

How to Create High Impact Community Outreach Through a Veteran Entrepreneurship Training Program

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The purpose of this article is to share the lessons learned from creating an entrepreneurial training program for area veterans. The article will provide a blueprint that will allow readers to create a similar program at their campuses. Discussion will include the benefits for an entrepreneurship program by creating this type of outreach activity, why this type of program can have a high community impact for the university, how it has helped veteran participants, what are the key issues, and how to avoid pitfalls in the process.

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2013, our University was approached by a community bank to consider providing an entrepreneurial training program to area veterans. The program would be a partnership between the University's Entrepreneurship Center (EC) and the bank, with the program being run at the University with faculty involvement and supported financially by the bank. This partnership came about from a personal relationship. The bank president was an alumnus of the University and had a longstanding connection with the EC's director. We believed that this relationship was key, as it would have been unlikely that the University would have had this opportunity without some kind of relationship already in place.

PROGRAM JUSTIFICATION

The first steps to create this program were to determine if there was a need for entrepreneurial training among area veterans, what the parameters of the program would be, who should be recruited, and what would be the cost to develop and deliver the program. First, to determine the need for this program, we involved the University's Office of Veterans Affairs, and specifically, its military liaison. Our area had military bases nearby and the individual reached out to soldiers stationed at these bases and veterans

in the surrounding area to see if there would be interest in a program like this and if so, would the veterans be willing to come campus for instruction? The response came back as overwhelming “yes” to both queries.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The next step was to determine how the program should be structured. There are different possibilities ranging from what stage of the entrepreneurial process does the veteran have to be in to participate, to the mode of delivery of the program (online, hybrid, or in-person), and if the course should be for-credit or not-for-credit.

Research has shown that participants in these types of programs can have a variety of motives ranging from determining if they should be an entrepreneur, to coming up with a possible venture concept, to deciding if a chosen concept has any potential (Cook, Belliveau, & vonSeggern, 1991). In considering these three stages of development, we decided to work with veterans that possessed a business concept and needed help in developing their plan and finding resources. The sponsor was in alignment with this vision as they wanted to see concrete improvement in the lives of veterans and the local economy. Certainly, entrepreneur self-reflection/inspection and opportunity development are worthy goals, but the program could not hope do all three, and do all of them well.

We selected an in-person mode of delivery over hybrid and online due to the realization that 1) the veterans’ levels of education and computer skills varied widely, 2) we believed that hands-on teaching and guidance provided the best chance for success of the veterans, 3) we wanted to establish a personal connection between the veterans and the instructors, and 4) the veterans that we were targeting were mostly within a reasonable driving distance of the University.

The decision to provide the program as a not-for-credit course meant that 1) faculty would be paid as project pay, which provided more flexibility than getting paid for teaching an extra for-credit class, 2) the veterans would not be assigned a letter grade, which meant that faculty could concentrate on providing feedback without worrying about formal grades or tests, and the veterans could concentrate on learning without fear of failure, and 3) the program was free of most university entanglements, which meant that the veterans did not need to be formally enrolled into the university to take advantage of the program.

Next, we needed to narrow down the definition of who we were helping, i.e., what constitutes an eligible veteran. Should this program be offered to all veterans, veteran’s families, active duty personnel, etc? Should it be limited to certain types of veterans (served within a certain time frame, disabled veterans, veterans with certain education levels, etc.)? Finally, what geographic region would the program support? These upfront decisions are important because they influence the overall design of the curriculum.

Some programs focus on disabled veterans only (i.e., <http://ebv.vets.syr.edu/>) or on post 9/11 veterans, etc. We decided on being more inclusive and as long as the participant was a veteran, or on active duty, they were eligible. As this was an on-campus program that was held at night, we recognized that it would have a limited geographical reach so we kept our participation restrictions to a minimum. In order to determine the eligibility of applicants, we implemented a two stage registration process: the on-line application was reviewed by the EC Director to ensure that the veteran had a business concept for a new venture or to guide the expansion of an existing venture; and then it went to the aforementioned University’s military liaison to ensure that the applicant was an eligible veteran. Once the veteran was approved by both parties, s/he was part of the program.

In order to determine a reasonable class size, and whether the class should be taught online, in-person, or using a hybrid format, we further investigated the potential veteran students. Our initial needs research told us that many students were located within a reasonable driving distance from our campus. In addition, we discovered that their education level, age, and level of comfort with technology would vary. Furthermore, some potential veteran students would not have participated in formal education programs for years while others were fairly recent participants. This information led us to conclude that a relatively small cohort (determined to be 15) could be taught best in a face-to-face format. This size and format

would facilitate development of a relationship between students and instructors, allow for individual attention for each student, and permit students to progress somewhat at their own speed. As it turns out, it also permitted comradeship to develop among the students.

During the decision process outlined above, the sponsoring bank was an active participant in shaping the broad parameters of the program. One of the other initial decisions was to charge a nominal, refundable fee to participants in the program. This fee was utilized to ensure seriousness by participants and that they would have some “skin in the game.” The fee would be refunded in full if the participant attended all of the classroom sessions. The rationale was that we did not want participants to take up a space in the program unless they were serious about finishing it, given that the number of spaces was limited to 15 to allow for significant individual feedback. Eventually, we elected to waive the fee for two primary reasons. One, several veterans had trouble coming up with the fee and we worried that some veterans might not be able to participate. Two, the university’s financial system was not equipped to take deposits that would be returned following completion. In retrospect, if a fee was to be collected, it would be best to have it held by a third party to avoid the university’s financial system, and a waiver could be put in place for veterans who have trouble coming up with finances.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

Once these parameters were in place, the recruitment of veteran participants began and the specifics of the curriculum design were developed. However, before any recruitment could occur, the dates for the program had to be established. The first year, essentially our pilot year, occurred in the summer 2014. There were three basic reasons for a summer start. First, since it was a face-to-face program, we needed classroom space and the availability of space in the summer at the University was much greater. Second, we needed the faculty and staff who would be involved in our curriculum delivery to also be available, something that was tough to accomplish during the semester. It should be noted that the faculty teaching in the program were the University’s full-time faculty and not adjuncts. We wanted full-time faculty as they were very knowledgeable in their fields, as this would send a message to the vets that the University valued this program. In addition, fulltime faculty were more likely to be able to troubleshoot any issues/problems that arose in the delivery of the program as well as between this program and the University should they arise.

In designing the curriculum, our guiding principle was to provide ample personalized attention for the veterans, and provide them feedback on their business plans while the class was in session. Immediate and ongoing feedback is important from a pedagogical perspective as it allows students to better comprehend the material (Cone & Weaver, 2001; Erickson, 1984). Therefore, the course was designed with homework assignments due every week, and these assignments were the individual sections of the veteran’s business plan that was covered in the previous class. These assignments were submitted electronically two days before the subsequent class, allowing the instructor time to review and comment on them before the next class. We could have created a program where the veterans would have met all day, every day for a fewer number of days, and still covered the same volume of material. However, we worried that this method would have overwhelmed the veterans with information and it would seem like at the end of the program, we are saying “good luck and now go write your plan.” Our structure was designed to allow for the plan to be built step-by-step, with mentoring and feedback at each step, with plenty of opportunities to ask questions along the way.

CONSIDERATION OF BACKGROUND OF THE VETERANS

The other aspect that went into the design of the curriculum was in consideration of the varied educational backgrounds of the participants. Educational backgrounds ranged from high school equivalency to masters’ degrees and for those with college degrees, from business to liberal arts. In addition, some veterans had not been involved with formal education for a quite a while and therefore, their skills had become rusty. Finally, a good deal of work and education in the military is team-based

whereas this entrepreneurship training would be primarily individual level work to prepare the veteran to made decisions on their own and to be able to start and run a business. Hence, we needed to develop a curriculum that someone with a high school education could handle (as that was the lowest education level allowed into the program). This influenced our choice of textbooks and how the material was presented. From our teaching of business plan creation to regular university students, we knew that participants needed to learn a solid research process in order to be able to find credible data and create a viable plan, and that a good understanding of financial statements would be needed for participants to be able to decide whether or not a concept was viable. Accordingly, we started off the program, in week one, with two workshops. The first was a business research session at the library, taught by our business librarian. This workshop provided the vets with basic knowledge of, access to, and practice searching various databases for industry, market and competitive information related to their business concept. These tools should permit the veterans to conduct market research, develop a marketing plan, and provide data regarding their operations. The second workshop, taught by an accounting professor, explained accounting terms and walked the veterans through the basics of proforma financial statements. We wanted the vets to have a general understanding of financial terminology and documents, i.e, what an income statement shows versus a cash flow statement, etc., when it came time for them to create their own financial statements. For additional support for the veterans, a subject matter expert panel was created. This panel consisted of volunteer business experts in subjects, like accounting, legal, marketing, social media, etc. Any veteran could ask a specific question of these experts as they develop their business concepts.

ADULT AND MILITARY LEARNERS

In preparing to teach veterans, much time was given to considering the delivery of the course material to make it as clear and meaningful as possible. The material covered had been delivered in undergraduate classes and there was a concern that the needs of this new audience might be different, and needed to be fully understood.

Research on best practices found that andragogy, or the teaching of adult learners, was introduced by Malcolm Knowles (1980) and he set out a set of characteristics of the adult learner:

- They prefer to be self-directed.
- Their life experience should be drawn on in the learning experience.
- They demonstrate a readiness to learn.
- They approach learning as a way to solve problems or achieve a skill rather than as a means to deep understanding.
- They are internally motivated to learn.

The characteristics of adult learners are shared by military learners, according to most studies. Most military learners were found to be 24 years and older, had many work and family responsibilities, and were most often enrolled part-time. However, these veteran students were able to study for the same number of hours as traditional undergrads, despite their many responsibilities. The military culture experienced by veterans also gives them “greater self-discipline, leadership abilities, time-management skills, maturity and a sense of purposeful focus” (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 15).

Some military learners can also distinguished from the larger adult learner population by combat exposure. Not all veterans are deployed, but those that are may return with a number of injuries. “The studies also indicated that the nature of the injury, severity of symptoms or side effects from treatment and medication may present numerous functional impairments or physical, emotional and cognitive challenges, which in turn may also impact the learner’s interactions, experiences and academic performance both online and in face-to-face classrooms” (Ford & Vignare, 2015, p. 15).

Veterans themselves ascribe problems with course work to the structure and timing of academic expectations which are so different from military culture. They list other issues that can lead to problems such as lack of time, trouble with concentration, and half-remembered study skills or basic concepts. Not

dismayed by these problems, most find their military training gave them self-discipline, and perseverance. Support from fellow veterans who were facing the same challenges were key to their ability to continue, and achieve success (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

Keeping in mind the attributes and characteristics described above, our experience was that each cohort gave us a much broader range of educational attainment than most classes that include adult learners. When teaching graduate and undergraduate students, the norm is that everyone has completed pre-requisites, either classes or degrees, so there is more homogeneity in background. With these veterans, the first cohort's educational profiles ranged from the General Education Development (GED) certificate to a Master's in Business Administration. This meant that material had to be much clearer, and each individual veteran needed substantial individual support.

Further, while a variety of ages are common in most for-credit evening classes, it is rare to find anyone over forty. This was not true of our veteran cohorts which had a much broader range of ages. The first cohort had a participant aged 24 and one 59 years old, while most were in their forties. The second cohort had an age range from 27 to 68, with most in their thirties, and the third had one aged 23 and one 59, with most in their fifties. The common denominator was the shared military culture which engendered a respect for knowledge and the professors who shared it, and a belief that much could be achieved with hard work. Also, continuing education is common in military life, and so older students were more likely to have been in classes more recently than would be commonly assumed.

INDIVIDUALS VERSUS TEAMS

The main deliverable for undergraduate and graduate students in this type of curriculum is a business plan that is researched, developed, and written by students in teams. And, since these veteran students are traditionally team-focused, it would have been easy for them to be able to work in such an environment. However, our program was designed to have veterans create a business plan individually, and while they supported each other, each one worked alone. We worked under the belief that each veteran needed to take ownership of his or her business concept, and use this process to determine if 1) this business concept is viable, 2) the veteran is capable of pulling this concept together, and 3) this is the life direction that the veteran wishes to go. This was a challenge, but we believed it could be addressed by a greater emphasis on mentorship.

PILOT YEAR

We were successful in recruiting 14 veterans for the pilot class in the summer of 2014. We had a policy that in order to graduate, the veteran must attend seven of the eight class sessions. All 14 veterans completed the classroom portion of the program. At that time, the veterans were paired up with volunteer business mentors who would work with them for the next year; answering questions and helping the veterans pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions. The mentor would work with their veteran to help them finish their business plan, and provide one-on-one support as the veteran worked through their business concept. In addition, the veterans had access to the library's databases for this year as well, allowing them to have the same level of resources that regular students would have.

Approximately one week after the classroom portion of the program was completed, a graduation ceremony for the veterans and their families was held on campus and it generated substantial PR for the University and the program as well. As part of their ceremony, the University's Office of Veteran Affairs handed out military coins, which had great significance for the veterans.

Continuing, veterans were then surveyed about the program content, the program structure, and the instructors. The survey consisted of a ranking of the attributes in the program as well as a series of open-ended questions. The two main suggestions from the veterans about the program structure and content were for increased time in the program, and for the workshops (library and accounting) to be placed closer to when the topic would be covered in the classroom.

The staff also conducted a post mortem with regard to how the program went. One of the major issues that emerged was that several of the veteran's concepts were not well defined going into the first night's class. For example, a veteran was interested in starting a restaurant and, therefore, knew what industry to research. However, is the industry category going to be fast food, fine dining, or fast casual? Is there going to be a focus on a specific type of cuisine? Would the restaurant be located downtown or out in the countryside? When a business concept is too fuzzy, you can't conduct accurate market research or develop a credible marketing plan because you don't know the parameters of what you are researching. This problem occurred during our first cohort as some of the veterans were still trying to pin down specific aspects of their business in week three or later.

IMPROVEMENTS IN THE PROGRAM

As noted, tightening up the veterans' business concept was one area that clearly needed help. To try to ensure that the vets had a solid start to the program, we split the classroom part of the program into two phases. We expanded the number of classes and made the first class phase one. Phase one was two weeks long and devoted to helping the veteran more fully develop their business concept by having them answer the following questions. A veteran could not move into phase two of the classroom part until they were able to answer the following successfully:

1. What is the product/service (name and description)?
2. Why does the typical customer want or value these products/services? What problem are you solving or need you are filling?
3. Who is being helped: who is the primary customer or market? Describe them: type of business, or if individual (age/gender/education/income/marital status/etc.)
4. Where will you be located and why?
5. What method will be used to get the product/service to the market? (E.g. E-commerce, distribution via drug/department stores, infomercial, direct mail, etc.)
6. Is there anything unique about business? (service, location, expertise, etc.)
7. Why should you run this business? What experience, knowledge, or training do you have, or plan to acquire, that qualifies you to operate this type of business?

The objective was to help the veterans sharpen their concept prior to getting into the main research phase of the program. All vets and their mentors came to this phase for one session, which accomplished two things: it introduced the vets and their mentors to each other a bit earlier than in the pilot year, and gave an opportunity for both parties to discuss the veteran's concept. In part one of this initial session, the instructors explained the working parts of a business concept and the importance of clearly defining each part. In the second part of this initial session, the instructors were roaming facilitators, keeping check on how each veteran was coming along with working on their concept questions. At the end of the session, the veterans were given a homework assignment – they were to formally revise and submit the answers to the business concept questions to the instructors within five days. These concepts were then either approved or not approved. If they were approved, the veterans were accepted into phase two of the program. If their business concept was lacking, or not clear, they were provided feedback and an opportunity to resubmit it to the instructors. Only veterans with an approved concept were allowed to go on to phase two. Phase two began with the business plan development instruction, with all veterans having a fairly solid business concept to research.

OUTCOMES

What outcomes can be expected when undertaking this type of program? It is very important to understand that the potential outcomes are varied, and may not be what one would first envision. While many entrepreneurship educational programs look for increases in entrepreneurial self-efficacy, or new business creation, it may be more realistic to look at this as an introduction to entrepreneurship where many students are exploring the topic and attempting to decide if this type of life is for them. Therefore,

some students will take the class and decide that business ownership is not for them. This is a perfectly valid response and means that the student will not invest a lot of time and effort in a future endeavor that has little chance for personal success. Some students find they identify with business ownership, but that the chosen concept may not be the proper vehicle. This is another win, as the student has learned a process for developing and evaluating a potential business concept that they can apply to future ideas. These students also know better what type of business concept they want. Finally, some decide this is not only what they wish to do with the next stage of their career, but the business concept they investigated is viable and desirable. While the plan may still need work, and the student may still need lots of guidance, the student has a direction, a mentor, and other support mechanisms to move forward.

In addition to the above desirable outcomes, several others may, and did occur. Several veterans dropped out of the program at the end of phase one because they could not develop a business concept that would permit entry to phase two. This outcome was disheartening to the veterans. Several students dropped out or missed classes due to either active duty deployments or on-base assignments while others missed classes due to commitments to job or family. And while the overwhelming majority of the students gave it their best shot, a few did not put in sufficient effort to gain full advantage of the training and mentoring opportunity. These less than desirable outcomes should be expected as the veterans enrolled in the program are a cross-section of society and hence, are not totally unlike traditional students.

Another outcome that was not anticipated relates to timing. As noted before, we focused on accepting veterans into this program who had a business concept, and were interested in developing that concept into a business plan and potentially launching their venture. We thought that these veterans would reach the go or no go decision within the one year duration of the program (classroom and mentoring phases). What was unanticipated was that some of the veterans were still in active duty, and were thinking about starting their venture 2-3 years down the road when they exited the service. Hence, the venture may still be pursued but just at a later time than we envisioned. This made measurement of the program's overall economic impact more difficult, as these temporal delays meant that the support mechanisms (mentoring, database access, etc.) that last for one year after the classroom portion was done would end before a veteran was ready to finish their plan and launch their venture.

As an example of the way the program is designed to work, the following excerpt is from a letter of a successful veteran's entrepreneurial journey, in terms of finishing the program and business plan, and then using the plan to raise money for his venture:

Well, I am officially retired. I left my job at the Department of Veteran Affairs Regional Office on June 12th. I did this to follow my dream of opening The Salad Car, LLC. I left 100% on faith. I could have stayed and continued to "make easy money". But, a piece of me was dying inside, and once you get this entrepreneurial bug, it's hard to shake it. I can honestly say, if I did NOT do this business, I could not live with myself. This is my dream, and now my fulltime job. I'm excited about the future...

As for here, I had a meeting at the bank and we came up with a checklist of what The Salad Car will need to apply for the loan. I have finalized my food truck design and the builder is waiting to get started. Currently negotiating with a landlord and drafting a Letter of Intent for me to rent a location in Delanco that will be my food truck commissary. I have finalized my menu, price points, and packaging. Still working on building my recipe stacks and sizing the recipes for my employees for training. Awaiting final quotes on all of the insurance required. Just received my finalized equipment list quote from Restaurant Equippers, I have established accounts at all of my required wholesalers and produce vendors. In addition, I have established secondary and tertiary levels for both.

With all that being said, I am looking at a late February opening with a no later than date of 4 March 2016. My goal is to have the loan approved by November and to take off from there. Scheduled for a January delivery of the food truck. This will give me time to train my

staff for a few weeks while at the same time learning my operation prior to opening” (personal communication, September 15, 2015).

As a result of our experiences over three years, we have created a list of topics that a University should consider when creating this type of program.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN CREATING A VETERAN’S PROGRAM

1) Institutional backing and funding: Funding can be internal or external. Need to engage the University’s veterans’ affairs office for help in determining the need, promotion of program, and screening. Do you want this program to be free or require some co-pay from participants?

2) Program structure: What is your mode of delivery of the program (on-line, hybrid, or in-person)? What infrastructure does your choice require?

3) Entrepreneurial process: What stage of the entrepreneurial process should the veteran have to be in to participate? Are you trying to help a veteran decide whether or not they want to be an entrepreneur, generate a business concept, evaluate a predetermined idea, or grow an existing venture? Think of the implications of curriculum design given what you want to do.

4) Veteran qualifications: What veterans do you want to serve (veterans only, family of veterans, restrictions to service within a certain time period, etc.)? What should the criteria be to be admitted into the program?

5) Interactions: Regardless of the mode of delivery, interactions with the veterans is still a key to a successful program. Give assignments so you can provide feedback and assess how well they understand the material.

6) Extra support: Decide on what support can be offered and for how long. Using mentors (often volunteer business executives) can provide a personal relationship and gives one-on-one attention to the veterans.

7) Ongoing overhead expenses: Do you have the resources in place to process registrations, order supplies, track participants, provide for instructional materials and refreshments, etc.? This can also include instructional technology support.

8) Completion requirements: What constitutes a graduate? What standard for completing assignments/attending classes should be set for a veteran to successfully complete the program? How will completion be recognized?

9) Variation in adult learners: You may have a class with mixed educational and technology backgrounds and a wide range of ages. Understanding the differences in learning styles is important.

10) Supplemental skills: Do you need to include specialized sessions on topics (accounting, business research skills, etc.) to help veterans be prepared for the main curriculum?

11) Follow-up: Conduct surveys of the veterans right after program completion for feedback, and develop a tracking mechanism to follow any entrepreneurial successes. The faculty and mentors should be included in the feedback loop.

12) Publicity: This is a huge opportunity for the University and your program to be painted in a positive light. Involve the public relations/communications office. Accreditation bodies generally consider this to be high community impact.

CONCLUSION

This article provides a blueprint for a University to create an entrepreneurial training program for area veterans on their campuses. The blueprint shows the benefits for the University in creating this type of outreach activity, why this type of program can have a high community impact, how to identify key issues in creating a program, and how to avoid pitfalls in the process. There is a need to help veterans with their entrepreneurial ambitions because since 9/11, roughly 2.4 million active and reserve members of the U.S. military have returned to civilian life, with another million to transition in the next few years (Flournoy, 2014). Universities are in a prime position to assist in this activity and help create a stronger economy.

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