

Military veterans marching towards entrepreneurship: An exploratory mixed methods study

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ABSTRACT

“This study evaluates the effects of a community-based entrepreneurship training program on the entrepreneurial passion (EP) and networking frequency of military veterans. Pretest and post-test surveys were completed by military veterans who received scholarships to attend a 10-week structured course. These veterans also participated in business mentoring sessions with local business entrepreneurs for an additional nine months. The results demonstrate that the program significantly improved the veterans’ entrepreneurial passion scores, as well as raised the level of networking behavior. These findings provide additional validation for the EP survey instrument and contribute to the understanding of integrating military veterans into a civilian-based entrepreneurship ecosystem that provides access to business resources and in turn increases entrepreneurial passion.”

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Veterans are at least 45% more likely than those with no active-duty military experience to be self-employed. Given that there is an increase in the number of service members transitioning back to civilian life after post-9/11 service, and many are interested in entrepreneurship, this study investigates whether a community entrepreneurial education program fuels entrepreneurial passion and increases consultations for veterans.
- Using cohorts of 20-35 in a Midwestern community, the authors found that structured entrepreneurship education positively impacts a military veteran’s entrepreneurial passion level, specifically related to inventing, founding, and developing passion.
- In addition to expanding their network, structured entrepreneurship education courses that included both veterans and civilians exposed the veterans to more resources, encouraged frequent communication with business partners, family, and friends, and improved veterans’ comfort level with working with civilians outside of the military context.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Veterans and transitioning service members should consider participating in structured entrepreneurship training courses with business mentoring to capitalize on the entrepreneurship skills they developed during their military service. Given that participation in structured entrepreneurship training courses is associated with a broadening of more formal networks, veterans and service members participating in the course should take full advantage of the benefits of entrepreneurship training courses by having frequent consultation meetings with business associates and other entrepreneurs. Veterans should also consult with their informal networks, such as their family and friends, to discuss aspects of establishing their venture. Established entrepreneurs should consider becoming involved in entrepreneurial training opportunities for nascent entrepreneurs. Given that many successful businesses that serve civilians were started by veterans, including Walmart and FedEx, family members and friends of veterans should seriously consider their veteran's business goals and feel comfortable offering advice as a civilian.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might incorporate more entrepreneurship trainings in TAP and other transition programs. The VA might continue building on the entrepreneurial skills veterans develop during their military service by offering structured entrepreneurship training courses with business mentoring. The VA might expand their entrepreneurial trainings to include a mentorship program with veterans whom have successfully established their own business. Given the benefits to both veterans and civilians who participated in a structured entrepreneurship training course, the VA and policymakers might partner to create more opportunities for both veterans and civilians to develop their entrepreneurial passion(s).

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the insightful findings, this study has limited generalizability since veterans who chose to take part in the entrepreneurship program could be different from veterans who do not partake in the program, including different motivations for becoming an entrepreneur. The study's limited small sample size and the self-report measures poses a challenge to generalize findings to a broader veteran population. Future researchers should measure the effectiveness of structured entrepreneurship training courses through more objective measures, such as the percent of veterans self-employed after course. In this study, the scale used to measure entrepreneurial passion (EP) may not take into account the uniqueness of the veteran population; additional studies are needed to refine the EP scale. Researchers should conduct follow-up studies with veterans two and four years after the completion of the course to determine the effects of the program and if the training translates into sustainable businesses. Additional studies are needed to examine how entrepreneurship training programs can be improved, taking into account the dynamic lives and experiences of veterans. Subsequent research on entrepreneurship training programs for veterans should further study the role of family and friends in the path to self-employment for veterans.

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