

The California Community College Experience with Blas Villalobos

Interim Chancellor Daisy Gonzales, Ph.D.: Well, welcome back everyone. This is Dr. Daisy Gonzales Interim Chancellor for California's Community Colleges, and you're listening to another episode of the California Community College's Chancellor's Office podcast. If you're returning to this podcast, then you already know that we are dedicating this space to uplift California Community College alums with extraordinary journeys. And more importantly, we are sharing the impact that they are making in California and beyond. Their stories inspire me and I hope that they will also inspire you. Today's guest is Dr. Blas Villalobos, the Chief Executive Officer of Center StonesMilitary Services. Welcome, Dr. Villalobos.

Dr. Blas Villalobos: Hi, Dr. Gonzales. How are you?

Gonzales: <laugh>. Good. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Villalobos: Absolutely. It's a great pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Gonzales: Where are you today since we're recording virtually?

Villalobos: I am not traveling this month, or at least today. So, I am at home in Lakewood, actually not too far from Lumber City College.

Gonzales: Oh, good. Well, I'm excited that all of our listeners are going to get to meet you. I feel that it's only fair that I also share that you're not just an alum, but you're a United States Marine Corps. So thank you for your service.

Villalobos: Thank you.

Gonzales: And you're also a current board of Governor's member serving 1.8 million students. You've been serving our system, our students since 2018, and I know you're going to share a little bit about your journey, but I want to share what folks would see on a bio so that we can understand your impact, and then we'll get started. How does that sound?

Villalobos: That's perfect.

Gonzales: Great. So let me share with our listeners who Dr. Blas Villalobos is. As Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Villalobos leads the organization's delivery of mental health and substance use disorder services for veterans, active duty military personnel and military families. Prior to this role, he also served as the Veteran Affairs Director at Chapman University, where he established the University's first Veterans Resource Center.

Gonzales: Dr. Villalobos also managed Mayor Eric Garcetti's, office of Veterans Affairs. And under his leadership, he developed and implemented mayor Garcetti's Strategic Vision to leverage private and public resources to assist veterans and their families as they reintegrate into civilian life. He managed the 10,000 Strong Initiative, a program that helped more than 12,000 veterans find full-time employment. Dr. Villalobos also served as the Executive Director of Community Programs and Veteran Services for the US Vets Patriotic Call. And in 2018, he served as a member of the Veterans Administration Advisory Committee on Readjustment of Veterans. He was appointed to this committee by the VA secretary. He proudly served our country as a United States Marine Corp from October, 1999 to October, 2003. And during his military service, he was deployed to Iraq where he served as a squad leader during combat

operations, earning several awards, including the Combat Action Ribbon, the Presidential Unit Citation and Humanitarian Service Metal. After his military service, Dr. Villalobos attended Long Beach City College and then graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a bachelor's degree in psychology. He now holds a doctorate and master's degree in social work from the University of Southern California, and we are very lucky to have him serving in our board. So welcome, Dr. Villalobos.

Villalobos: Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate

Gonzales: It. So I always start with the same question on this podcast and It is let's start from the beginning. Tell us a little bit about your upbringing, your time at Long Beach City College.

Villalobos: Absolutely. And right before I get into that, just one thing that happened in the last few weeks, it wasn't on my bio and I forgot to mention it. I'm actually a recent inductee at the Lumber City College Alumni Hall of Fame.

Gonzales: Wow. Congratulations.

Villalobos: That happen just a few weeks ago? So it feels like we're having this conversation and things are coming full circle, but just to give you some history, I was born in Mexico. I was young when my parents moved to West Texas before I joined the Marine Corps. Ended up joining the Marine Corps after high school. Did my four years in the Marine Corps as you mentioned. But I remember right before I left the Marine Corps, I was driving to the mall and I was trying to figure out what I was going to do after my service. And I drove right by Lumber City College, the LAC campus, <laugh>, right off of Carson and Clark. And I remember thinking to myself, you know, this is where I want to go to school. If I'm going back to college and I'm not reenlisting, this is where I want to start.

Villalobos: And so started doing some research about LO City College. At the time, as you know, veteran Resource Centers did not exist yet, but there was a retired Air Force gentleman, Alan was his name, who helped me set up my benefits to get started. And that's where it all began for me. I had an incredible time, although I did have some challenges. I remember I almost dropped out during my first semester at Lumber City College for a very embarrassing reason. Honestly, <laugh>, I remember being in my history class and our professor asked us to create a blog and summarize the first few chapters of the book that we were supposed to read. And I remember thinking to myself, you know what? What's a blog? <laugh> <laugh>? I had no idea. I had spent the last four years in the military, and between all the training and deployments, I just didn't really keep up with, you know, all the technological advancements and the internet and all that.

Villalobos: And so I went back to my friend Jesus, who was the student work study at the VA office, if you will, financial aid office. And I told them I was dropping out. Mm. And when I told him the reason, he laughed <laugh> for for a little while, but then sat down with me and said, look, you know, let's take a look at your schedule. Let's see what we can drop and get you just into some classes that will get your feet wet and get you going. Til' you have the confidence you need to really move into the tougher, more advanced courses. And that's what we did. And the rest is history.

Gonzales: Wow. I love hearing about Alan. So shout out to Alan. I was also reflecting on the fact that you're right, Veteran Resource Centers did not exist then. Even now, we struggle with increasing the number of centers that we have adequately staffing them. And my second question makes a lot of sense, because you have been an advocate for removing barriers for

our students who are veterans and their families, always in all advocacy, including what are we doing about Veterans Resource Centers, asking the questions about how our innovations actually impacts veterans. So this makes a lot of sense after hearing your story, the journey of, you know, getting to a campus in our system, the challenges, but then asking for help. So let me ask you this question. How did your California community college educational journey now shape what you do every day from being on a board, the Board of Governors, to the work that you do day-to-day as the Chief Executive officer?

Villalobos: Well, if you know, those who know me know very well that I always mention Lumber City College, that wouldn't be where I am now without it. In fact, you know, when I submit my bio for different speaking engagements and people leave it out, I always reach out and make sure that it's included. Or I'll have my chief of staff reach out and make sure that it is included. Because it played a vital role in who I became, even down to being introduced to the veteran population that was struggling.

Gonzales: Hmm.

Villalobos: When I became a work study student at Lumber City and I started helping veterans in military families, I noticed that a lot of veterans were coming up to us using the same address. And I didn't understand why. I asked one of the veterans, and he finally told me that it was a living facility or an apartment complex for veterans. That's what he said. Oh, I was very interested in it. So I drove by it, took a look at it, and it was in fact a living facility for homeless veterans. And the veteran I had the conversation with just did not want to tell me that. Hmm. Not thinking that I was going to go and visit it and take a look at it. And so that is how I was introduced to US Vets, which is where I began my career working with veterans, noticing that veterans were dealing with some of the same issues I dealt with after the service. You know, mental health issues, post-traumatic stress. As a result of combat experience, we had female veterans who were dealing with military sexual trauma as well as combat experience. And on top of that, you know, know veterans were losing their homes or they were living on the streets or couch surfing, unemployed mental health issues.

Villalobos: And at the time, the GI Bill was not what it is today. The tuition benefit was not included. The much higher monthly stipend was not included. And so, I could relate to a lot of the issues, both financial and mental issues that the veteran population was dealing with at the time. And so I stayed in touch with someone at US Vets. And in 2008, after I transferred to Cal State Long Beach, and actually right before the semester before I graduated from Cal State Long Beach, I was offered an outreach position at US Vets. And that's how my career actually began. But the introduction to all the issues that the veteran population had been dealing with at the time was made at Long Beach City College while I was there as a work study student. And it's what gave me the, I would say I didn't develop the passion for it until a few years later, but it gave me the drive that I needed to one, you know, advance academically in order to be able to do something for the population at some point in my career. And two, just reminded me that, you know, there are many challenges our veterans and military families are facing that can go easily unnoticed unless we point them out and we advocate for them.

Gonzales: Hmm. I hear so much of that. We've now done three of these podcasts and just hearing how that initial love to serve others came from your community college experience. So I love that you started off as a student worker, got integrated into other experiences of veterans that were similar to yours, but maybe also a little bit different. We talk a lot about, you know, the *Vision for Success*, focusing on the student experience in your comments. I heard a lot about the intersectional lives of veterans, but when we think about the *Vision for Success* being student-centered, what would that mean for veterans for us to really design for their success?

Villalobos: Well, you know, it really does help the veteran population in a number of ways. I would say, in my personal opinion, one of the most important ways in which it helps them is on really their GI Bill saving on their GI bill. Not having to take a necessary classes when they can actually start at a higher level. Of course that saves them on their GI Bill. I like to tell people that the community college are doing such an incredible job with the veteran population right now, because so many veterans are choosing not to use their benefits because there are so many resources available to us at the community college level nowadays that they are able to save those benefits either for a bachelor's degree or even a master's degree. And that is one of the great benefits we are seeing, not just from the vision for success, but also from the additional resources that are available for the veteran population, both at the federal level, but also at the community college and community level.

Gonzales: Hmm. So developing a clear pipeline that gets into their end goal. And I love the message around, you know, our pipeline is not just that degree or credential, it's that master's degree is really what sets up our veterans, our students for success.

Villalobos: Absolutely. And it's been fascinating and very rewarding to see veterans. You know, whenever I travel for work and I run into another veteran who's doing work in the veterans space, and you know, he mentions he's either a Ph.D. or has his master's degree or his license. And even with veterans who are doing great work in the trades, I have friends who are welders friends who are in the construction business, and they are doing incredible work. And it's a very well paid, you know, career as well. But they're doing great things. And all these great things really began with every single one of these individuals at a community college. And most of 'em, of course, you know, community colleges here in California.

Gonzales: And some of them become chancellors like Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley.

Villalobos: <laugh>. Exactly. You know, he is Army, but we won't hold that against him. <laugh>.

Gonzales: You mentioned the vision for success, all the work that you've done. So let me ask you this question. You've been serving our students 1.8 million today, since 2018. As a Board member, what is the accomplishment that you are most proud of in your service as a Board member?

Villalobos: Well, I would say being able to visit the community colleges and talk to the V.R.C. or Veterans Resource Center directors or managers and some of the veterans and family members, and learn about the struggles that they continue to face, and ideas on how we can address those issues, uh, at a system, you know, within a system level. I wish that because of the pandemic, I was not able to travel as much and visit as many colleges as I wish I had. I threw a wrench into what we were trying to accomplish or I was trying to accomplish. But now that the pandemic is not as severe as it used to be, I would say, we're able to travel more often and we're able to visit people more often. What I want to do is I want to continue visiting community colleges and not just visiting and listening to the veterans in the military families or the students.

Villalobos: I want to bring those stories and any issues they may be facing back to the Board and work with my fellow Board members to address those issues. When we're talking about pride, I am proud of the number of veterans who are attending community colleges. I'm proud of the number of military families and really the focus that our Veterans Resource Centers are putting on the families as well. For many years as a society, we focused really mostly on the veteran. Not a lot of attention was being paid to the families, but to walk into a VRC, like the one at Lumber City College, Cypress College, you know, we're talking about a community college as well. Walking into that VRC and seeing family members are getting help, right. Or

just interacting with the other students in the room. That tells me that we're doing more for the population

than we were before, but we are becoming more sensitive to the fact that it is not just a veteran who needs help, it's also their family that needs our help.

Gonzales: Absolutely. That's what it means to be a community college. I love that. Well, I want to get closer into the work that you do today, and you help thousands of veterans, Californians in general, but also you have a big impact nationally. Tell us a little bit about that work and then, you know, we know the work that you do addresses mental health, the trauma that veterans enter our colleges with. What can you share with us about what our state and federal leaders need to know about our talented students, what they need to succeed in our colleges and beyond?

Villalobos: Well, one general comment I always make about the community college student population is that our drive is often taken for granted. It's underestimated, I would say. Hmm. To me, and I'm comparing this to my career, having started at a community college, just like I started as an outreach worker and then moving on to a four-year school and then a master's, and then my doctorate. It's very similar to what I did in my career field where I went from outreach to case manager to manager, director, executive director, and then to a CEO position. Now, it really gave me the opportunity to not just learn about the many issues that our military families and veterans are dealing with, but also ways in which to address those issues at that current level I was in. And then figure out, okay, if I'm a case manager and I see that we need to do more work in this particular space to benefit the population, help the population, what do I need?

Villalobos: Well, I need a master's degree. Great. Let me go out and get a master's degree. Right. And so it allowed me to really understand every aspect of every position I've been in and apply that position to any future position I've held. You know, through Centerstone, One thing I am very proud of is the staff. My staff does incredible work. I give them all the credit for all the accomplishments that we have been able to achieve in the last 18 months I've been with the organization. We serve clients in every single state. We also provide services in Puerto Rico and DC and we also serve clients, veterans and military families in 10 different countries.

Gonzales: Wow.

Villalobos: From Mexico to England. And so it's, it's amazing work. But when you take a look at what the needs of our populations are, I mean, especially focusing here in California, the vast majority of veterans who returned to school start at a community college.

Gonzales: Hmm.

Villalobos : That tells me something at a personal level, right? One, that's where community gathers. That's where veterans are feeling comfortable, right? That's where they are starting their academic career. And by identifying any issues they may be dealing with and addressing those issues, we are setting them up for success. The VRCs, Veterans Resource Centers, are a great place for them to learn about the resources that are available to them, but also to voice their opinion and say, look, this is what we're lacking as an organization or as a community. You know, these are the resources that we need that are not being provided. And then identifying ways to really bring those resources to the table. One thing I would love to see is more involvement, and this is just, again, looking at it from an outsider's perspective, more involvement between, let's say the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veteran Resource Centers, or even at the state level, right? Identifying ways to fund using federal funds, you know, the VRCs throughout the country, because this is truly where the veterans are receiving, I

would say, the most help if they are returning to school. And that applies to the military families as well.

Gonzales: Yeah, I love that. I heard, you know, messages to our state and federal leaders around our students are resilient using their voice and respecting their voice about what they need to succeed. And then I love this idea of partnerships. I have one idea, that I've been thinking about that I think I've shared with you in the past where, you know, during an economic crisis, it's difficult to have new resources. But yeah, we've tried this in the past. We partner between Department of Veterans Affairs, the DMV, to help veterans get access to their state and federal resources. Now, as we think about declining enrollment in our system, wanting to create that pipeline between DMV, Veterans Affairs and our VRC centers at our colleges, where as our veterans are going to the, you know, DMV, one of the places where most Californians end up <laugh>, whether they like it or not, in the line, and wanting to ask them, would you like to get connected to higher education resources? It could potentially be free. May we share your information with the California Community College Veteran Resource Center? And just sharing that data, that is oftentimes one of the biggest barriers, just knowing what opportunities are out there for you. What do you think about that?

Villalobos: Well, I'm glad you brought that up, because it brings up a very important point. And I did this when I left the military, right. My home of record was Texas. In order to receive the additional funding I needed to move back to Texas, I had to return to Texas.

Gonzales: Mm.

Villalobos: So I went back to Texas for about a month, and then I came back to California. Well, no one in California knew I was here, right? Oh, and that happens with many veterans, right? Because as a veteran, you know, you leave the military, in my case, after four years, I didn't have a job lined up. I didn't have thousands of dollars in my account. And so to get that extra funding, I decided to drive all the way back to Texas in order to get those funds and then move back to California.

Gonzales: Wow.

Villalobos: And so, one thing we can do, and it's really exciting about what you said is once veterans get their license, you know, you have to go through DMV, no matter what.

Villalobos: But once we identify a veteran who lives in California, who didn't live in California before the military, you know, and if we can share that information, as you said, with the community colleges, with the Veterans Resource Centers, or find a way to get that information to the community that will allow the veteran population to access services and resources a lot quicker. Right. For me, I mean, it's always been about prevention and early intervention. You take a look at the number of nonprofits that are out there, and the programs that are out there that are very successful.

Gonzales: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>

Villalobos: The majority of these were created to address a crisis. <laugh>, I'm more on the preventive side, right? How do we prevent this from happening? Why do we need to wait until a veteran is in crisis before we provide assistance? We shouldn't do that. And that applies to the academic sector as well. How can we get that information in front of the veterans.

Gonzales: Hmm. <affirmative>

Villalobos: As early as possible, as close to their discharge as possible in order for them to make a good, you know, educated decision on where they are going to live, which community college they would like to attend, and to get information about that community college and that community that surrounds that community college.

Gonzales: I love that. I, I look forward to working with you, especially now that we have baccalaureate degree programs at our colleges.

Villalobos: Oh yeah.

Gonzales: What an incredible pipeline that could be.

Villalobos: Right? Absolutely. Absolutely.

Gonzales: Well, I have two main questions as we head towards the end of our podcast. And this one's really important for me because I think a part of sharing our story is then making the connection to the people that helped us along the way. And so I want to ask you to reflect on your journey at community colleges and identify one person throughout your community college experience, and tell us a little bit about what they meant for your journey and anything that you want to share with us publicly.

Villalobos: Yeah, of course. Well, the first person that comes to mind, and there's several, so at least four, right? So be unfair for me to keep all of them out. But Jesus would be the first one who comes to mind having that conversation with him when I had decided to drop out. You know, that played a vital role in me staying in school versus reenlisting.

Gonzales: Hmm.

Villalobos: So he's the first one that I usually mentioned when I'm asked this question. You know, I had great professors. I mean Professor Karen Daniels, my sociology professor. I had another professor, Doug Briton, who was my geology professor. You know, there were so many people who I had conversations throughout my time at Lumber City College when I was dealing with an issue who gave me some, you know, good feedback and good advice on what to do next. Those would be the top three who come to mind. My anthropology professor, Janna Paik as well. Nice. I mean, you know, there was quite a few people. And really it goes to show what a great community we had at Long Beach City College, right? When we started to advocate for Veterans Resource Centers, having, you know, our former Chancellor Eloy, you know, supporting us as a veteran. You know, making sure that that came to fruition. I mean, that made a big difference in what we are currently doing with a veteran population of military families today.

Gonzales: Hmm. I love that. So many people to thank. And then just thinking through common themes, faculty, and I think to your earlier comment about how our students are resilient, just being open to asking for help is probably one of the hardest things for our students. And so, I love that you shared your story at each part of where you faced a barrier and what they meant for you as faculty and your education, your journey to figure out what's next. So thank you for sharing that. Yeah,

Villalobos: Absolutely.

Gonzales: My last question is really impacted by all the students that I get to meet every day. They all

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come with different trauma, different life experiences. I can tell you that the number one question that I get via email, first of all, they don't get to see people like you and me in positions of power authority. And so the number one email that I get is I, I think I want to give up.

Villalobos: Yeah.

Gonzales: Or I've faced a hurdle, or, you know, I have so much trauma in my life that I just don't know how I can get out of bed and go to class. So I want you to think about your journey, your experience, and if you could give younger, you <laugh> your younger self, some advice, but really advice for our students who reach out every day, what would you say to them? What would that be?

Villalobos: I'll use this example because it applies to everyone, not just veterans. I was blessed when I met my mentor, who's the CEO for US Vets, and I met him early in my career. This was in 2008 when I first met him. He's a Marine Corps veteran from the Vietnam era. Very successful, very influential, incredibly knowledgeable in the veteran space, and highly respected. I reached out to him whenever I have questions. I reached out to him before I applied for this position, after I interviewed for the position, and after I was offered the position. And we often have great conversations about what I should do next, what I can focus on, how to improve what I'm doing for the veteran population.

Gonzales: Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.\

Villalobos: I would tell myself to identify that individual as early as possible. He has given me advice and insight and guidance that really shaped my career path. And that was incredibly helpful in figuring out whether I was going to stay in the veterans space and if I was going to stay in the veterans space, you know, which career path would I choose? Would it be employment or mental health or housing it. So it happened that all three of 'em were combined in some of the programs I manage. But you know, he played a very vital role in guiding my career path as well. And this applies to anyone. If you're a civilian who is interested in business, right? And you know that that's the career you want to choose, I would say identify someone within either your network or outside your network that you can reach out to and have a conversation with. I would say figure out who your mentors are going to be, develop and strengthen that network, because having those conversations with them early on will make it easier for you when you're navigating that career path and what it is that you're trying to accomplish, even down to whether you need a master's degree to do the job that you want to do as a career or not.

Villalobos: Right. And so that was very helpful. I mean, in my case, the Vietnam Arab population, you know, individuals like my mentor who are incredibly successful today are really a guiding light because we have been dealing with our issues as a veteran. I've been dealing with, you know, my issues, I would say since 2003, right? 2004. Thankfully I was able to address those successfully and move on. But who better to ask how to do that than someone who has been dealing with those issues successfully for decades and is now 75 years old and a highly successful individual and has been a very successful individual and has helped countless veterans and military families throughout his career. I mean, who else, you know, can provide that level of guidance and support? And that applies to other individuals in the community. You know, those who are, you know, in the any industry really, who are leaders in their industry. I mean, any student can reach out to them and say, look, you know, I would love to have a conversation with you about your career path because that's the career path I believe I want to choose. That can help eliminate a lot of the empty space, I guess you can call it, right.

That may force you to take longer or may make it longer for you to achieve your career goals.

Gonzales: Well, thank you, Dr. Villalobos. Anything else that you would like to share?

Villalobos: Well, just very excited to be here. I'm very proud of our community college system. I'm very proud of our Veterans Resource Centers, and now I want to give them credit for a lot of the great work that many of us are doing in the community. I mean, it all started with our community college and the support that we received at the community college as well. And nowadays, obviously for veterans and military families, there's that Veterans Resource Center that can provide a lot of resources and support. And so I thank them for that, as well as the entire community college system for doing what it does for our military families and for our veterans.

Gonzales: Aw, thank you Dr. Villalobos. Colleagues. Thank you for listening to another episode of the California Community College's Chancellor's Office podcast. You just listened to Dr. Blas Villalobos, Chief Executive Officer of Centerstone's Military Services, a proud community college alum and Board of Governor's member. Thank you for joining us, and we will see you next time.

Announcer: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast. This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.