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

By *Monica M. Matthieu, Michael J. Pereira, and Ian D. Smith*

Introduction

Ongoing program evaluation of The Mission Continues' flagship program, the Fellowship Program, is imperative to assess program outcomes. This formal and structured civic service program provided post-9/11 disabled veterans a stipend to serve as a volunteer at a nonprofit organization in their local community for a period of 14-28 weeks, typically at social service, youth, or veteran's organizations.

Aside from the service component, other core components of the Fellowship Program included placement assistance and program monitoring by the Fellowship Program staff, a fellowship course curriculum, and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlined and negotiated the duties and goals for the Fellow and the placement site.

Agencies were selected as placement sites to represent five broad categories of service: education, environment, military, social improvement, and disaster services. These areas fit with the Fellows' long-term service, educational, or career goals and accommodated their current functional abilities.

Previous research on the Fellowship Program (Matthieu et al., 2011) indicated that all participants in the first cohort of this program would recommend the program to a family member or a friend (100%). However, this is only one indicator of program level satisfaction. This study assessed the participants' satisfaction using additional indicators.

Research Question and Methods

Satisfaction with civic service programs has been studied by examining the benefits participants receive such as social support, feeling purpose driven, and having meaningful interactions with the beneficiaries of their service (Morrow-Howell, Hong, & Tang, 2009; O'Neill, Morrow-Howell, & Wilson, 2011). Research has also focused on program-level characteristics such as stipends, training, mentorship, and supervision (McBride & Sherraden, 2007).

This study focused on the first cohort of post-9/11 disabled veterans to complete the Fellowship Program. The aim of this study was to assess the participants' satisfaction with and the perceived impacts of the Fellowship Program on their future.

This study was led by Washington University in St. Louis. The Mission Continues provided logistical support for data collection.



Washington University in St. Louis

Specifically, we examined how participation in the Fellowship Program impacted the veteran's ratings of satisfaction and how the program impacted their career goals using web based, self administered, and standardized measures (CNCS, 2008; Morrow-Howell et al., 2008).

The first cohort studied consisted of all 52 Fellowship Program alumni who completed the program between June 2007 and December 2010. No incentives were offered for participating in the web-based survey. The response rate was 52% (N=27). Survey participants did not differ demographically from non-participants.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

For this study, the Mission Continues Fellows were all United States military veterans, discharged after September 11, 2001, and reported having a service-connected disability.

Most Fellows were under the age of 45 (85%), Caucasian (67%), and male (83%). A third of the Fellows had never been married (33%). Over 75% percent of the Fellows served in the Army, while others served in the Marines (21%) or the Air Force (4%) for 1-4 years (54%), 5-8 years (25%), or 9 or more years (21%). Thirty percent also reported serving in the National Guard or Reserves, most having served 9 or more years (86%).

Prior to the fellowship, 33% of Fellows reported being employed. At the time of the survey (2011), 62% of Fellows reported being employed. Thirty three percent reported being currently disabled or retired.

Satisfaction Ratings

The majority of Fellows reported high levels of satisfaction with providing services to the community and learning about their organization (95%). Conversely, lower levels of satisfaction were reported for developing a relationship with their co-workers (73%) or with their supervisor (64%).

Slightly more than 20% of Fellows reported that participating in the Fellowship Program was stressful. Others reported not having a lot of extra time to do other things due to the fellowship time commitment (4.5%). All of the Fellows reported the fellowship was a worthwhile experience (100%).

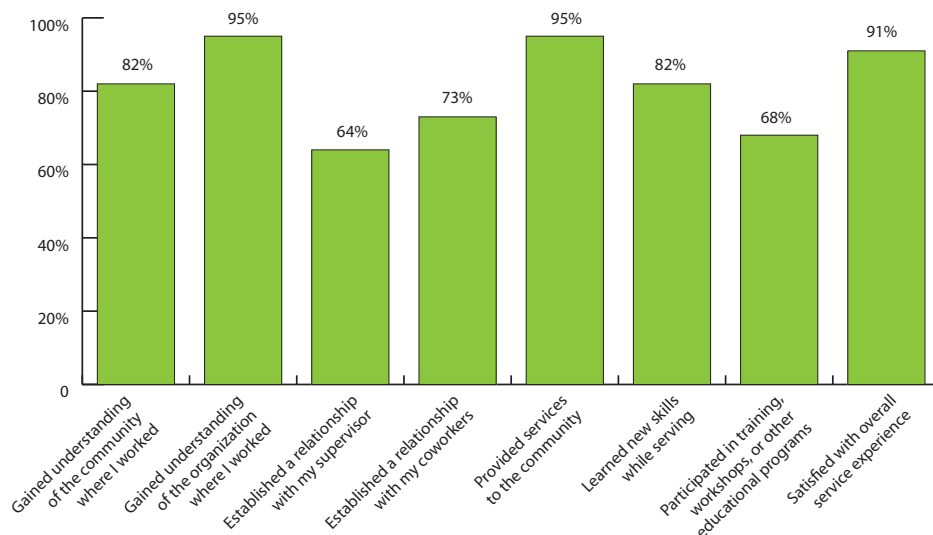
Perceived Impact of Fellowship on Career Goals

With regard to current and future employment, Fellows reported that the fellowship helped them to improve their chances of finding a job (82%), improve their performance on the job (91%), improve their chances of getting a promotion (82%), and make a career change (77%).

A little over a quarter (27%) of Fellows were using their VA educational benefits such as Chapter 30: Montgomery GI Bill, Chapter 31: Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, and Chapter 33: Post-9/11 Montgomery GI Bill, to attend school full (19%) or part time (5%). Others reported planning to start school in the fall or increase their course load when their benefits process was completed.

As a result of completing the Mission Continues Fellowship Program, 100% of Fellows reported that they will probably or definitely stay involved in volunteer activities and public service in the future.

Alumni Satisfaction with Fellowship Program (N = 27)



Fellows Comment on the Program

Some Fellows reported that the Fellowship Program provided a structured transition and networking opportunities, as illustrated below:

- » “The Mission Continues helped me to learn and earn values in my life beside helping me to transfer from military to civilian life and build up a network.”
- » “I have met great people and have worked with great people as a result of my fellowship.”

Other alumni reported that the fellowship bolstered their self-assurance in following their new direction in life and careers:

- » “The most important skill the Fellowship opportunity provided was the ability to identify a sense of purpose in the civilian world and the confidence to pursue it.”
- » “It gave me the opportunity to get the job I am doing now as a Benefits Officer [for a veteran’s service organization].”

Summary and Implications

Fellows from this initial cohort of disabled post-9/11 veterans to complete the Mission Continues Fellowship Program reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. While the Fellowship Program may have been stressful for some, nearly all of the Fellows reported that the overall experience was satisfactory and they would recommend the Fellowship Program to others.

Participant ratings of satisfaction in the Fellowship program provide one indicator of program success. Data from the perceived impacts also showed that nearly 80% of the participants felt that the Fellowship Program has had a positive effect on their future employability, performance, promotion, or instigated them to make a career change. All of the Fellows reported that the program was helpful and that they intend to continue to volunteer and to serve others here at home.

For some participants, this post-only survey was completed over three years after finishing the program. Since then, the Fellowship Program and its curriculum have undergone enhancements and critical refinements. This and the small sample size considerably limit the generalizability of these study results. Conclusions should be limited to only the first cohort of Fellows who completed the program.

Program satisfaction data from this survey demonstrate the desire of these post-9/11 disabled veterans for structured transition time between military service and entering the civilian workforce, starting or returning to school, or developing civic service roles. While some of the Fellows indicated that the program was demanding, all reported that the Mission Continues Fellowship Program was a worthwhile experience.

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Authors

Monica M. Matthieu, MSW, PhD
Research Assistant Professor, Brown School
mmatthieu@wustl.edu

Michael J. Pereira
Research Manager, The Mission Continues
mpereira@missioncontinues.org

Ian D. Smith
Program Development Officer, The Mission Continues
ismith@missioncontinues.org

Contact Us

Monica M. Matthieu, MSW, PhD
mmatthieu@wustl.edu
(314) 935-7516

Center for Social Development
George Warren Brown School of Social Work
Washington University in St. Louis
Campus Box 1196
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130

csd.wustl.edu

 **Washington University in St. Louis**
GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

George Warren Brown School of Social Work
Campus Box 1196
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, Missouri 63130-4899