW-SVA Fellowship

Marine Corps veteran and life member of VFW Post 7883 in Westerville, Ohio, Tom Wike is a student at Ohio State and an SVA member. He was selected as one of 10 student veterans to participate in a student veterans' legislative fellowship with VFW. Wike joined the other vets in the semester-long academic fellowship that advocates on behalf of veterans.

While in Washington, D.C., in March 2019 for VFW's annual Legislative Conference, Wike worked on an individual project, which is required of all VFW-SVA fellows. He proposed to add social workers to the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, a collaborative program between the Pentagon, VA and the Department of Labor that prepares troops for the civilian world.

"In TAP, all the military basically does is help service members with their resumes and gives them a list of resources to use, and then tells them to seize the day," said Wike, who was the Vets 4 Vets chapter president during the 2018-19 academic year. "And then veterans get out and everything falls apart. We have 20 veterans a day killing themselves and no one can figure out why."

Wike, who served as a motor transport operator with Combat Logistics Battalion 4 in Afghanistan in 2012, believes that TAP needs to have social workers at the ready for any service member who needs help solving and coping with problems in their daily lives.

“Bases have social workers already,” Wike said. “TAP should start using social workers as a resource for the program.”

Wike said working with the VFW Washington Office on his proposal was an “overall great” experience.

“This opportunity with the VFW gave me the ability to make an impact on other veterans,” Wike said.

This article is featured in the January 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiwa](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.