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Reexamining Impacts of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program on Post-9/11 Veterans, Their Families, and Their Communities

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Introduction

Since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, transition programs for post-9/11 veterans that leverage military experience, leadership skills, and service orientation have grown rapidly. For example, The Mission Continues Fellowship Program provides each veteran participant with a stipend to serve as a volunteer at a nonprofit organization for a period of six months. The Mission Continues, a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, challenges post-9/11 veterans to continue to serve their country and communities after their military service has ended.

The aim of this study is to assess the perceived personal, social, and family impacts of participating in The Mission Continues Fellowship Program, focusing on the second cohort of post-9/11 fellows enrolled in the program.

Research Question and Methods

In 2010, we studied the effects of The Mission Continues Fellowship Program on the first cohort of participants, and results show that the program has a substantial impact on participants' outlook on life, ambitions, and beliefs.¹⁻³ Fellows describe

the impact of civic service in the military and the Fellowship Program as profound, meaningful, and life changing. Their participation also allows for positive interpersonal and social benefits, which tend to spread to their families and communities.

The second cohort consists of 414 fellows who began the program between January 2011 and October 2012. In this study, we reexamine the degree to which participation in the Fellowship Program impacts veterans' personal growth, values and beliefs, personal effectiveness, sense of community connectedness, family life, and relationships. As with the first cohort, we used a self-administered, standardized postsurvey to measure outcomes⁴⁻⁵ but added a presurvey to the study design. Data for this study are drawn primarily from postsurvey results. 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

The Mission Continues Fellowship Program participants are United States military veterans discharged after September 11, 2001. They are predominantly male (69%) and younger than age 35 (71%). The sample is racially diverse with Caucasian (60%), African American (26%), Latino/Hispanic (22%), other races (10%), biracial (9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3.9%), or American Indian/Alaskan Native (1.5%) representatives.

Almost 80% of fellows reported having beyond a high school education, and 60% reported being employed (35%), disabled (14%), or retired (10%). Over half (56%) reported that they volunteered before joining the military, predominately in faith-based (24%), social service (24%), or educational (21%) settings.

Personal Impact

Personal growth through civic service.

Seventy-nine percent of study participants reported that the Fellowship Program exposed them to new ideas and ways of seeing the world, 74% reexamined their beliefs and attitudes about themselves, 49% learned more about the “real” world, 58% did things they never thought they could do, and 65% changed some of their beliefs and attitudes.

Self-truths: values and beliefs. The majority of fellows (95%) believe that they have important skills to pass along to others, most (90%) say that many people come to them for advice, 83% feel that other people need them, 97% enjoy teaching

things to others, and 91% feel that they have had a good influence on the lives of many people. Nearly all program participants (92%) believe that others would say they have made a contribution to society.

Social Impact

Personal effectiveness of community service.

Nearly all participants (95%) stated that The Mission Continues Fellowship Program allowed them to make a contribution to their communities. While 87% reported they felt like part of a community, 94% of fellows believe that they made a difference in the life of at least one person.

Local civic efficacy. In addition to developing a sense of community connectedness through service, many fellows perceived that they could influence local government decisions to meet a range of community needs (Figure 1).

Grassroots efficacy. Fellows also exercised leadership within their neighborhoods. Most study participants reported feeling competent in their ability to organize programs and events to benefit their communities (Figure 2).

Community-based activism. While some fellows participated in community events or joined advocacy organizations in support of causes, only a few shared their personal opinions in public forums (Figure 3).

Engagement in the political process. On average, over 60% reported being politically active by learning about candidates or ballots before voting, keeping informed about the local or national news, and voting in local elections (Figure 4).

Figure 1. Local Civic Efficacy (N = 184)

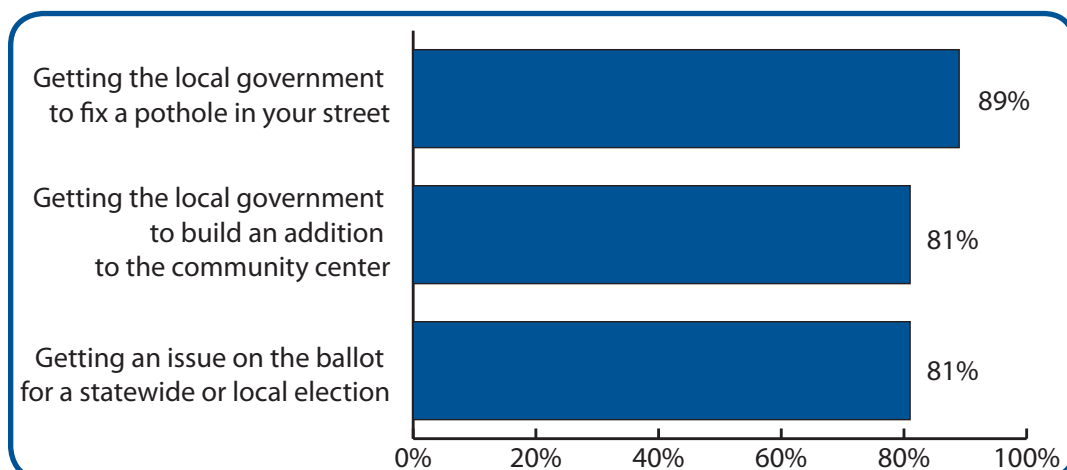


Figure 2. Grassroots Efficacy (N = 184)

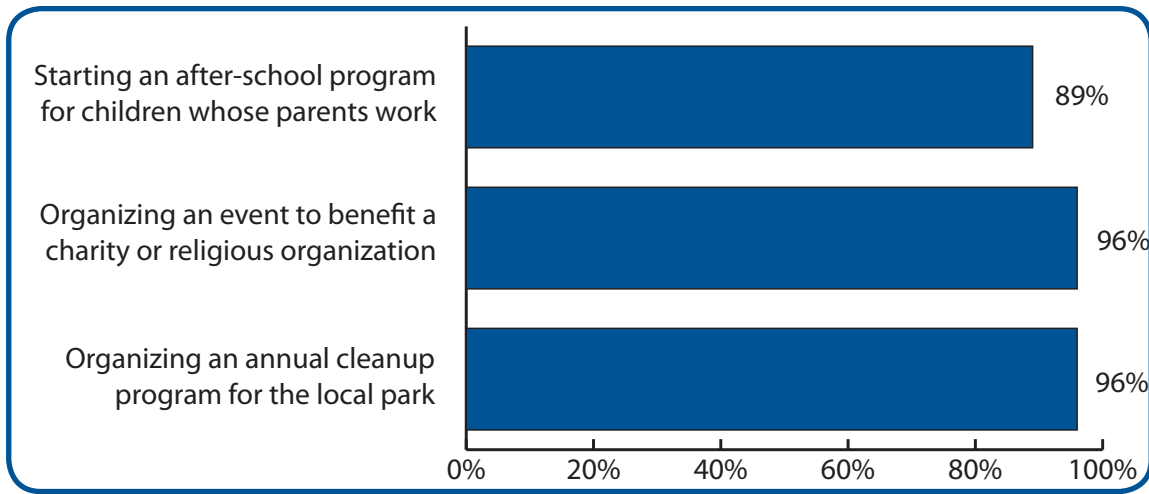


Figure 3. Community-Based Activism (N = 184)

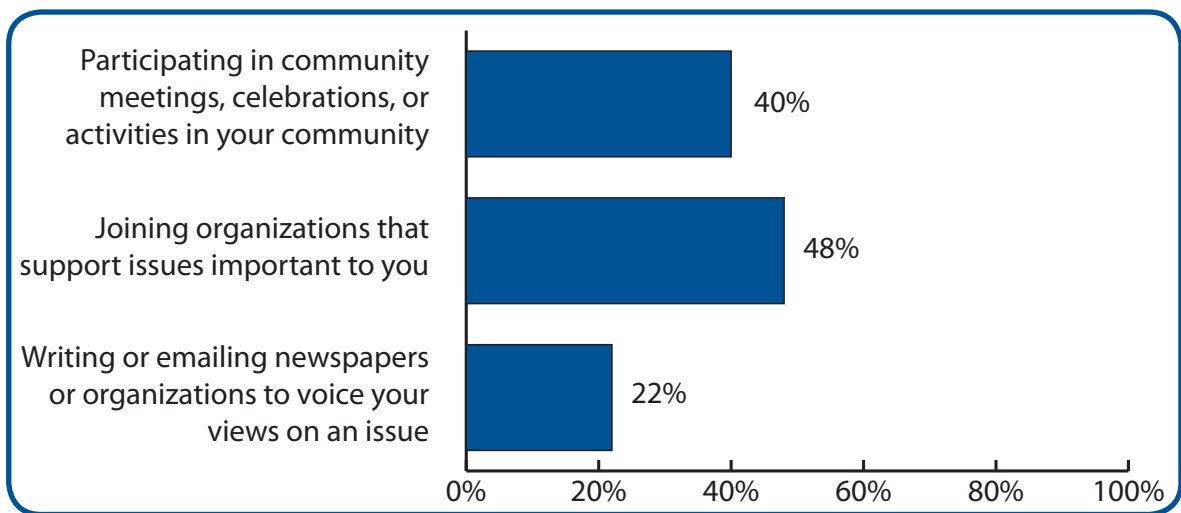
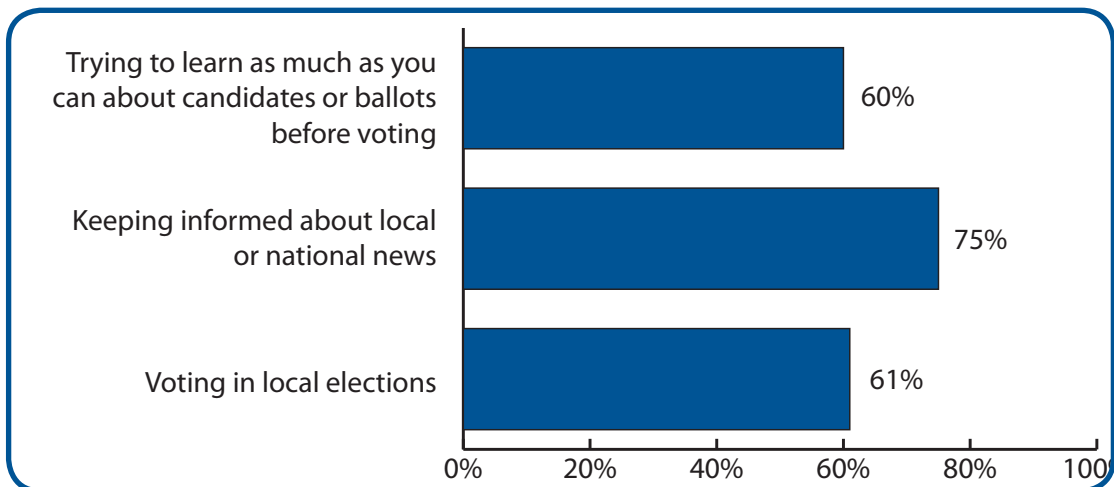


Figure 4. Engagement in Political Process (N = 184)



Sense of community connectedness.

Ninety-one percent of participants reported feeling that they have the ability to make a difference in their communities, 73% often discuss and think about how political and social issues affect their communities, 88% are aware of what can be done to meet the important needs of their communities, and 91% try to make a positive difference in their communities. Seventy-eight percent reported having a strong attachment to their communities.

Family Impact

Enriching family life. Although the Fellowship Program does not target family involvement as a program outcome, 82% of participants reported that their families were pleased with their involvement. Even though many (44%) reported that they spent less time with their families because of the program, fellows also reported that they earned extra money (65%) and brought resources, information, and new skills back to their families (65%). Other reported effects of the program include involving family members in volunteering (48%), becoming more aware of social and community issues (69%), and becoming more socially active (42%). Some fellows (31%) also reported that their participation lessened their families' concerns about them.

Strengthening relationships. Nearly half (45%) of study participants reported that the fellowship improved their relationships or communication with their families, 76% reported that they set an example for their families and children by participating in the program, and 86% reported that their families were proud of them.

The Veteran's Perception of Impact

Ninety percent of participants rated their contribution to the welfare and well-being of others as excellent, very good, or good. They described their fellowship experience in terms of personal growth.

"I have become a leader in veteran services in my area and gained full time employment working with veterans."

"I wanted to do something for my child, I needed to feel needed...a reason to get out of the house and so it happens that they reached out to me."

"I have been able to purchase my very first home."

"I am now enrolled in school full time and on the dean's list."

Other fellows reported that their families and relationships have improved.

"I learned that I was still a capable leader. My services are very much needed in my family, on my job, and in my community."

"I have gotten me back, [I] was able to achieve more and grow more because of what I did while serving with the Mission Continues!!!!"

"I felt lost for a period of time but have found my new sense of purpose in my life."

"I have been given confidence and the courage to do more than just make comments about my community."

Finally, participants reported feeling more connected to their communities and that they could make a difference in the world around them.

"I have helped other veterans like myself and people from the community to become more aware about the problems veterans are currently facing. I have also contributed to the raising of funds to help better the lives of veterans and our community..."

"I now feel like I can comfortably work within the veteran community to get what I need and also help others."

“I’ve gained a deeper knowledge of social needs in my community and how I can contribute to those issues. 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.”

Summary and Implications

Participating in The Mission Continues Fellowship Program has many positive personal, social, and family effects. Findings reveal that the fellowship combines participants’ military leadership skills and experiences with purpose-driven civic service activities to affect personal, family, and community life. Fellows are more civically engaged and confident in their abilities to influence government and organizational decisions and lead successful community-based movements.

Contrasted with our research on the first cohort, our current findings show improvements in participants’ satisfaction ratings and a marked increase in the percentage of fellows who reported that the program had personal, social, and family impacts, especially in personal growth, reexamination of values and beliefs, development of community connectedness and engagement in the political process, and enrichment of family life via the strengthening of familial and social bonds.

Overall, these evaluations suggest that the current fellows are more likely than the first cohort to perceive that the Fellowship Program influenced their personal and interpersonal relationships and contributed to ongoing civic engagement. Given the maturation of the program and refinement of the program’s goals, objectives, and activities to focus specifically on life and career transitions, these improved ratings are reasonable and expected. Fellows recognize that continued service adds value to their personal lives, families, and communities.

Limitations

The nonexperimental study design restricts conclusions that can be made regarding program impacts and community and family 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

In less than ten years, The Mission Continues Fellowship Program has seen tremendous growth and a consistent trend of positive rating of individual, family, and social impacts of the program by participants. While the program will continue to expand and innovate, the findings from this and earlier studies indicate that returning veterans find meaning, purpose, and direction from participation in nonprofit-sponsored civic service programs. Fellows perceive that their service fortifies organizations and communities and that participation strengthens their families and relationships.

Finally, The Mission Continues Fellowship Program appears to foster a strong sense of citizen leadership by encouraging engagement in local government and confidence among veterans to serve as citizen leaders after completion of their military careers. Positive impacts such as these can only solidify the future outlook for post-9/11 veterans.

Endnotes

1. Matthieu, M. M., Smith, I. D., McBride, A. M., & 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>
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