

## UCLA Life Sciences Student Veteran

Meet Barsin Eshaghi Gharagoz, a student-veteran in UCLA Life Sciences. He served in the U.S. Army as a Combat Medic, began UCLA as a transfer student, and is now in his final year majoring in Molecular, Cell and Developmental Biology, with a minor in Biomedical Research. He's the embodiment of UCLA's True Bruin Values: Respect, Accountability, Integrity, Service, and Excellence. He has high standards and is determined to see all veterans in Life Sciences succeed.



Barsin sets a high bar for himself. He's in the College Honors program, working toward departmental honors. For his Biomedical Research minor, he's been working alongside a graduate student in the lab of Professor Elaine Hsaio, researching how the gut microbiome affects placental health during pregnancy.

He says, "When I'm in lab, it's very important for me to do the best I can possibly do... and go beyond, so they will know that veterans are a different breed. To me, being a veteran means to hold oneself to a higher standard, and the reputation of veterans matters a lot."

He's passionate about promoting undergraduate research, and believes that students should learn about programs that can provide them with experience and help them make important connections.

"You come to the number one public institution, not because it's number one, but because it matches your interests and goals. Go in prepared and know what the school has to offer you. For me, that was the resources they had for veterans, the programs, the campus environment, and quality of research. UCLA has some of the greatest minds on the planet."

What drives Barsin to work hard and care so much? If you ask him, he tells a story of multiple trials and triumphs. His family was a religious minority in post-revolution Iran. They were bullied and persecuted, and stepwise, he saw his right to an education taken away. At the age of 10, he watched his father suffer a stroke— as doctors at the local hospital refused to help because it was haram, or forbidden, to touch a non-Muslim.

“Of all my memories, watching my dad having a stroke, and no one helping, that's the thing that has still stuck with me, the inhumanity of that moment... If I ever see a kid next to his dad or mom, like I was next to my dad, you bet I will do everything there is in my power to make that stop.”

While his father experienced a difficult recovery, he did manage to survive and find asylum for his family in the U.S.

In American schools, Barsin found an escape in learning. He discovered caring teachers and mentors, like one middle school teacher who met him everyday, an hour before school started, to help him learn English. While he earned good grades, the cost of college seemed so insurmountable that he gave up hope on pursuing a higher education. It was an Army nurse that he met at work, who told him he should consider the Army and return to school.

Barsin became a Combat Medic in the U.S. Army, and upon returning from duty, enrolled in Skyline community college. There, he took all the classes he could to super-charge his curiosity and broaden his understanding in the subjects that most interested him. As he built a strong foundation for future schooling and career development, he met Dr. Jamil Kanaanah, who would provide him with another critical step in his career.

“Noticing my curious nature, my professor, Dr. Kanaanah, drove me to UCSF, helped me get into a lab that researched my interests and continued to mentor me through my doubts and reservations about my usefulness to the lab.”

This level of dedicated mentoring, and becoming part of a scientific community, proved invaluable for Barsin. It built his confidence so he could take the next step— applying to universities. This process involved researching schools and

programs online and attending informational meetings. It was this preparation, approach and targeting that helped get him into UCLA.

Transitioning from military service to a successful college life takes time and resources. Student veterans might need a little extra help getting into the right headspace for an academic life. For example, like many students, they might need to address issues like anxiety, ADHD, or PTSD. Students also could use guidance to plan for the best academic experience possible. And especially in the sciences, they could greatly benefit from direct guidance from faculty or staff in the sciences.

On the whole, student veterans are typically older, non-traditional students who may require additional considerations. Some have family members to support. Many are the first in their families to attend college. Many are transfer students. They are an underserved population who could use more support and understanding, while they transition to civilian life and figure out academic life. This is particular true in the sciences.

Through his experience, as a transfer student and working as an intern for the Veterans Resource Center (VRC), Barsin has advice to share with undergraduates. He was paired with a student mentor through the Transfer Student Center, and the Veterans Resource Center provided him with help too. Important advice and information sometimes came through chance conversations and encounters with students and faculty. As a peer-mentor himself, sometimes he feels that advice from fellow students isn't taken as seriously as advice coming directly from UCLA faculty or university leaders, particularly when it comes to the sciences. Now, as a VRC intern he's building partnerships across campus to help other student veterans succeed in Life Sciences.

He says, "Science is challenging. If UCLA is able to come up with a sustainable successful model where student veterans are successful in fields of science— man, that's groundbreaking! As part of my legacy, I want to make sure that when student veterans come to UCLA, they're able to have all the resources they need to succeed in the sciences... When I came in, I didn't necessarily have all those, and had to put the puzzle together on my own. There could be faculty or staff in the sciences who could check in with student veterans to ask: 'Hey, how are you doing? How're your science classes? Did you get the tutors you need? What are

you struggling with? Why is it hard for you?' I think this would make a huge change for the student veteran community."

In addition to working at the VRC, through UCLA's Student Veterans of America, Barsin has been working to serve veterans in other ways.

"There's service commitment to our veteran community... how can we not take advantage of being near the VA to help veterans who are not necessarily students, but are struggling with their own needs?"

After graduating from UCLA, Barsin plans to go to public health school to get a Master of Public Health degree and then continue on to medical school. After completing his training, he plans to return to the U.S. military.

"I want to be there so I can help America's heroes," he says. "I appreciate life as I live it and do my best to take advantage of every moment to the fullest. I believe most veterans realize how fragile life is, hence, why they give their all in everything they do."

With their military service and training, student veterans bring a valuable set of life experiences, skills and assets to UCLA. UCLA Life Sciences is honored to have Barsin Eshaghi Gharagoz and all our other student veterans in the Bruin community!

Barsin's advice for students in UCLA Life Sciences:

**1. Early on, take classes that you find truly interesting.**

This might help you hone your future career direction. If you're in community college, and you're able, don't just take the bare minimum, audit classes that spark your interests.

**2. Create your team.**

Find the group of people who will support you as you move towards your future goals. Find faculty and staff at UCLA who can provide you with good information and connections. Include friends with similar goals or values that will support you. Be willing to go out and do this. If UCLA has accepted you, you're pretty amazing already. Keep going to the next level.

**3. Consider College Honors.**

UCLA honors are extremely supportive of student veterans to help them navigate the institution's policies and to answer any questions regarding your degree(s) or meeting particular requirements. Honors has been an important part of my mentorship team throughout my UCLA experience. If you were part of the community college honors program, you're in; otherwise you'll need a competitive GPA.

**4. Take LS 110.**

You should take this career-development course sometime in your first year. I can't emphasize enough how important this class is, and you won't know how important this class is until you take it.

**5. Go to office hours.**

You can use this time to ask questions, and importantly it's a time for your instructors and TAs to get to know you, and you to know them. You can also learn how they got to where they are now. Most instructors care about your success.

**6. Participate in undergraduate research.**

Find time in your first year to talk with people at the Undergraduate Research Center, Sciences. Also, talk to Dr. Ira Clark about the Biomedical Sciences Minor. UCLA is a top research institution. Even if you don't go into

research, all science students should learn about research being done in Life Sciences, and consider working in a lab to gain (possibly paid) experience and meet potential mentors. Again, the people you meet here could be part of your success team.

Important advice for student veterans:

**Go to the Veterans Resource Center!**

For student veterans, this is **the** most important advice! The VRC can help with so many things a student veteran might need help with. This is where you'll find all resources for veterans, a great community, and tutoring in addition to what UCLA provides.