

Pierce college ROUNDUP

A FIRST AMENDMENT PUBLICATION

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Students, former department chair say professor engaged in repeated misconduct

Amid investigation, auto tech professor denies alleged derogatory remarks

By Delilah Brumer
Editor-in-Chief

Longtime Pierce College automotive technology professor Tom Fortune is teaching four classes this fall, a load similar to previous semesters. Several of the courses he teaches are a requirement for auto tech students to graduate. Each of the sections is full, and many have a lengthy waitlist.

For multiple auto tech students who spoke to the Roundup, these facts pose a frustrating reality. The students said Fortune repeatedly bullied them, made sexist and racist comments and required them to take expensive off-site tests. They also said Fortune demeaned them when they spoke out.

The Roundup interviewed students, faculty, Pierce President Ara Aguiar and Fortune, and reviewed months of emails, lecture videos and other documentation. The records and interviews show that the Los Angeles Community College District is aware of misconduct allegations involving Fortune.

Fortune said allegations that he made derogatory remarks are false.

The district put Fortune on paid administrative leave for 90 days during the Spring 2024 semester, after multiple complaints. Now, he's back to teaching, pending further investigation — and some students say little has changed.

'Bigoted or inappropriate' remarks

When Joanna Trujillo walks into her automotive technology

classes, she wears the same red and black, grease-stained uniform as the rest of her peers. But as one of two or three women in each class of 40 to 50 students, she stands out.

Although Trujillo's presence is an anomaly in a male-dominated field, she's not afraid to get her hands dirty tuning up an engine, and she said her classmates typically treat her with respect.

Trujillo said she was "upset" when she witnessed the comments she said that Fortune made while teaching an auto tech class she was in earlier this year.

Trujillo and two other students said Fortune spent several minutes during a class session demeaning men whose girlfriends earn more money than them. Then, the students say, Fortune said it's best if both a man and a woman in a relationship earn a high salary, but not if the woman does it "by being on the pole." Fortune said this claim is false.

"I was like 'What the hell,'" Trujillo said. "I wasn't the only one to hear it, and it threw me off. In auto, for females especially, we're supposed to just deal with the inappropriate comments dudes make."

But Fortune is a professor, and "it's not okay," Trujillo said.

The students said Fortune has repeatedly made degrading comments about women's bodies, including their butts and breasts. They said Fortune has frequently gone on tangents during class time about strippers and prostitution, both before and after his Spring 2024 leave. Fortune said he did not make such remarks.

"He still would continue to do

the things he used to do, even though he was warned," said Trujillo, who is currently taking a class with Fortune.

Carlos Arroyo, an auto tech major who has taken multiple classes taught by Fortune, said the professor's comments are often "bigoted or inappropriate."

As a member of the FAST club, an automotive tech organization at Pierce, Arroyo attended the club's end-of-the-year event in 2023.

A tradition of the club is for students to get toolboxes when they graduate. Arroyo said that at

the 2023 end-of-the-year event, Fortune remarked that those toolboxes "aren't for Mexicans." Arroyo, a Hispanic student, said Fortune looked directly at him when he said it, later patting Arroyo on the back and claiming he was joking. Fortune said he did not make these comments.

Automotive technology professor Alex Villalta was at the event and said he also witnessed the comment.

"Words matter, and they matter a lot," Villalta said. "You can say you were just kidding, but they still matter."

Villalta, who used to be the auto tech department chair, said Fortune has "bullied and dehumanized" students, specifically female, Hispanic and disabled students, for years. Villalta said students have complained about Fortune to him, with one crying in Villalta's office.

"As sad as it is, it's almost the norm [in the auto industry]," Villalta said. "But this should be a learning environment, a safe environment."

Article continues on page 4.



Abraham Elizalde / Roundup News

A student walks by the Advanced Automotive Technology Building at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on October 21, 2024.

NEWS

pg. 5

Reducing textbook costs



Karla Villacorta / Roundup News

CAMPUS LIFE

pg. 6

"The Mousetrap" play review



Abraham Elizalde / Roundup News

SPORTS

pg. 8

Men's soccer beats Moorpark



Alfonso Vargas / Roundup News

Auto tech professor's alleged misconduct *(continued from page 1)*

Hundreds of dollars of tests

According to four students and Villalta, an obstacle to succeeding in Fortune's classes was that until this semester, he had required outside tests called Automotive Service Excellence certifications, or ASEs.

The tests could cost as much as \$100 each, and were not administered or graded by Fortune. Fortune confirmed that he previously required these tests.

"Getting to go take the test is a valuable experience," Fortune said.

The tests were required for students to pass some of Fortune's classes, despite only being mentioned in the Course Outline of Record reports for the classes as a goal for which to prepare students, not a requirement. The "student-provided resources" sections of the required Course Outline of Record reports, which were reviewed by the Roundup, mention only "safety glasses,

textbook [and] shop clothes."

Fortune said that offering ASEs was a team decision by the department. These types of outside tests are not a requirement to pass in other Pierce auto tech classes, though. Some professors offer extra credit to take them.

Victor Marroquin, an auto tech student who graduated in June, worked full time while attending Pierce at night. Some of the final courses he needed to graduate were taught by Fortune and required ASEs. He said he ended up taking and retaking the exams a total of nine times — spending more than \$800 — before passing the classes that required the ASEs.

Marroquin also said had to take a day off work each time he took an ASE, because the offsite, in-person exams conflicted with his schedule.

"It made me feel unmotivated," Marroquin said. "It had me stressing out so much. It made me not want to even show up to class, because I was told if I don't

pass this one thing, I'm not going to be able to graduate."

Auto tech major Lenore Kassab said he spent more than \$300 on ASE tests. He said interacting with Fortune led him to try to get a substitute class for one of Fortune's advanced classes to avoid having to take another class with him. He said the testing and substitution ordeal have led to a delay in getting his diploma, despite having all other requirements completed.

"In these classes, you're not learning anything and you're dealing with all this," Kassab said. "It's really disappointing."

Fortune confirmed that, as of this semester, he no longer requires the tests, and that discontinuing the requirement wasn't his decision.

Students say Fortune repeatedly bullied them

The students who spoke to the Roundup said Fortune has engaged in verbal bullying. They said he demeans students who work non-automotive jobs, although many are low-income students, and do so to make ends meet while still in school.

In lesson videos reviewed by the Roundup, Fortune gave examples and anecdotes of students, who he did not identify by name, working jobs he considered low level and not "giving the industry a chance." These examples included "working at dad's construction company" and "manager at Bevmo."

Kassab said one of Fortune's low-level job anecdotes was about him, although Fortune never said it was. Kassab said he felt like everyone in the class recognized it was about him because the auto tech department is small.

"That's really not a good example for a professor to set, to call out his students like that," Kassab said.

Trujillo said Fortune has told the students that they could end up homeless, or needing to drink and smoke weed to get through the day, if they don't find a good job.

Villalta also said Fortune has bullied students, including using the R-slur. Fortune said the claims of bullying are false.

LACCD investigation

The LACCD investigated the complaints against Fortune in Spring 2024, placing him on a 90-day paid administrative leave. According to Aguiar, further investigation is ongoing.

The events that initially sparked an investigation, according to the students, Villalta and Fortune, were some students

cheating on ASEs.

Some of the students who were interviewed by the Roundup said they knew of peers who submitted fake ASE results to Fortune, to avoid the stress and cost of repeatedly retaking the ASEs. Fortune said he then alerted Villalta, who was department chair at the time, and other Pierce admin of the cheating.

Fortune said he expected disciplinary action to be taken against the students. What instead happened was that administrators were concerned about the ASE requirements in the first place. Concerns were raised that requiring students to pay for and pass an outside test could be in violation of California Title 5, Section 55002.

In the time since district and college administration began

Kimhou Chhith, the current chair of the auto tech department, did not respond to a request for comment.

Career Technical Education Dean Mon Khat said, "I have received the concerns that the student body and additional stakeholders have raised about the situation, and we are looking into them. Unfortunately, I am unable to comment on matters that are still pending."

"I want you to know that here at LA Pierce College, we do take these concerns seriously and handle them with care and concern for all parties involved," Khat added.

The students who spoke to the Roundup said they are disappointed in the way the district has handled the complaints. Some of the students

"The school and the district just brushed it off, basically."

Carlos Arroyo
Pierce auto tech major

investigating Fortune, several current and former students have come forward with their experiences of alleged bullying, sexism and racism.

When Fortune came back from his administrative leave, some students said his alleged misconduct did not change or end.

Trujillo, who is currently in a class taught by Fortune, said Fortune announced in a class session that he is "an asshole" but that, since he was able to return, it means he can "be an asshole."

Fortune said that claim is false. He added, in an interview with the Roundup, "I'm not going to comment. I am an asshole, okay. I am all right. How many people could admit that, 'I could be a bit of an asshole sometimes.'"

Fortune said that the students' various complaints about his comments are false, and that they were "solicited by the former department chair to complain about me." He said the student concerns tie back to Villalta, who was not re-elected to be department chair, with his term ending on July 1, 2024.

The students disputed this claim, and so did Villalta.

"As department chair, the students' complaints came to me, and my job as a chair was to report what they were saying," Villalta said. "My mindset is of serving the students. This is about the students and the needs of the students, not me."

said that college administrators were helpful initially, but that once the complaints escalated to the district, they felt unsupported.

Some of the students went to the Sept. 28 meeting of the Pierce Academic Senate, hoping to raise awareness of their concerns.

"The school and the district just brushed it off, basically," Arroyo said.

An LACCD media representative said the district "cannot comment on the specifics as this matter is part of an ongoing investigation."

"We want to emphasize that we take all allegations seriously and are committed to maintaining a safe and supportive campus environment for all students and employees," the district media representative added.

Aguiar said it's important to follow the proper processes for investigations into professors. "We have to be fair to everybody," Aguiar said, adding that in the meantime, "students can feel that we're not doing enough."

"It's not going on deaf ears," Aguiar said. "We are very much aware and we are in the process of working with the district, so that the district can continue to look into this matter. The faculty, they're entitled to that process, and so we are following the process, both for our employees, and then we're also being responsive to the student concerns."



Karla Delgado / Roundup News

Automotive Technology professor Tom Fortune sits at a booth during the Meet Your Major Fair event at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on Oct. 2, 2024.

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Pierce students grapple with food insecurity Brahma Bodega and local pantry face high demand for aid

By **Delilah Brumer**
Managing Editor

Three points for each can of vegetable soup. Four points for pasta. Ten points total, per week. Pierce College student Carolyn Mansager is not a math major, but each week she is faced with a challenging arithmetic problem: How can she stretch her Brahma Bodega points to ensure she has enough to eat?

Like more than 60 percent of Los Angeles Community College District students, Mansager experiences food insecurity. Pierce's free food pantry, the Brahma Bodega, has provided her with support over the past two years. Facing increasing food costs and high demand, the Bodega instituted a point system this semester, which assigns a value to each item and limits students to 10 points per week. Previously, students were allowed to take up to five items per week, regardless of what the item was.

Mansager, a non-traditional college student majoring in American Sign Language and business, said the point system has been limiting for her, as a vegetarian.

"Now, with the point system, I'm getting the same things over and over, because that's what I can eat and afford," Mansager said. "If their goal is to address food insecurity, they are failing for me, with the point system. I don't want to make it seem like I don't appreciate what I get, because I do, but they were doing better in the past."

The Brahma Bodega offers students a variety of free services to combat food insecurity, including two hot lunches per week, 10 points of items from the

pantry per week and two snacks per day. But limited funding coupled with vast need means that the Bodega has to limit what each student can take, according to Jeremy Mason, who leads the Bodega.

The Bodega is funded through state budget allocations, receiving \$400,000 per year, according to Mason. That funding is used to purchase food for the approximately 300 students per day who use the Bodega, and to pay Bodega staff and student workers. The Bodega also provides other resources such as free farmers markets for students and their families, providing fresh food to more than 1,000 people, according to Mason.

"We want all students to know that we're here to support as much as we can," Mason said. "There are budgetary constraints, and simultaneously, the Bodega is servicing more and more students, with the same finances."

To receive food from the Bodega, students need to sign up for a Bodega card. According to Mason, about 1,200 students have Bodega cards this semester. The Bodega does not have a maximum family income eligibility for who can receive food support.

"If you don't have your basic needs met, it's difficult, if not impossible, to do other things outside of that like go to class," Mason said. "We try to combat that hunger so students can focus."

Debbie Decker, the executive director of the West Valley Food Pantry in Woodland Hills, works with her organization to provide nutritious free food to about 9,000 people per month, including many Pierce students. She said that in the past several



Janet Harper / Roundup News

Students wait in line to check out at the free Brahma Bodega located in the Multicultural Center, LLC 5110 at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on March 12, 2025.

months, the local community's demand for food has increased, due to the cost of living, inflation and the loss of jobs and housing due to the recent wildfires.

"We're seeing extreme need," Decker said. "People are making choices between food or medication, or food or housing. That's a terrible place to be in, so there's a need for food assistance."

The pantry held a grand opening for its new facility, located about two miles away from Pierce, on March 29. The new facility was initially made possible by a \$3.5 million state budget appropriation in 2021. Unlike the Bodega, the pantry requires verification that recipients are low-income, but Decker emphasized that most

Story continues on page 4.



Delilah Brumer / Roundup News

West Valley Food Pantry Executive Director Debbie Decker accepts a certificate from County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath during the new facility grand opening in Woodland Hills, Calif., on March 29, 2025.

CAMPUS LIFE

pg. 5

'Antigone'
play review



Dominic Borja / Roundup News

PHOTO ESSAY

pg. 7

'Stop the
Bleed'
workshop



Rashad Muhammad / Roundup News

SPORTS

pg. 8

Volleyball
loses to Santa
Monica



Gerardo Escobar / Roundup News

PCC talks new buildings and old problems

By Alyssa Lupercio
and Zamourad Iqbal
Reporters

Budget discussion and campus construction continue to be top of mind for the Pierce College Council (PCC), which met Thursday, March 27, on Zoom.

PCC Chair Brian Gendron led the meeting to discuss campus updates.

Multiple buildings are planned to be demolished in relation to the Academic East, Academic West, Child Development Academic and Industrial Technology construction.

Project manager Soufiane Boudiaf presented an update

on the construction plan and its progress.

"We are about 30% in terms of construction progress," Boudiaf said. "We already poured half of the second-floor decking, which is really good."

Boudiaf revealed that the Academic West building is headed toward the second phase of construction.

The Child Development Academic Building framing is 90% complete and is now in development for details, according to Boudiaf. The Industrial Technology Building is also in the works, with needed finalizations aiming to be started late April.

Buildings set for demolition

include buildings 1200, 1300, 1400, 1500, 3600, 3800, parts of the Child Development Center, the Botanical Garden and Pierce College Village, except for 8100 and 8200.

Senior Sheriff Deputy Isaac Jorge updated members on recent incidents at Pierce College.

"We have had a little uptick in crime, a couple of vandalism and graffiti in some restrooms," Jorge said. "We have a bike theft, a golf cart theft from one of our trailers and a lot of gas has also been stolen from the gas carts."

Jorge also added the recent changes in the sheriff's department's operations on community college campuses.

"All of the other deputies and security officers at the community colleges will start wearing cameras from April 1," Jorge said. "It is just to give you where when we receive a call for service, and somebody calls us on the camera."

Michael Habata, from the Diversity Committee, raised concerns that students are afraid to attend in-person classes because of fears of immigration enforcement, based on reports from other faculty.

"The faculty members reported that they had students who had stopped coming to in-person classes due to fear of possible raids on campus and their students who were anxious not only for themselves but for their family members and children attending K-12 schools," Habata said.

Vice President of Student Services Jason Cifra mentioned that new policies will be

implemented for the fall semester of 2025. Priority registration will encourage more students to register, and services for financial aid and enrollment will be provided.

"We are also going to be committing to more financial aid workshops, and as well as Super Saturdays, that are targeted to a special population, to make sure the work that we are doing is really sticking to the students that need it," Cifra said.

With the budgeting process being a highly discussed topic, Vice President of Administrative Services Rolf Schleicher mentioned that Pierce is trying to keep enrollment high.

"Enrollment is everything. I mean, that's what we're here for," Schleicher said. "Instruction, making sure support services are where they need to be, the facilities are what they should be."

Schleicher added that finances are limited despite the school's size.

"We are not given a whole lot of money to run a big college at this level, but we do an outstanding job, in my mind," Schleicher said.

Pierce President Ara Aguiar announced that a Budget Summit was set to be held and hosted by the Budget Committee, featuring a panel with administration. Aguiar also mentioned that the budgets are constantly recalculated, and this meeting provides information about the budget and its progress. The meeting was set for Tuesday, April 1.

Brahma Blotter

Reporting by
Delilah Brumer

Crime Log

An updated crime log was not provided for March 26 through April 1.

The crime log is made publicly available at the Pierce College Sheriff's Office.

Pierce College Sheriff's Office
General Information
818-719-6450
—
Emergency
818-710-4311



Screenshot by Alyssa Lupercio / Roundup News

A screenshot of Pierce College President Ara Aguiar as she speaks to the Pierce College Council during a meeting on March 27, 2025.

Student food insecurity (Continued from page 1)

college students that come to the pantry qualify for food aid.

According to the United States Government Accountability Office, about 3.8 million college students experience food insecurity nationwide. The office explains that "studies have found that students who experience food insecurity are more likely to have lower grades and are less likely to graduate compared to their peers." Mason and Decker both emphasized the importance of combating food insecurity to ensure students' success in college.

Pierce anthropology and philosophy tutor Ariella Daniali has used the Brahma Bodega since 2022. She said the Bodega helps her because she can pick up quick foods such as instant

noodles when she doesn't pack a lunch, as opposed to feeling hungry during the day.

"Geremy is like a campus parent because he meets our basic needs," Daniali said. "I think it's really cool to have a place on campus like this where we can get staple items like beans and rice and stuff, and sometimes produce as well."

For more information about the Brahma Bodega, visit www.lapc.edu/student-services/spr/brhma-pantry.

For more information about the West Valley Food Pantry, visit www.westvalleyfoodpantry.org.

Photographer Janet Harper contributed to this story.



LEFT: Boxes of food sit inside the new West Valley Food Pantry facility during its grand opening event in Woodland Hills, Calif., on March 29, 2025. Photo by Delilah Brumer.

→ Professors raise concerns about common course numbering

By Delilah Brumer
Editor-in-Chief

Many students at Pierce College take English 103 to satisfy their critical thinking requirement for transfer to a UC or CSU. At Santa Monica College, 20 miles away, the comparable course to meet that requirement is ENGL 2. This incongruence of course names and numbers is common across California.

With the aim of eliminating potential confusion caused by non-uniform course information, Assemblymember Marc Berman, D-Menlo Park, authored AB 1111, which was signed into law in 2021. Due to this law, the state chancellor's office has required California community colleges to adopt a common course numbering system, including standardized content outlines.

Three years after the law's

passing, its implementation has proved complex.

Some Pierce College faculty, as well as the statewide Academic Senate, have raised concerns that the process of streamlining course information, including names, numbers and content descriptions, could have a negative impact on students trying to transfer and could infringe on professors' academic freedom.

Pierce Academic Senate Secretary Jennifer Moses is one of the professors who has called for a delay of the implementation of AB 1111. She said she is concerned that AB 1111 might result in some Pierce courses losing their transfer articulation to four-year universities, because when the community colleges standardize their course information, they'll have to re-submit their courses for transfer approval to each CSU and UC

individually. She added that there is no guarantee that these four-year universities will accept the new versions of the courses.

"We all want what is best for students," Moses said. "If you're going to make a huge change, avoid unintended harms for students. Why can't we just slow down and make sure we do this rollout responsibly?"

Moses said she wants to pause AB 1111 implementation until there is more faculty involvement in the common course numbering decision-making, and confirmation from UCs and CSUs that the law won't adversely impact transferability.

"This is an unprecedented change in how we do things, and it happened so quickly, without broad input from faculty," Moses said.

Each California community college, including Pierce, has received \$913,043 out of the 2024-2025 budget to spend on the implementation of AB 1111, including updating course catalogs and aligning course information.

Another issue raised by faculty is AB 1111's implications for academic freedom. The state community college chancellor's office has created templates for the first six courses to be included in the new course numbering, and they include course content outlines that are required to be identical.

Psychology Professor Angela Belden spoke during the public comment portion of the Academic Senate Curriculum Committee

meeting on Friday, Nov. 22, to voice her concerns about how this standardization might limit the ability of professors to adapt to the needs of their students by limiting what they teach.

"Academic freedom exists not for faculty, but for the good of our students," Belden said.

Faculty concerns about AB 1111 were at the forefront of Friday's Curriculum Committee meeting, which was a special meeting called to approve, for the fall 2025 semester, the six initial courses impacted by the common course numbering law.

The original Curriculum Committee meeting, when these courses were set to be approved, was held on Nov. 15, but no vote was held due to a loss of quorum, according to Curriculum Committee Chair Phyllis Braxton. There were not enough voting members present during the meeting, after some members walked out before the vote was held.

During the special meeting on Friday, the courses were approved unanimously, with the Dec. 2 state deadline to approve them looming. Several members of the Curriculum Committee said they want to delay the implementation of AB 1111, but that if they didn't approve these courses in the meantime, they might not be allowed to offer them at Pierce next fall, which would hurt students.

The six courses, which include English 101 and Political Science 001, make up approximately 24% of all course sections

offered at Pierce, according to Dean of Social Sciences Susan Rhi-Kleinert.

Pierce President Ara Aguiar said the approval vote was a "step in the right direction" to ensure there are no issues for students who want to enroll in these courses.

"I'm very proud to say that the faculty did a great job by approving the six courses, so we will meet the timing that is required by the chancellor's office," Aguiar said. "This has to go through a process, and we are in compliance. But we still have an opportunity for further discussion, and for the faculty to express their concerns, and have their concerns addressed."

Political Science Professor Anthony Gabrielli, who is a member of the Curriculum Committee, said he hopes the implementation of AB 1111 is delayed so that colleges can ensure they have the proper transfer articulation, as well as adequate technology resources to change course information online.

"I think what the state Academic Senate says, that this should be delayed, is probably the best thing we should do, because I think this is just going to be a nightmare," Gabrielli said.

Barring a potential pause to the implementation of AB 1111, the first six courses will have uniform names, numbers and content outlines across the state beginning with the fall 2025 semester.



Delilah Brumer / Roundup News

Math Department Chair Eddie Tchertchian speaks during an Academic Senate Curriculum Committee special meeting at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on Nov. 22, 2024.

Veterans come together at Pierce

By Alfonso Vargas
Reporter

Veterans make up about 3% of the Pierce College student body, and their challenges of readapting to civilian life are often not understood by those who haven't served.

That's why the Veterans Resource Center hosted a resource fair on the courtyard in front of the Library Learning Crossroads on Wednesday, Nov. 20.

Veterans Club Vice President Jonathan Block helped organize the event to spread awareness for the veterans who don't know about local resources.

"There are around 600 veterans at this school that I'm aware of, and not many people know about any of the 25 plus veteran resources that are local to us," Block said. "I wanted to be sure that veterans who are struggling, going through hard times transitioning out of the military. We're in a safe and comfortable place here at Pierce."

Block adds that the event has resources that will help the veterans with their struggle in life or educational benefits by enrolling in Pierce.

US Marine veteran Oscar Rodriguez believes Pierce helps veterans feel a sense of belonging after transitioning out of the military.

"The support that Pierce College gives to veterans, it's very humbling to feel a sense of belonging," Rodriguez said. "Especially here because like most veterans you're out of the military so you don't have a sense of purpose, but here, at least they help."

Veterans Center Coordinator Curtis Smith wants veterans on campus to know about the resources around them.

"Resources like this are invaluable to our veterans," Smith said. "A lot of our veterans don't even know that there's resources in the area. Our dean Will Marmario and Vice president Jason Cifra really want to grow our veteran population and make sure that we have the

resources to help them and get them what they need."

Some of the resource booths that attended the veterans resource fair was the VA Chatsworth Vet Center and Path which is an open mental health organization that helps vets with PTSD and also the CVJP (Community Veteran Justice Project), according to Block.

Nursing major Ursula Centurion who attended the event believes it's important to engage with the resource fair and veterans.

"I feel like even though you're not a veteran, it would be nice for you to come. Engage with this and to get somewhat of understanding what it is," Centurion said.

Veteran Clubs Media Manager Julissa Gomez wants the resource fair to help veterans realize they are not alone.

"I hope that they get to know that they're not alone when they're out here in the civilian world, and that they can find the support they need within the school," Gomez said.



Hanna Vandergugten / Roundup News

VRC Rep. and Veteran Club VP Jon Block (left) discussing the Navy with Chief Anthony Copeland (right) at the Veterans Resource Fair on Nov. 20, 2024, at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif.



Pierce College student Katie Hirahoka's 5-year-old son Kai tries on her boots from when she was in the U.S. Army at their home in Woodland Hills, Calif., on April 30, 2025.

Parenting, serving and finding themselves

Pierce College veterans grow in the military and beyond

**Article and photos
by Delilah Brumer**

Katie Hirahoka was running on two hours of sleep, but as a new mother with an energetic, wobbling toddler to take care of, this wasn't unusual. As she paced around the United States Army center in Germany, Hirahoka didn't give much thought to her lack of rest or the fast approaching deadline for her final exams in her college courses.

She couldn't spend her bandwidth on those worries, because more than 3,000 miles away, soldiers in Hirahoka's unit were trekking through the arid terrain of Afghanistan. It was the summer of 2021, and the soldiers were relying on Hirahoka, who was their staff sergeant, to help coordinate their mission as they pulled refugees out from a country teetering into chaos.

"It was hard to balance it all, but

my unit was deployed and I had to focus on my job," Hirahoka said. "But then I would come back from my missions and I would reunite with my son, and all those sacrifices felt like they were for something."

Hirahoka, 28, spent eight years in the army, before leaving to focus on higher education and support her son, who is now 5 years old, as a single parent. She is now a mathematics and economics major at Pierce Col-

lege, with hopes to transfer to a four-year university in the fall. Although Hirahoka is no longer in the service, she stays connected with the military community through the Pierce Veterans Club and the Veterans Resource Center.

“School is a huge priority for me, but it’s not easy going to college either,” said Hirahoka, who was the president of the Veterans Club last year. “My friends from the service are a really good support.”

Veterans make up approximately 3% of students at Pierce College, and according to the U.S. Census, there are more than 2.6 million military families in the United States. Many of these families create community and support one another, but they also face challenges such as frequent travel and mental health struggles, according to Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, the director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University. In a 2023 survey of military families by the non-profit Military Family Advisory Network, 59% of respondents said they experience loneliness.

“Military families face all the same challenges that civilian families do, and there are things that are over and above for them, especially because military families are generally quite young,” MacDermid Wadsworth said. “But military families are very adaptable.”

For David Shats, an engineering major at Pierce College and a former U.S. Marine, the decision to enlist took time. He would occasionally eye a military recruiter’s glossy business card that sat on his desk, unmoved among the clutter. At first, he couldn’t understand why he hadn’t thrown it away. Most of the men in his family had served in the Russian military before immigrating to the United States, but the prospect of Shats donning a uniform seemed to be more of a far-away whisper than a plan.

Still, the idea lingered as Shats



Veterans Resource Center Coordinator Curtis Smith discusses sports scores with two students in the Veterans Resource Center at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on April 29, 2025.

stumbled apathetically through his community college classes. So, he picked up the phone. Maybe it was to make his grandfather proud. Maybe he didn’t realize the toll it would take on his mother. More than anything, Shats enlisted to find a path for himself.

“The last thought every single person has before they sign the dotted line is, ‘Fuck it, I’m doing this, I’m climbing this mountain,’” said Shats, 24. “My mom cried when I told her, but they all came around eventually. She now has a sticker, ‘Proud parent of a U.S. Marine,’ and what once devastated her is now her biggest pride

and joy.”

Shats served for four years and ended his time in the Marines as a corporal. He spent most of that time deployed in Japan and South Korea. Sixteen hours ahead and halfway the globe away from his family and friends in Los Angeles, Shats said the distance was a challenge. But being a Marine was worth it for him, because it taught him to be responsible and disciplined, he said.

“All the men in my family basically had the point of view that they think all men should serve, and that it’s part of character building, and part of me has started to agree with that,”



Engineering major David Shats stands near the Veterans Resource Center at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, Calif., on April 28, 2025.

Shats said. “The person I was before and the person I am now, at its core, it’s the same, but it’s a flipped image.”

Hirahoka, Shats and many other veteran students at Pierce use the Veterans Resource Center on campus to access resources for basic needs, get assistance with financial aid and academics and come together. The resources that the center provides can make a significant difference, considering that one in five military families experience food insecurity, according to the Military Family Advisory Network survey.

Curtis Smith, the coordinator of the Veterans Resource Center at Pierce, said he “thoroughly enjoys” supporting veteran students in his role. Smith began his role last year.

“Our veteran students have a lot of life experience and really contrib-

ute to the campus,” Smith said. “The VRC is an avenue for them to get together and hang out with other veterans, regardless of which branch they’re from.”

“The person I was before and the person I am now, at its core, it’s the same, but it’s a flipped image.”

David Shats
Veteran student

Beyond the VRC, much of the support for veterans on campus is provided by other veterans, accord-

ing to Hirahoka, Shats and Smith. The Veterans Club, which Hirahoka previously ran, helps fill that gap. Hirahoka said most of the items in the Veterans Resource Center are brought in by students.

“I noticed that it was just as hard in the rest of the world as it was in the service for veterans, with a lack of support,” Hirahoka said. “The Vet Club is a way to have a higher level of community.”

Throughout the challenges she has faced both in the military and as a civilian, Hirahoka has used her creativity as an outlet for growth and self-love. She painted murals during her deployment, and she continues to create art, primarily acrylic paintings. She mostly paints the people she sees around her, including her son and her friends.

“There is so much beauty in peo-

ple, and there are so many stories to tell through my painting,” Hirahoka said.

Hirahoka hopes to eventually pursue a PhD in math or economics. She said her advice to other Pierce veterans is to reach out to each other, join the Veterans Club and show love to

themselves.

“One thing I think the world lacks is a lot of love,” Hirahoka said. “Something I’m focusing on a lot lately, as I’ve grown as a person, is showing love to myself and the people around me.”



Pierce College economics major Katie Hirahoka stands with her son, Kai, in Woodland Hills, Calif., on April 30, 2025.

Pierce veteran resources

Veterans Resource Center: Located in the Library Learning Crossroads (LLC) building on the first floor. Hours are Tuesday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Contact the VRC via email at pierce-veteran@piercecollege.edu.

Tuition assistance benefits can be accessed after veteran students apply for Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/>.

Veteran Counseling: Veteran academic counseling appointments can be set up at this link: <https://www.lapc.edu/student-services/spr/veterans/counseling>. These counselors serve as veteran certifying officials to process veterans’ paperwork.

For free food assistance, Pierce College offers the Brahma Bodega. More information can be found here: <https://www.lapc.edu/student-services/spr/brhma-pantry>.

For support with mental or physical health, visit the Student Health Center. More information can be found here: <https://www.lapc.edu/student-services/spr/health-center>.



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JOURNALISM EXPERIENCE

CalMatters | Los Angeles, Calif.

August 2024 - Present

Higher Education Reporting Fellow

- Report on statewide higher education issues, legislation, finance and student voices. Submit and track dozens of records requests. Visualize demographic data and enrollment trends using Google Sheets and Datawrapper.
- Localize impacts of federal policy on California college funding, programs, undocumented students, etc.
- Appeared on PBS SoCal and Sacramento's NPR affiliate, sharing my reporting with multiplatform audiences.

New York Times | Los Angeles, Calif.

August 2024 - Present

College Journalism Corps Member; Stringer

- Member of the third cohort of the New York Times Corps, a multi-year career development program bringing together 20 undergraduate journalists nationwide to learn from veteran journalists.
- Stringer during the January 2025 L.A. wildfires, providing on-the-ground reporting, feeds and interviews.
- Stringer during election week 2024 from Parker, Ariz. Sent data, info, quotes and a live feed to editors.

Southern California News Group | Los Angeles, Calif.

February 2023 - August 2024

Summer 2024 California Press Foundation Reporting Intern; L.A. Daily News Freelance Reporter

- Reported on education, politics and local news, pitched stories, took photos, produced live feeds, interviewed sources in Spanish, conducted public records research, attended government meetings. Filed on daily deadlines.
- Wrote explainers, contributed to questionnaires and did research as part of the 2024 Local Election Guide team.
- Covered the L.A. Unified School District beat full-time for three months, reporting on meetings, policies, etc.

EdSource | Los Angeles, Calif.

January 2024 - May 2024

Reporting Intern

- Reported on K-12 and higher education and pitched stories as part of California's largest education newsroom.
- Produced on-the-ground articles and photos covering pro-Palestine and pro-Israel protests at USC and UCLA.

Los Angeles Times High School Insider | Los Angeles, Calif.

September 2020 - March 2023

For Your Mind contributor; Summer 2022 High School Insider Intern; High School Insider Student Board Member

- Reported on youth mental health for LAT website series and wrote 35+ articles for high school news platform.

STUDENT MEDIA EXPERIENCE

Roundup News (Los Angeles Pierce College) | Los Angeles, Calif.

December 2023 - Present

Editor-in-Chief; Magazine Editor; Managing Editor; News Editor; Reporter

- Oversee 28 editors, reporters and photographers producing student-run weekly newspaper. Edit all content.
- Worked to develop Spanish translation section and wrote investigation into professor's alleged misconduct.

HONORS AND AWARDS

- **Participant and Scholarship Recipient**, Bloomberg College Journalism Program in New York City, 2025.
- **First Place In-Depth/Enterprise News Article**, California College Media Association, 2025.
- **Carl Greenberg Investigative Reporting Student Award**, Soc. of Prof. Journalists Los Angeles, 2023.
- **Courage in Student Journalism Award**, Student Press Law Center, 2023.
- **California High School Journalist of the Year**, Journalism Education Association, 2023.

SKILLS

Reporting: Spanish (fluent), AP Style, Freedom of Information Act and California Public Records Act requests.

Technical: Photojournalism, WordPress, Datawrapper, Adobe Creative Cloud (InDesign, Photoshop, Audition), Microsoft Office (Excel, PowerPoint, Word), Social Media, Google Suite (Sheets, Slides, Docs), Slack, SEO.

EDUCATION

University of California, Los Angeles

Expected June 2027

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. Entering Fall 2025 as a junior transfer student.

Los Angeles Pierce College

Expected June 2025

Associate of Arts in Political Science and Journalism. 3.96 GPA. Dean's List.