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# Student Veterans of America Celebrates Leadership, Community, and Impact at 18th Annual NatCon

HONORS AWARDS, NATCON

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**WASHINGTON, D.C. (January 14, 2026)** – Student Veterans of America (SVA) concluded its 18th Annual National Conference (NatCon), bringing together thousands of student veterans, military-affiliated students, higher education leaders, employers, and national partners for three days of programming that showcased the strength, growth, and future of the student veteran community. With record student attendance, expanded partnerships, and the generous support of sponsors including TikTok, DLA Piper, RTX, The Walt Disney Company, and EY, this year’s NatCon highlighted national leadership, inspired community-driven action, celebrated excellence, and set the tone for SVA’s next chapter.

The conference opened with a high-energy Welcome Session **sponsored by The Walt Disney Company**, where SVA President and CEO Jared Lyon delivered a forward-looking State of the Organization address. Lyon emphasized the growing complexity of student veterans’ experiences and SVA’s commitment to serving

veterans “as whole people,” underscoring the importance of cross-sector collaboration that supports veterans “to, through, and beyond higher education.” In an emotional moment, Lyon announced his upcoming departure from SVA to complete his doctoral degree and spend more time with family, calling the transition “a goodbye for now, not a closing chapter.”

SVA Board of Directors Chair **Scott Blackburn** affirmed the organization’s momentum and announced a nationwide search for the next President and CEO. He introduced **Cory Boatwright** as SVA’s Interim President and CEO, citing his experience as a two-time student veteran and national non-profit leader. Boatwright emphasized continuity, transparency, and mission-driven leadership, and announced an expanded partnership with Google, enabling student veterans and alumni to enroll in Google Career Certificates.

The session also featured insights from Liz O’Brien of **Hiring Our Heroes** and a leadership panel including Eric Eversole, CMSAF JoAnne Bass (USAF, Ret.), and CSM John Troxell (USA, Ret.), highlighting national collaboration to support student veteran success across transition, education, and employment pathways.

Day Two opened with the Government Affairs General Session, **sponsored by RTX** and hosted by SVA Vice President of Government Affairs, **Tammy Barlet**, featuring remarks from top federal leaders shaping policy and delivering critical veteran-serving programs. Speakers included Kenneth Smith of the Veterans Benefits Administration, Dan Wiley of The American Legion, Dr. Lynda Davis of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Brian Duffy of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Matthew Passmore of the Department of Labor VETS. The session underscored the importance of policy implementation, cross-agency coordination, and workforce pathways that directly impact the nearly 600,000 student veterans represented by SVA chapters nationwide.

New this year, SVA hosted two featured panels including a fireside chat with General James “Mad Dog” Mattis and Frank Ryan of DLA Piper and a panel with

Medal of Honor recipients Sal Giunta and Clint Romesha, hosted by Jim Lorraine of America's Warrior Partnership (AWP).

At the Honors Awards Luncheon, producer, actress, and SVA board director, Jamie Gray Hyder returned for her 10th year as host, celebrating outstanding contributions across the SVA network. TikTok received the Daniel J. Edelman Corporate Champion of the Year Award; Howard University's Office of Military and Veterans Affairs earned the William Pearson Tolley Champion Award; and Jim Lorraine, President & CEO of AWP, received the Bob Dole Continued Service Award. **Matthew Butler of Fordham University was named Chapter Advisor of the Year**, and the **Saddleback College Student Veterans Club was awarded SVA Chapter of the Year** for its high-impact and community-driven model of chapter leadership. The conference's highest honor, **Student Veteran of the Year**, was presented to **Nikki Gold** of Oregon State University for transforming their campus and statewide veteran community through advocacy, coalition-building, inclusive leadership, and life-saving support initiatives.

The luncheon also highlighted five organizations, **EY, Fiserv, Johnson & Johnson, RTX, and The Walt Disney Company**, which were recognized with SVA's 2026 Partner in Excellence Awards for significant contributions that advanced SVA's mission.

The conference closed with a dynamic General Session featuring Krisanthe Vlachos, President Ted Carter, Jr. of The Ohio State University and SVA board director, and creator Johnny Vargas, aka *VivaLaVargas*, followed by a powerful leadership panel with Jim Lorraine, Sal Giunta, David Jones, and Nikki Gold. Attendees wrapped up the weekend at the Student Veteran Ball, celebrating community, impact, and the year ahead.

Across three days of programming, the 18th Annual NatCon showcased the collective power of student veterans and the partners who champion their success. With major announcements, national leadership, expanded collaborations, and

recognition of excellence across the SVA network, this year's conference reinforced the organization's commitment to ensuring every student veteran thrives in higher education and beyond.

SVA would like to extend its sincere gratitude to every student veteran, chapter leader, partner, speaker, and supporter who made the 18th Annual NatCon a powerful and inspiring experience for all in attendance. The leadership, energy, and commitment to community continue to elevate the student veteran movement and strengthen the mission we share. SVA wishes continued success in the year ahead and looks forward to welcoming attendees to the 19th Annual NatCon, taking place January 4–6, 2027, at the Gaylord Texan, where SVA will continue building momentum, strengthening connections, and shaping the future of student veteran success together.

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### ***About Student Veterans of America***

*With a focused mission on empowering student veterans, Student Veterans of America® (SVA) is committed to providing an educational experience that goes beyond the classroom. Through a dedicated network of over 1,600 on-campus chapters in all 50 states and 4 countries representing nearly 600,000 student veterans, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors by connecting student veterans with a community of like-minded chapter leaders. Every day these passionate leaders work to provide the necessary resources, network support, and advocacy to ensure student veterans can effectively connect, expand their skills, and ultimately achieve their greatest potential. For more information, visit us at [www.studentveterans.org](http://www.studentveterans.org).*





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