

Tulane offered the perfect transition from military to civilian life for this graduate

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Manuel Lopez Vergara, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who graduated from the School of Professional Advancement with a degree in digital design and health and wellness, said he felt the program encouraged him to stretch his comfort zone and served as the perfect transition from military to civilian life. (Photo provided by

Manuel Lopez Vergara)

After 20 years with the U.S. Marine Corps, Manuel Lopez Vergara was looking for his next challenge. His wife encouraged him to apply to Tulane University, even though he worried he wouldn't be accepted.

"After the military, I felt I needed to focus my mind on something productive to help me transition into the role of a productive member of society," he said.

Fast forward to today, and he's graduated from the School of Professional Advancement (SoPA) with a degree in digital design and health and wellness. He said that, as a person who likes a challenge, he felt the program encouraged him to stretch his comfort zone and served as the perfect transition from military to civilian life.

Originally from Nicaragua, Manuel came to the U.S. when he was 13 years old. He is the first member of his family to enlist and retire in the military and the first to graduate from college.

He said he wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps to repay the U.S. for all the opportunities he was able to access as a child. During his time in the military, he focused mainly on logistics.

While in the program, Manuel's wife, who is still in the military, was assigned to move to Maryland. He worried about being able to continue his studies, but was assured by his professors he could continue online until he completed.

"You could say that one of my favorite memories was knowing there was no stopping and that I could, in fact, accomplish my goal," he said.

He is grateful to his SoPA professors Rebecca Carr, professor of practice and program director of Media+Design, and Erica Smith, professor of practice in the PreK-12 Education Programs, who encouraged him to reach a little deeper with every assignment.

"Every time I thought I was done, they pushed me further, which helped me dig deeper for better results," he said.

After he graduated in December 2023, a military colleague offered him a job as a logistics manager with Siemens Mobility in Washington, D.C., where he supports

Amtrak's operations.

Manuel said that during the job interview process, his time at Tulane piqued employers' interest, leading to opportunities with higher levels of responsibility.

"I am confident the level of training I received in the Marine Corps, complimented with the education I received at Tulane, has solidified my competency for all future challenges," he said.