



Bootcamp gives veterans an entrepreneurial edge

By Annette Crawford

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Starting your own business can be a daunting venture even under the best of circumstances. But add to that the challenges of being a service-disabled veteran, and the experience can be overwhelming.

That scenario troubled Mike Haynie, a former U.S. Air Force major. A few months after beginning his new career as Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprise at Syracuse University's Whitman School of Management, Haynie set out to help those veterans.

He said he felt "very linked in and connected to what was going on in the military, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan," and read newspaper articles about the challenges many of these men and women face who return home with a disability as a result of their military service.

"At the same time I had been doing some academic research on why people choose small business ownership and entrepreneurship as a career," Haynie said.

One of the findings was that people who are disadvantaged – whether socially, economically or physically – are drawn to business ownership and entrepreneurship.

"People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be self-employed than the general population in the U.S.," he said. "It occurred to me that here I am, at the No. 1 ranked entrepreneurship program in the country as a professor and a background in entrepreneurship – why couldn't we do something? So I took that to my dean, who is a Vietnam era vet, and before I even got halfway through my pitch he stopped me and said, 'We're doing this.'"

"This" is the Entrepreneurship



Professor Mike Morris addresses members of the first Entrepreneurial Bootcamp for Veterans at the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University in July 2007. Professor Morris is the Witting Chair in Entrepreneurship at Whitman. (Courtesy photo/Syracuse University)

Bootcamp for Veterans (EBV) – a free program that began at Syracuse University in 2007 and is expanding this summer to three other campuses: UCLA Anderson School of Management, Florida State University's College of Business, and Mays Business School at Texas A&M.

EBV involves three phases. The first one has a self-study curriculum facilitated by online discussion and assessment, and the students develop their own business concepts.

During Phase II, the students are immersed in business principles and practices during a nine-day residency at one of the four EBV universities. There are hands-on workshops and lectures from entrepreneurship faculty representing nationally ranked programs, plus presentations from Fortune 500 business leaders.

Students receive a year of ongoing

support and mentorship from EBV faculty experts during the final phase.

The program's name is well-deserved, according to some of its first participants.

"When they say bootcamp they really mean it," said Charles Blackwell, a 21-year Army veteran who served as a medic at Camp Bucca, Iraq, during his last assignment.

"It was more than I expected," Blackwell said. "You're up late at night, you're doing study sessions, you have to prepare for venture capitalists. And to get all that stuff together, in just nine days' residency, you're really grinding."

John Raftery echoed his classmate's feelings. Not only was it more than he expected, "it was a better experience. I had the traditional school setting in mind,"

said Raftery, who served in the Marine Corps for more than four years.

“The whole experience itself was entrepreneurial-like. You were learning about it and also doing it. It was challenging,” said the 28-year-old Raftery.

Phase III has also lived up to its billing.

“That’s one of the things I was a little skeptical about at first,” admitted Raftery. “How are they going to be able to mentor everybody? I thought, ‘OK, we’ll see.’ That has been one of the strongest ongoing things I’ve experienced. I talk to Mike (Haynie) probably three to five times a month. If I have questions I get a response the same day. They’re just real open – anything you need. If I have an idea I can run it by them. If it’s not in their area of specialization, there’s always an expert answer they’ll find for us. It’s like having your own consulting firm at your disposal.”

Raftery has seen the bootcamp pay off with big dividends. He formed Patriot Material Handling in Midlothian, Texas, with a business partner who has been in the material handling business 15 years.

“If someone is moving materials or storing materials, that’s where we find our core competency – being able to go in and create a solution,” Raftery said.

His company recently landed a large contract with the Navy, and Raftery said he owes that success to EBV, where he learned about leveraging resources.

“It was one of our more specialized opportunities. It was a project that my business partner had worked on with another company, and it was put on the shelf. When we started this up I fired it up again and got in contact with the right people,” he said.

“Everything I learned [at EBV] has applied in every area. Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. Sometimes it’s hard because you want to be the go-to guy,” Raftery said. “I’ve created a team of people with diverse capabilities and our value proposition is that we’re former military and we’ve held

clearances and we understand how the military and the government works, not to mention it’s special for us. We understand the mission that we’re supporting.”

While the 46-year-old Blackwell hasn’t started his own business yet, he’s gearing up for the day when he opens his own special events facility. Meanwhile, he’s applying his knowledge to his present job at the Cobb County, Ga., fire department.

“I didn’t expect that going to bootcamp would enhance what I’m already doing. I’m working on a project right now in my job at the fire department, and I was able to cut the overtime budget in half. A lot of that is due to things I learned while at Whitman,” Blackwell said.

The New York City native said he continues to get guidance and ideas from Whitman faculty and classmates.

“Our strength is that everyone knows what the others’ venture is proposed to be,” Blackwell said. “Whenever we see something that’s even remotely related to that venture, we just give them a call and let them know about it, even if it’s just happening onto a relevant Web site.”

Haynie said one of the aspects of the program he’s most proud of is that there’s no government money involved at all.

“Part of the deal was if we’re going to do this, we’re going to do this for free. We’re going to find a way to make this program entirely cost-free for veterans. So we went out and raised all the money privately. It’s citizens standing up and saying ‘I get this, and I want to help you make it happen.’ Almost all of those people are entrepreneurs, and a lot of them are veterans,” Haynie said.

Admission to the program is fairly straightforward.

“There’s one criteria in our program, and it’s a passion for entrepreneurship. It’s a strong desire to go out, and today or tomorrow, be a business owner,” Haynie said. “There are no educational prerequisites. We had students in our first class with master’s degrees and four years of high school. We had all branches

of the service represented. Our age range was 24 to 53. When you talk about the program, right now it is focused on veterans with a service-connected disability, post 9-11. That’s the qualification – what gets you into the program is demonstrating to us that you have a passion for entrepreneurship.”

Haynie said an overarching defining moment keeps coming back to him.

“It’s that when you talk to these veterans, they all have big plans, they all have big dreams, they all have something they want to accomplish. For a lot of them, their military career defines who they are – I am a Marine. I am a Soldier. I am an Airman. I am a Sailor,” he said.

“And for a lot of them, that identity is or was threatened because of their injuries, and entrepreneurship becomes a way for them to redefine who they are now. Now you hear them say, ‘I am an entrepreneur.’ What is potentially scary, all of these dreams are being formulated at a time when the economy is on the downswing, college tuition costs are ever increasing, the VA is overwhelmed, and the support structure and resources available for many of these folks might not do it.

“I think that’s what the program means for me in that defining moment – in that this program is certainly only a little piece of what needs to be a much broader effort. For entrepreneurship, here is where they can turn to.”

Editor’s note: There is no deadline to enroll in the EBV, which operates on a rolling admissions policy. Acceptance decisions are made as people apply and assignment decisions are made as to which school they will attend. With a first-come, first-served policy, once the seats are full, a person’s application will be rank-ordered by when it was received and offered a seat in next year’s program. For more information, visit <http://whitman.syr.edu/ebv/>.