For Marine vet, Yellow Ribbon Program makes Tulane dream possible

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Marine veteran Immanuel Ramon Colón Lugo (MANA ’27) is continuing his education at Freeman with support from the Yellow Ribbon Program, a Post-9/11 GI Bill provision that bridges the gap between tuition benefits and the cost of attending private universities.

There was no shortage of obstacles for Immanuel Ramon Colón Lugo (MANA ’27) on his journey to Freeman, but every step of the way, the U.S. Marine Corps veteran’s focus has remained the same: keep moving forward and excel wherever the path leads.

“One of my mottos is, be the best I can be at anything I try or do,” Colón says.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Colón overcame early hardship — including surviving a gunshot wound as a teenager — before moving to Miami to finish high school. Driven by a desire to support his family and pursue higher education, he enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2006.

“Even though my dad didn't want me to sign up and my mom didn't want me to join either, I told them, ‘It's my choice, I want to go.’ And I did it,” Colon says. “Every time I have stepped back after I made a choice, that choice ended up being the right one.”

Over a nine-year military career, he rose through the ranks from tactical data network specialist to leading cybersecurity operations for elite units, including the 2nd Marine Special Operations Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He was later deployed to Iwakuni, Japan, where he fell in love with the culture and language.

“My dad had a master's in psychology and was a really smart person,” Colón says. “He always taught me that learning is continuous and we should always continue to learn and to stay in love with the progress. So that’s what I did.”

Even when struck by personal loss, including the unexpected death of his father while stationed overseas, he remained committed to the value of continuing education.

After completing his military service in 2015, Colón transitioned to civilian defense contracting in San Diego before relocating to New Orleans in 2018. While working full time, he enrolled at the University of New Orleans, navigating remote learning during the pandemic and persevering through the sudden death of his brother. He eventually earned a Bachelor of Science in hotel, restaurant and tourism administration, a field that had long interested him.

Determined to keep learning and pursue leadership roles, Colón enrolled in the Freeman School’s Master of Business Analytics and AI program with the help of the Yellow Ribbon Program, a provision of the Post-9/11 GI Bill that helps eligible veterans cover tuition and fees beyond the bill’s annual cap. At Freeman, eligible students can receive up to $25,000 from the school, which the Department of Veterans Affairs matches.

“Everything has a value, and Tulane's big value also comes at an expense, and the VA doesn't cover that 100%,” Colón says. “I knew I could figure out some way to get

in and get what I want, to prove myself worthy. I took a chance on signing up for the Yellow Ribbon program and I was super happy to be approved. It’s a dream come true to go to a big-name school and study something you want.”

Now attending classes full-time and in person, Colón sees a natural parallel between military standard operating procedures and modern data science.

“Business analytics and AI is showing trends, figuring out what's happening and how you can fix it and better it,” he says. “You do the same thing in the military, except you're doing the manual work. With the MANA program, it's like learning how to use the tools that help you and do it for you.”

Looking ahead, Colón hopes to combine his experience in tactical leadership, hospitality and AI through business consulting and future entrepreneurial ventures. At Freeman, he sees not only a path to sharpen those ambitions, but also a community that can help him carry them forward.

“I researched how powerful the alumni network is at Tulane and what it means to have that behind your back,” Colón says. “I realized I needed to be surrounded by like-minded, business-minded people who push for excellence, and that’s what Tulane offers.”