A Holistic Approach to Career Transition Support for Veterans, Spouses, and Caregivers

EXPERIENCES OF DOG TAG INC. FELLOWSHIP ALUMNI
When customers place their orders at Dog Tag Bakery in Washington, D.C.’s historic Georgetown neighborhood, they are doing more than fulfilling a craving for pastries, cookies, and other baked goods. The establishment’s tagline hints that it has a larger mission: “Purpose Baked In.” In addition to dedicating a portion of its proceeds to supporting veterans and military families, the bakery provides hands-on training and classroom instruction to Dog Tag Inc. (DTI) fellowship recipients. Since the program’s launch in 2014, this “living business school” has trained more than 190 fellows—post-9/11 veterans and spouses and caregivers of veterans and current service members—in a variety of business sectors. The program supplements this occupational and entrepreneurial training with wellness activities and peer support to help fellows build connections, manage stress, and prepare for a new set of demands in the civilian workforce. Through these experiences, the program aims to empower fellows to develop their individual definitions of success, seek new purpose, and build community.

Transitioning from military to civilian life can be challenging, not only for service members but also for their families and caregivers. Veterans with service-connected injuries or a history of trauma exposure can find it particularly difficult to transition to the civilian workforce after military service, and it is not unusual for the spouses and caregivers of veterans to have breaks in employment due to frequent relocations and caregiving demands. For these reasons, fellowship participants have the potential to benefit immensely from the program.

To gain a clearer picture of the program’s impact, identify opportunities to improve support for fellows’ near- and long-term goals, and guide future programming, DTI partnered with the RAND Corporation to develop and field a revised survey of its fellowship alumni and to collect alumni perspectives through focus groups and interviews. Survey questions and discussions were designed to capture fellows’ experiences both during and after program participation.
Identifying and Prioritizing Challenges Associated with Military-to-Civilian Transitions

Despite an abundance of public and private programs to help U.S. service members transition to the civilian workforce, few studies have thoroughly evaluated these programs’ effectiveness. However, the available evidence indicates that employment and entrepreneurship support can increase veterans’ career satisfaction, resilience, and civilian earnings and provide other benefits. There has been even less research dedicated to the career-related goals and outcomes of veterans who have experienced combat or military sexual trauma and those who are coping with the effects of physical, behavioral, or mental health disabilities, but it is likely that at least some of their needs will not be met by programs designed to reach as many veterans as possible. DTI fellowships target these underserved groups of veterans, along with military-connected spouses and caregivers. Although the program intentionally accepts only limited numbers of participants, it aims to reach diverse cohorts of veterans with service-connected injuries and current and former military spouses and caregivers. Current active-component, reserve, or National Guard service members are also eligible if they will transition out of the military within six months.

Over the course of five months, DTI fellows participate in workshops with entrepreneurs, business leaders, and experts and receive formal classroom instruction in entrepreneurship, accounting, management, communication, finance, marketing, and business policy. They also receive hands-on training at Dog Tag Bakery and apply lessons learned through a capstone project. Reflecting the program’s holistic approach to supporting participants’ personal and professional goals, fellows devote a portion of their time to wellness activities, such as yoga and journaling. On completion, fellows receive a certificate in business administration from Georgetown University or, for those who participate through DTI’s newly established second location, Loyola University Chicago. They also have the opportunity to maintain a connection to DTI through ongoing professional development, networking events, and social activities.

Measuring DTI Fellowship Alumni Outcomes and Satisfaction with the Program

RAND researchers collaborated with DTI staff to revise the program’s alumni survey (previously administered twice in 2018 and once in 2019) to capture more-nuanced insights into participants’ satisfaction and long-term outcomes. The revised survey was fielded in November 2020 and November 2021. It is important to note that the fellowship program was fully virtual in these two years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and only these two survey waves captured responses from virtual participants. In addition to questions about employment status and satisfaction, education and training, types of support received, and the fellowship’s professional impact, the survey asked about respondents’ personal well-being, community engagement, participation in DTI alumni activities, and challenges since completing the fellowship.

Satisfaction with the fellowship was consistently high across all five survey waves, with an average of 95 percent of respondents reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied.
fellowship, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around half of DTI fellowship alumni shared their military-to-civilian transition, fellowship, and post-fellowship experiences in voluntary, confidential focus groups and interviews, providing valuable context for the survey findings. Note that these sessions were conducted between November 2019 and March 2020 and therefore did not capture challenges associated with the pandemic.

Measuring Alumni Satisfaction with Their DTI Fellowship Experience and Post-Fellowship Support

Satisfaction with the fellowship was consistently high across all five survey waves, with an average of 95 percent of respondents reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied, and the majority indicating that they would recommend the program to others. Importantly, there were minimal differences in ratings between those who completed the fellowship fully in person and those who completed it in a fully virtual format.

In focus groups and interviews, alumni often referred to their fellowship experience as a foundation or stepping-stone to the next steps in their professional development. They also described DTI staff as diligent in providing ongoing assistance after the program ended—including reference letters, college applications, and networking opportunities.

Analysis of previous survey data provided insights into which fellowship program components contributed the most to alumni satisfaction, with formal instruction in business administration being cited most often. In focus groups and interviews, alumni recalled their initial reticence about the program’s emphasis on wellness—particularly Finding Your Voice, an event at which fellows are asked to identify and present a part of their life story through a narrative, expressive form of personal storytelling. However, this ended up being one of the most popular parts of the program: More than 40 percent of alumni reported that Finding Your Voice had the greatest impact on their personal life.

DTI fellowship cohorts tend to be more diverse than participants in other veteran support programs; fellows are not necessarily veterans themselves, and those who are include both former officers and former enlisted personnel. Despite initial challenges associated with this integration, alumni reported that finding commonalities amid individual differences was personally rewarding and beneficial to their preparation for the civilian career paths. They also appreciated the fellowship’s mix of on-the-job training, classroom learning, and interactive workshops with business professionals that helped them hone their networking skills.

Now that I’m done with the program, the wellness—the holistic aspect—is what resonates, more than the other aspects. The emotional-intelligence skills are far more valuable than any other.

—Veteran
I thought, “It can’t hurt. I’ll give it a shot.” Finding Your Voice was so powerful. . . .

You can’t come here and act like that trauma didn’t affect you in some way.

—Veteran
Leaving the program, you’re ready to go any which way. You’ve gone through a rigorous process, and you know where you’re going to go, but, more importantly, you know you’ve got someone to help you. —Veteran
Assessing the Personal and Professional Impact of the DTI Fellowship’s Holistic Support for Career Transitions

DTI leadership was particularly interested in the extent to which alumni were engaged in entrepreneurial pursuits post-fellowship, a focus of the program. More than half of survey respondents reported that they were working on a business idea, and, among those, most continued to work on the same idea as during their fellowship.

In 2021, 14 percent of survey respondents described themselves as entrepreneurs, and 23 percent identified as full-time paid employees of a company. A little over 18 percent were unemployed and seeking work, and 31 percent were pursuing either full- or part-time postsecondary education. The 2020 and 2021 surveys explored levels of underemployment among fellowship alumni. This could include those who were employed part-time but wished to be employed full-time, those who did not feel that they were making use of their education or training, or those whose work schedule or ability to work was disrupted by the pandemic, family obligations, or other circumstances. The share of respondents who considered themselves underemployed declined from 45 percent to 30 percent between 2020 and 2021.

Around three-quarters of respondents in both 2020 and 2021 reported that the fellowship continues to make a positive contribution to their personal and professional life. On the survey, alumni high-

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I had not known who I was for so many years, hadn’t known what I wanted to do and what my visions and goals were. . . . Going through Dog Tag just opened up a piece of me that was closed for so long.

—Spouse and caregiver

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Alumni Entrepreneurial Pursuits Following DTI Fellowship Participation

An average of 55% of alumni reported working on a business idea in 2020 and 2021

Pursuing the same business idea as during fellowship: 31%

Pursuing a different idea: 24%

NOTE: Averages from the 2020 (n = 65) and 2021 (n = 86) survey waves.

Alumni Views on the Ongoing Personal and Professional Contributions of the DTI Fellowship

78% of alumni agreed or strongly agreed that the fellowship continued to make a positive contribution to their personal life

75% of alumni agreed or strongly agreed that the fellowship continued to make a positive contribution to their professional life

NOTE: Averages from the 2020 (n = 64) and 2021 (n = 85–86) survey waves.
lighted several areas of their lives that continued to improve as a result of the fellowship, including personal growth, their ability to self-reflect, and their perseverance. This underscored many of the themes that arose in the focus groups and interviews, including that the fellowship promoted resilience and a sense of identity. In addition, more than 80 percent of survey respondents noted that they are able to approach their professional life with greater confidence, flexibility, and an expanded skillset as a result of the fellowship.

In terms of their focus since completing the program, alumni most frequently ranked their personal well-being first, a priority reinforced by the DTI fellowship’s holistic approach. When asked what challenges they continued to face as they pursued their goals, alumni consistently cited their physical or behavioral health conditions and managing the needs of their families. As alumni navigate their post-fellowship paths, DTI continues to be an important touchstone: More than two-thirds of survey respondents reported having ongoing contact with DTI, especially through alumni check-ins and social events.

Alumni came away from the program with a strong commitment to community service. In focus groups and interviews, they talked about serving others as an important part of their new definition of “success.” An average of 55 percent of survey respondents in 2020 and 2021 reported that they

Alumni Views on the Fellowship’s Impact on Confidence, Flexibility, and Resourcefulness

- More confident in my decisions about my professional life: 82%
- Helped me approach my professional life in a more flexible way: 80%
- Gave me the tools I needed to seek new professional opportunities: 87%

NOTE: Averages of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement in the 2020 (n = 64) and 2021 (n = 86) survey waves.
The program was designed in a way that would allow us to succeed based on what we wanted to do or what would be possible for us to do.

I feel like the love and care they have for us is amazing. It was like another pseudo-family.

—Veteran
I think one of the beautiful things about the program is that you realize you’re not alone—there is no smooth transition—and that what you’re going through is normal.

—Spouse and caregiver
were engaged in work, education, or volunteering in service to their local community, and 42 percent engaged in these activities in support of veterans, families, or caregivers.

Strategies to Measure Program Impact, Improve Programming, and Enhance Participants’ Experiences

Input from the alumni surveys, focus groups and interviews, and recent literature on veterans’ transition needs and experiences provided DTI with a foundation to begin tracking its program’s long-term impact, as well as to implement changes to better meet the needs of participants and address common challenges after fellowship participation. As DTI continues to expand its reach, it should take the following steps to identify opportunities to improve support for its fellows’ personal and professional goals:

Continue monitoring how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected employment and entrepreneurship.

The employment and business landscape has changed dramatically since the pandemic’s onset, and it would be valuable to explicitly address these factors in the curriculum.

Explore ways to continue supporting alumni post-fellowship.

DTI has been expanding its program offerings, and there may be additional ways that DTI could help alumni navigate common challenges to pursuing their goals.

Evaluate the pros and cons of in-person, virtual, and hybrid fellowship participation.

Alumni whose DTI fellowship was fully remote during the pandemic reported positive experiences, and familiarity with remote working practices is potentially valuable as alumni pursue career opportunities.

Monitor how scaling up the DTI model affects fellows’ experiences with the program, and continue to diversify the program’s staff.

As the DTI fellowship expands, it would benefit from replicating the most effective components while customizing programming for participants based on local resources. Staff who reflect the diversity of the veterans they support and are familiar with veteran culture can strengthen participants’ connections with the program.

Continue checking in with fellows and alumni through surveys and regular focus groups and interviews.

Surveys administered immediately before and after fellowship participation can be used to track fellows’ progress, inform program improvements, and complement the annual alumni survey. Regular focus groups and interviews, facilitated by a third party, would further enhance this data collection by eliciting nuanced, unbiased feedback about the program.

Consider conducting a formal process and outcome evaluation of the DTI model.

A systematic evaluation using the types of data described above, and potentially including a comparison group, would provide a more objective view of the fellowship’s impact and can help distinguish between the fellowship’s contribution to alumni outcomes and the influence of other, external factors.

Post-Fellowship Top Priorities and Challenges to Pursuing Goals for DTI Fellowship Alumni

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<tr>
<th>Top priorities</th>
<th>Top challenges</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Personal well-being</td>
<td>Own health conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Managing family needs</td>
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NOTE: Most commonly identified focus areas and challenges in the 2020 and 2021 survey waves.