

UC San Diego's Veteran Ventures Honored at Ceremony Aboard USS Midway

San Diego and four other cities were named 2018 Great American Defense Communities for promoting innovative programs, community outreach, and best practices in support of the military and UC San Diego's Veteran Ventures program was one of the exceptional innovative programs honored along with the city during an award ceremony aboard the USS Midway.

The Great American Defense Communities program was designed by the Association of Defense Communities in conjunction with the House and Senate Defense Communities Caucuses to recognize and celebrate communities whose exceptional commitment to improve the lives of service members, veterans and their families as a model for all communities.

Vice Chancellor for Research Sandra Brown and representatives from Veterans Ventures, which helps local veterans develop innovations into commercial products or launch new companies, joined San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer at the February 12 ceremony.

Other programs recognized for their commitment to the military community included the Veterans Village program; responsible for the annual Stand Down volunteer event, the Support the Enlisted Project (STEP); providing financial assistance to junior active duty enlisted members, and the Sugar Bear Foundation; dedicated supporting to gold star military surviving spouses and families.

“To have this recognition is special because it’s a part of who we are as San Diegans,” said Mayor Kevin Faulconer. “This national recognition is a reinforcement of how important the United States military and our veterans’ community are to us as San Diegans.”



President of the Association of Defense Communities Bill Parry (far left) presents City of San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer (immediate right) with the Great American Defense Communities Award and Flag alongside (from left to right) Kim Mitchell from Veterans Village, Michael Hayden from Veteran Ventures and Vice Chancellor for Research Sandra Brown, Tony Teravainen from the Support the Enlisted Project, Jennifer Carazo from the Sugar Bear Foundation, and Darnisha Hunter with the City of San Diego.

UC San Diego launched the Veteran Ventures accelerator program as a part of an expansion initiative to enhance its already robust lineup of entrepreneur programs geared towards veterans. The program enrolls a cohort of up to 25 veterans twice a year who work with proven entrepreneur mentors and are provided with resources to launch or scale their business or idea. What makes the program unique is that it is led by a team of veterans, for veterans within the UC San Diego community and the San Diego community at large.

“Our veterans have unique knowledge and experience that we as a public institution have a responsibility to support,” said Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “Our partnership with the City of San Diego means investing in the future of our shared community. It’s a way to give back to our veterans who have so bravely protected our citizens and nation.”

Research Affairs’ Office of Innovation and Commercialization and the Rady School of Management are responsible for funding the program and opening it up to all veterans—even those who are not enrolled as students at UC San Diego.

“When we were considering whether we should open this program up to our veteran community I was asked if we could afford making that sort of commitment,” said Vice Chancellor for Research Sandra Brown, “We decided that we couldn’t afford not to. At UC San Diego, we are not just a veteran-friendly campus. We are a veteran-empowering campus. We position today’s workforce to meet tomorrow’s societal needs.”



Veteran Ventures and City of San Diego team pictured at KUSI's Good Morning San Diego following a live interview on their Great American Defense Communities Award recognition. Photo by Danica M. Sirmans/UC San Diego Communications

UC San Diego was the first university in the nation to make available their campus-based entrepreneurial programs to all veterans in the community. San Diego is home to more than 250,000 military veterans. Veteran Ventures accelerator program was created to building veteran entrepreneurial skillsets to translate into new businesses, jobs and economic development for the region.

“Veterans inspire us with their service and we hope we can support them with coaching and funding for new venture creation,” said Vish Krishnan of the Rady School. “It is heartening to see Veteran Ventures grow and have real impact on our veterans.”

Michael Hayden, a retired Marine Corps gunnery sergeant with more than 20 years of service, is a proven entrepreneur and serves as the program facilitator for Veteran Ventures. He was grateful for the program’s success and recognition and said he is looking forward to scaling the program to provide more funding opportunities to veteran-led startups.

“We’ve successfully hosted two cohorts of more than 20 veterans over the last year,” said Hayden. “Our program provides workspace, generously provided by The Basement, mentorship and resources to support the budding entrepreneur. We hope this recent national recognition will provide funding opportunities for the program to invest in viable products that come out of our incubator and accelerator program.”

Hayden was invited to speak on behalf of the university and the program on KUSI’s Good Morning San Diego segment. He invited mentors and program graduates to attend, including retiring Navy Seal Robert Sweetman, who recently graduated from Veteran Ventures.

Sweetman is transitioning from military service this month and enrolled in the Veteran Ventures program after hearing about it in one of his Rady School of Management business classes. He saw an opportunity to get hands-on knowledge and expertise from fellow military veterans and business veterans to help him launch his business, Existential Tech, dedicated to providing aid to service members and veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Veteran Ventures was able to give me the confidence to pursue my own business,” said Sweetman. “Transitioning from the military is daunting when you’re trying to find a position in the civilian sector, but Veteran Ventures gave me the confidence to not only feel prepared for my transition, but to also launch myself into the unknown that is entrepreneurship.”

Hayden said he is committed to serving veterans because he knows what it is like to enter the unknown after exiting military service.

“I believe in the impact our veterans have on our societies and communities,” said Hayden. “San Diego’s recent recognition as a Great American Defense Community brings increased visibility to our Veteran Ventures program and that’s important. We’re investing in our veterans because they deserve it and because they’re equipped with the resilience and tenacity to be successful entrepreneurs who will impact our regional economy. We’re looking forward to continuing playing a supportive role in that success.”

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