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Reexamining Participant Satisfaction with The Mission Continues Fellowship Program for Post-9/11 Veterans

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Introduction

The Mission Continues is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that awards paid six-month community service fellowships to post-9/11 veterans committed to continuing in a service role after separating from the military. Through this Fellowship Program, each veteran participant selects a nonprofit organization where they serve 20 hours per week for 26 weeks to address key educational, environmental, or social issues. Since the launch of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program in 2007, we have performed ongoing program evaluation to assess program outcomes and define success.

Fellowship Program classes begin quarterly with a national three-day orientation during which veterans learn to apply military service skills to community building through service. Together, participants begin to identify a clear set of goals for their service and personal development. The orientation event culminates with a community service project that highlights the strategic and interpersonal skills fellows need to design and implement their own service projects.

During their fellowships, participants complete monthly curriculum assignments, including targeted goal setting, meaningful reflection, and interactive exercises designed to enhance leadership and service outcomes, strengthen personal and professional goals, and help establish a long-term, sustainable plan for

continued progress. A Fellowship Program Associate is assigned to each fellow to supervise goal attainment progress and provide peer support.

In 2011 and 2012, strategic revision of the core components of the Fellowship Program included (1) awarding fellowships on a quarterly—rather than monthly—basis with a prefellowship orientation for all participants, (2) expanding admission criteria to no longer require that the veteran have a documented disability, and (3) refining the curriculum. Because of these changes, we needed to perform program evaluation with a new cohort.

Research Question and Methods

This study focuses on a group of post-9/11 veterans who completed the Fellowship Program in 2011 or 2012 (i.e., the second cohort) and assesses participants' characteristics, satisfaction with the program, and perceived impacts of the program on their aspirations and achievements. Using self-administered and standardized measures, we examine how participation in the Fellowship Program (1) affects veterans' ratings of satisfaction with the program and (2) impacts their career goals.

This second cohort consists of 414 fellows who started the program between January 2011 and October 2012. As with the first cohort, we used a self-administered, standardized postsurvey to measure outcomes but



added a presurvey to the study design. The response rate for completing the presurvey within one month of starting the program was 99% (N = 414) of the 420 total fellows.

To control for sample bias, we offered no incentive to participate in the web-based surveys. For this study, we excluded those who did not complete their fellowships (n = 11), participants whose fellowships continued past the survey cutoff date of December 31, 2012 (n = 171), and nonresponses to the postsurvey (n = 46). Therefore, 46% (N = 192) of the second cohort are included.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

To be eligible for the program, veterans must have served a minimum of 24 months in the United States military after September 11, 2001, unless a serious injury prevented continued service. They also must have been honorably discharged and have a clean criminal record. Most fellows are younger than age 45 (92%), Caucasian (51%), and male (67%). Almost one third have never been married (30%), and three quarters (75%) of the fellows who started the program have a VA disability rating. Eleven percent are awaiting a disability rating decision. Nearly half (48%) have a VA disability rating of 30% service connected or higher.

Over half served on active duty in the U.S. Army (54%), while others served in the U.S. Navy (19%), the U.S. Marine Corps (18%), the U.S. Air Force (9%), and the U.S. Coast Guard (1%). Nearly half (47%)

served for one to four years, 26% served for five to eight years, and 26% served for nine years or more. A majority (93%) were enlisted, with the remainder (7%) serving as officers. Thirty-three percent also reported serving in the National Guard or Reserves, most having served less than 9 years (85%) or less than 5 years (51%).

Thirty-five percent of participants reported that before the program they were employed (19% full time), 24% were disabled or retired, and 61% were attending school (50% of all fellows attend school full time). After completing the fellowship, 40% were employed (20% full time), 25% were disabled or retired, and 62% were attending school (49% full time).

Satisfaction Ratings

As noted in Figure 1, fellows reported high levels of satisfaction with the overall program experience. The majority were satisfied with providing services to the community, gaining understanding and building relationships, and learning new skills. Conversely, participants reported lower levels of satisfaction with training, workshops, or other educational programs within their host organizations.

Upon completion of the Fellowship Program, more than one third (35%) of fellows reported that participating in the program was stressful, and 13% reported having a lack of extra time to do other things because of the time commitment. However, nearly all reported that the fellowship was a worthwhile experience (93%).

Figure 1. Satisfaction Ratings after Completing the Fellowship Program (N = 187)



Perceived Impact of Fellowship on Career Goals

After completing the program, fellows reported that the fellowship:

- improved their chances of finding a job (92%),
- improved their performance on the job (90%),
- improved their chances of getting a promotion (86%), and
- helped them make a career change (82%).

Over half (57%) were using their VA educational benefits—Montgomery GI Bill-Active Duty (3%), Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (16%), Veterans Educational Assistance Program (0.5%), Post-9/11 GI Bill (39%), Reserve Educational Assistance Program (0.5%), and other programs (4.3%)—and attending school full (49%) or part time (12%) after completing the program.

Previous research¹⁻³ indicates that all participants in the first cohort of the Fellowship Program would recommend it to a family member or friend and probably or definitely stay involved in civic service activities in the future. Of the second cohort, 97% would recommend the program to others, and nearly all (99%) reported that they will probably or definitely stay involved in volunteer activities and public service in the future.

Fellows' Perceptions of Achievements

Fellows reported personal, professional, and educational achievements.

“On a personal level The Mission Continues has helped me to value exactly how to give myself credit for what I can and do achieve. They have also helped me gain professional experience through my fellowship by learning how to conduct outreach for an organization and community. My educational goals excelled with The Mission Continues fellowship I held. I professionally developed in communications and listening techniques that will not only benefit myself but those around me.”

“I have made great contacts and have built strong relationships with other non-profit leaders who have encouraged me to continue my role in service work.”

“Through the fellowship I was able to implement drastic changes to how the host organization does day to day business. I have no doubt in my mind that without these changes this organization would have had a failure of epic proportions this summer. Setting the host organization up for success was my greatest achievement through this fellowship.”

Others reported that the program reinforced their current goals or encouraged them to pursue a new direction in life and career.

“I think it has made me a more confident individual. I have learned ways to motivate myself. I feel that my fellowship is going to be an important part of my job search. As for educational, it has helped me decide that I want to continue to work with veterans, especially those with PTSD and TBI.”

“I’ve been able to transition into a new career and a new phase in my life. I was ready for a change, but the Fellowship helped me get there by creating a new professional network and giving me experience and insight into new career paths.”

However, a small percentage of fellows felt that their achievements were less profound.

“I was already doing this in my community.”

“During the Fellowship, I met great people, but it did not contribute to me finding a job or becoming personally fulfilled.”

Summary and Implications

This study focuses on participants’ satisfaction with and impressions of the Fellowship Program’s effects on their educational, career, and vocational pursuits and accomplishments. Findings reveal that while some fellows felt stress from participation and a few reported limited benefits, approval ratings remain positive, steady, and encouraging.

Since our initial study of the first cohort in 2010,¹⁻³ The Mission Continues made several changes to the Fellowship Program, including adding a fellowship orientation, requiring a fellowship capstone service project, and standardizing core components of the curriculum. These changes involve more reflection, goal-setting activities, and individual responsibility, and it is possible that these additional rigors and challenges resulted in higher stress levels among the current sample than in the first cohort.

Nearly 25% more fellows were using VA educational benefits in the second cohort (57%) than in the first sample (27%). In fact, 50% of the second cohort—contrasted with less than 20% of the first cohort—were attending school full time. This dramatic increase in the number of veterans who also are students may coincide with the increased use of VA educational benefits nationwide.

Limitations

The nonexperimental study design restricts conclusions that can be made regarding program impacts and outcomes. Therefore, study results cannot be attributed solely and definitely to the program because a number of other confounders exist. In particular, selection bias, attrition, and a

change in timing of postsurvey delivery (i.e., the survey was given to the second cohort immediately after completion of the program, whereas the first cohort took it up to three years later) inhibit our ability to generalize findings beyond this group of post-9/11 veterans who participated in a veteran-specific civic service program. Future studies with more rigorous designs would establish the program’s efficacy and determine its long-term impact on veterans, their families, and their communities.

Conclusions

Program satisfaction data elicited from the second cohort of post-9/11 veterans who completed The Mission Continues Fellowship Program demonstrates that the program continues to have a positive impact on fellows’ personal and professional goals and aspirations. High satisfaction ratings and the number of veterans who returned to school indicate that the structured transition from military service to the civilian workforce or civic service roles may be demanding, yet it continues to be meaningful and productive.

Endnotes

1. Matthieu, M. M., Smith, I. D., Moore McBride, A., & Morrow-Howell, N. (2011). *The Mission Continues: Engaging post-9/11 disabled military veterans in civic service* (CSD Research Brief 11-25). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development. Retrieved from <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RB11-25.pdf>
2. Matthieu, M. M., Pereira, M. J., & Smith, I. D. (2011). *Participant satisfaction with The Mission Continues Fellowship Program for post 9/11 disabled veterans* (CSD Research Brief 11-37). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development. Retrieved from <http://csd.wustl.edu/Publications/Documents/RB11-37.pdf>
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