



MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF THOSE WHO SERVE THE MILITARY-CONNECTED COMMUNITY:

A Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program Case Study

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Evaluation conducted with the D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families

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About the George W. Bush Institute

The George W. Bush Institute is a solution-oriented nonpartisan policy organization focused on ensuring opportunity for all, strengthening democracy, and advancing free societies. Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the Bush Institute is rooted in compassionate conservative values and committed to creating positive, meaningful, and lasting change at home and abroad. We utilize our unique platform and convening power to advance solutions to national and global issues of the day. Learn more at www.BushCenter.org.

About the Syracuse University D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families

Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) was founded in 2011, as a partnership between Syracuse University and JPMorgan Chase & Co. Headquartered on the campus of Syracuse University and located in the Daniel and Gayle D'Aniello Building at the Syracuse University National Veterans Resource Center, the IVMF was founded as higher-education's first interdisciplinary academic institute singularly focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military, veterans, and their families. The IVMF team designs and delivers class-leading training programs and services to the military-connected community, in support of the transition from military to civilian life and beyond. Each year, more than 20,000 service members, veterans, and family members engage IVMF programs and services, which are provided at largely no cost to participants. The IVMF's programs are informed by the Institute's sustained and robust data collection, research, and policy analysis team and infrastructure. The D'Aniello Institute's work on behalf of the military-connected community is made possible by gifts and grants from individuals and corporations committed to those who served in America's armed forces and their families. For more information, please visit ivmf.syracuse.edu.



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Training and supporting effective and compassionate leaders are core to the George W. Bush Institute's work. Values-based leaders drive social change and build more equitable communities while advancing great ideas.

Government programs and initiatives, corporations, millions of individuals, and more than 45,000 philanthropic organizations are committed to improving veterans' quality of life. However, we see misalignment, duplication, confusion, and gaps in providing effective services to transitioning veterans and their families. Additionally, effective leadership training for those responsible for implementing the programs and policies is missing.

The Bush Institute's Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program develops the skills of leaders who are called to serve our Nation's veterans and their families. Veteran Leadership Program participants, or Scholars, address the challenges many veterans and their family members experience such as access to mental health care, education, and employment. After four years and 176 Scholars, we wanted to better understand the impact of the program on its graduates.

A team of evaluators from the Bush Institute and Syracuse University's D'Aniello Institute for Veterans & Military Families collected interview and survey data from program alumni of the first two cohorts, as well as survey data, interviews, and observations of the third and fourth cohorts while they were in the program. They also collected feedback from supervisors and colleagues (360 data points) on six of our alumni interviewees to understand how their learnings have translated back into their jobs and lives. The evaluation team used a mixed methods approach to combine quantitative and qualitative data to produce this case study—quotes may have been edited for length or clarity.

We highlight five program components that are critical to developing leaders through the Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program:

1. Our approach to connecting the Veteran Leadership Program network

The program connects diverse leaders who support each other, challenge each other's perspectives, and advance each other's impact on the veteran and military space through feedback and networks. Ninety-six percent of Scholars agree that their professional network gives them access to the people and opportunities they need to achieve impact for veterans and military families.

2. Strong leadership development content

The program features a unique curriculum developed from today's foremost thinking and research on leadership and designed to teach participants the essential skills to be impactful leaders in the veteran space. Over 90% of program alumni indicated that through participating in the program, they gained leadership skills that improved their ability to make a difference in the lives of others.

3. Activities and speakers that inspire program participants to achieve greater impact

Participation in the program inspires Scholars to adopt a more expansive view of their roles as leaders and their capacity to meaningfully impact the lives of others. Scholars engage with a variety of guest speakers and faculty, including former presidential administration officials and leaders in the military and veteran, business, and nonprofit sectors. Past speakers have included former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy, astronaut Commander Victor Glover, and Alex Gorsky, Executive Chairman of Johnson & Johnson and April and Jay Graham Fellow at the Bush Institute. After completing the program, 91.1% of Scholars indicated that they were inspired to achieve the impact they envision for the military-connected community.

4. Access to key resources

The program provides Scholars with access to the resources they need to expand their leadership capacity and drive change for veterans and military families – including key network connections, leadership tools, and sources of funding. Ninety-four percent of alumni strongly agree or agree that the access to resources provided through the Veteran Leadership Program assisted their development and success as a leader.

5. The use of a personal leadership project as a teaching tool

Scholars enter the program with a personal leadership project – a unique, scalable project with the potential to positively impact the military-connected community. These projects allow Scholars an opportunity to apply their newly acquired skills to their own work. Scholar projects have advanced policy, created critical partnerships, and resulted in life-changing outcomes in the military-connected community.

We hope this case study provides a clear picture of how we approach leadership development at the Bush Institute and describes the Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program's impact.

NETWORK

Value of the Veteran Leadership Program network

The program offers a one-of-a-kind network. This is a critical tool that Scholars utilize to refine and improve their ideas, challenge their perspectives, and advance their projects through connections and relationships. Scholars grow a large and diverse network by bringing together individuals from different backgrounds.

A successful class is not simply a collection of the most qualified individuals. Cohorts are richly diverse by many dimensions: gender, ethnicity, geography, ideology, religion, and more. Scholars are active-duty servicemembers, veterans, military spouses, and civilians who are accomplished leaders in their fields. Cohorts are carefully constructed to bring together individuals in positions of influence across a variety of sectors – private, public, nonprofit, academic, military, media, policy, etc. The benefits of these diverse classes compound with our alumni networks. This deliberate heterogeneity shapes the priorities, values, aspirations, and opportunities for participating leaders.

The network exposes Scholars to a wider spectrum of thought, experiences, solutions, and collaborators than they would encounter on their own. Participants' interactions with other Scholars encourage them to clarify and refine their core values, often illuminating previously untapped approaches to solve complex societal challenges. The opportunity to work with dozens of capable and committed leaders who are significantly different than oneself is often a life-changing experience.

These disparate groups yield uncommon and unexpected partnerships between people who, in most circumstances, would never collaborate. The Bush Institute has opened channels of communication for leaders from diverse backgrounds.

“Learning from my fellow leaders has just as much of an impact on me...Over the course of the past two years, I think I’ve collaborated with well over half of the cohort participants. It’s been an incredible experience.”

– Cohort One Scholar

Fostering the network

The Bush Institute team builds the Veteran Leadership Program network through structured social and leadership development activities, as well as unstructured social settings. Structured activities might include icebreakers, educational exercises led by faculty, or bonding experiences such as cooking competitions. The team purposely designs breakout groups and seating charts to encourage Scholars who have not yet formed close bonds to meet and interact. The program also encourages unstructured networking during meals and breaks. When interviewed, Scholars often spoke about the value of relationship building that took place outside formal sessions.

Increasing social impact through the Veteran Leadership Program network

Scholars learn from the program’s world-class faculty and guest speakers, but they also learn from each other. They share knowledge, contacts, and resources with each other, which increases the overall impact of each Scholar and their personal leadership project.

Scholars overwhelmingly agree that the program has influenced the strength of their network. Ninety-six percent agree that their professional network gives them access to people and opportunities they need to achieve impact for veterans and military families.

“Fellow Scholars have encouraged me to pursue new opportunities that I might not have considered previously; they have brought me in to advise on their projects when appropriate and have inspired me in countless ways with their passion and hard work. I can say without doubt that they have made me a better leader.”

– Cohort Three Scholar

Scholars help each other advance their personal leadership projects, careers, or ideas by making key connections with private, public, and nonprofit sector actors who are working to improve the lives of veterans and military families; recommending best practices; and keeping each other informed of new academic and government initiatives. The Bush Institute team, faculty, guest speakers, and facilitators encourage Scholars to work together to generate new ideas and refine existing ones. For example, a speaker may present data from the field and ask Scholars to work in groups to make sense of it, point out gaps, and share resources on the topic. There are times when these conversations lead to a Scholar changing their project – or even their job – to have more impact.

96%

of Scholars agreed or strongly agreed that the Veteran Leadership Program influenced the strength of their network.

Cohort Three Scholar Dennis Miller's fellow Scholars

encouraged him to change his personal leadership project to one that helped lead to the passage of legislation that awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the 855 members of the Women's Army Corps assigned to the 6888th (Six Triple Eight) Central Postal Directory Battalion during World War II. Miller entered the program pursuing a different project, but his classmates noticed his passion for the Six Triple Eight – the only all-Black female battalion to serve in Europe during World War II. His grandmother was a member. It became apparent to him that pursuing recognition for the Six Triple Eight was the best use of the resources and network that the Veteran Leadership Program offered him.



Miller utilized the Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program network of Scholars and speakers. They were able to connect him to the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and their contacts on Capitol Hill. He created additional awareness around the issue and reached out to key contacts to get the remaining signatures needed to pass the legislation. President Joe Biden signed the Six Triple Eight Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2021 into Public Law 117-97 in March 2022 after it passed both the House of Representatives and Senate.

Scholars' networks help them form collaborative partnerships, reevaluate their decision-making processes as leaders, be more comfortable having difficult conversations, and think more extensively about their goals for the future.

Exposure to and appreciation of diverse perspectives

Survey results reveal that 87.5% of alumni believe that the Veteran Leadership Program significantly influenced their lives by increasing their exposure to and appreciation for a wide diversity of perspectives. Scholars value the diversity of background and perspectives that their peers bring to conversations about their personal leadership projects and the Veteran Service Organization space.

I've been able to reach out to several Scholars to help make connections that ultimately have led to new programs or offerings or contacts that have made an impact on veteran employment in my city. I've also taken on the role of a nonprofit board leader, which would not have happened had I not been a part of the Veteran Leadership Program. Finally, I've leveraged other organizations to help positively impact communities in my region.

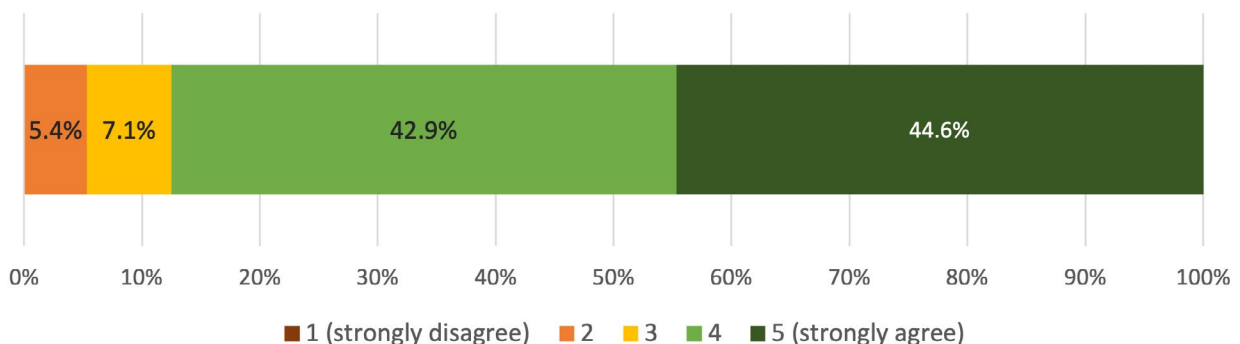
— Cohort Three Scholar

Figure 1: The Veteran Leadership Program increases Scholars' exposure to diverse perspectives

Please indicate whether and how much you agree that participating in the program has significantly influenced your life in the following ways:

My exposure to and appreciation of a wide diversity of perspectives has increased.

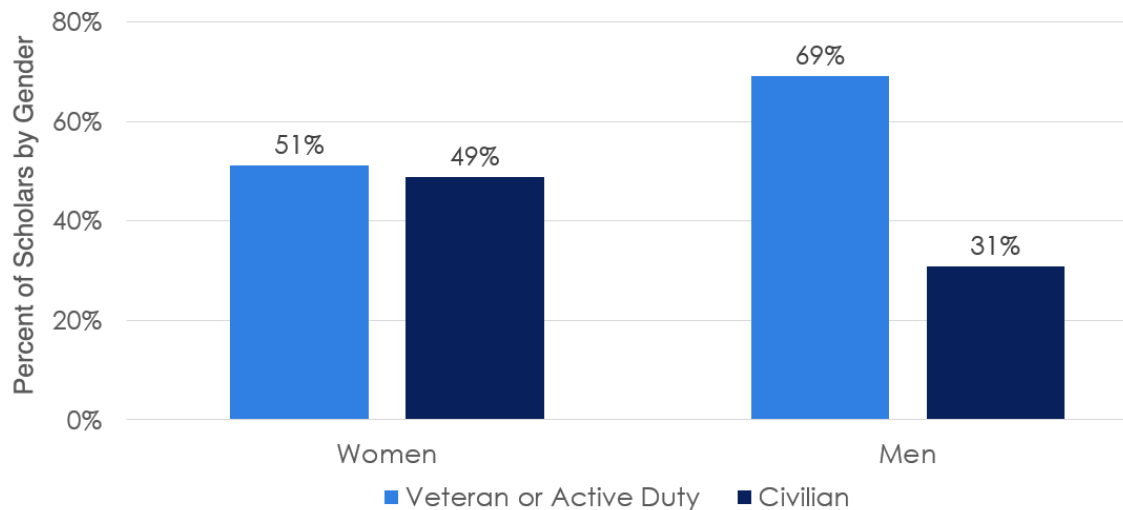
n = 56, mean = 4.27, standard deviation = 0.82; Source: 2021 Alumni Survey



The program aims to bridge the civilian-military divide by bringing together both veterans and civilians who are working to advance projects in the military and/or veteran space. The large proportion of civilians in the program – 41% – also helps balance the program's gender diversity. Despite representing only 16% of active-duty military personnel and 10% of veterans, women make up 47% of Scholars. About 49% of female Scholars are civilians, compared to 31% of male Scholars.

“Each person brings unique perspectives that help me think differently about my work.”
– Cohort Three Scholar

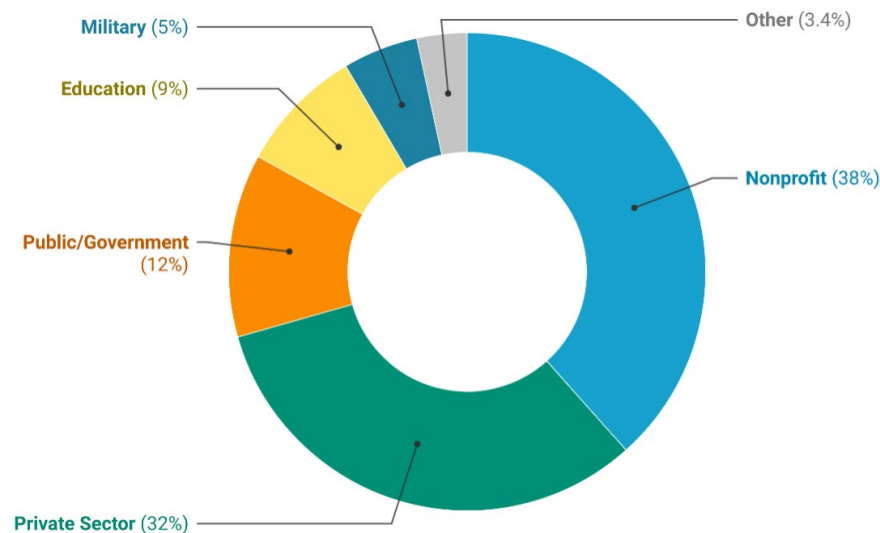
Figure 2: Military and civilian representation by gender in the Veteran Leadership Program



Scholars represent a variety of private-sector and nonprofit organizations, as well as the public sector, military, and educational institutions. Scholars come from inside and outside the traditional veteran space. They work at established veteran-serving organizations such as The Wounded Warrior Project, Minority Veterans of America, Combined Arms, Team Red White and Blue, Team Rubicon, The Mission Continues, Student Veterans of America as well as corporations and private organizations such as Boeing, Home Depot, Microsoft, Neuroflow, and Lumen Technology. Scholars are also public servants, doctors, and academics, including staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs at the state and national level, local elected officials, and representatives from institutions such as Harvard Medical School and Texas A&M University.

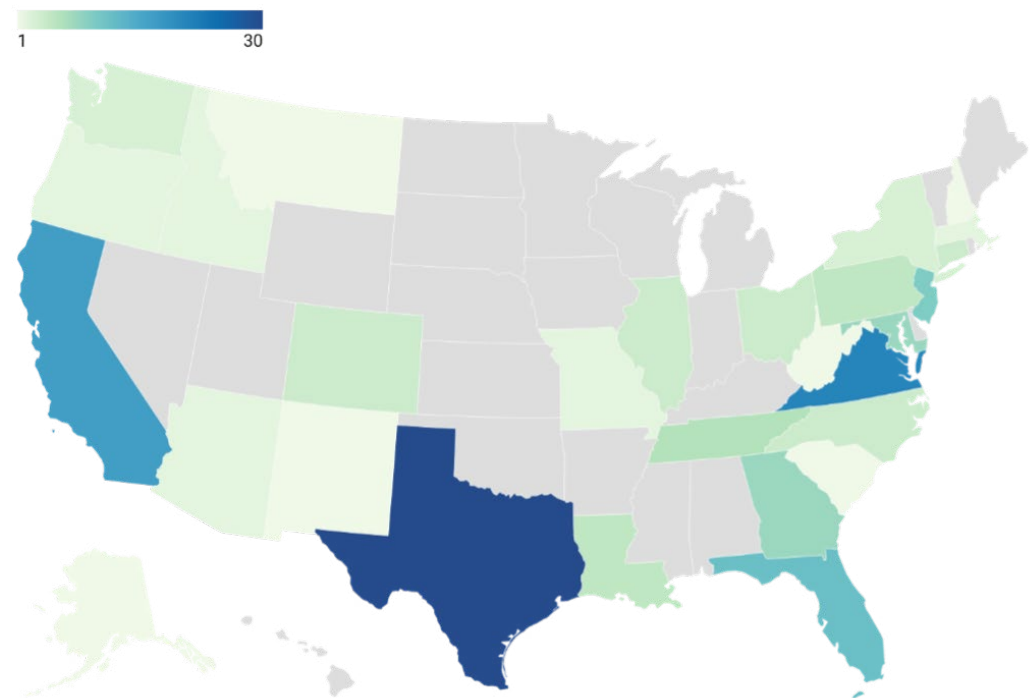
“There’s nothing by chance with the Bush Institute. Everyone was chosen for their background, the diversity, the knowledge that they brought to the program, and, because of that, there were so many folks that had very different perceptions of life, perceptions of culture, and perceptions of leadership.”
– Cohort Two Scholar

Figure 3: Scholars represent a wide variety of industries



Scholars represent 32 states across the Nation, with the highest concentration of Scholars residing in Virginia (11% of Scholars) and Texas (16% of Scholars), followed by California (10% of Scholars), and Florida (7% of Scholars). Unsurprisingly, Scholars tend to reside in the most populous states.

Figure 4: Scholars represent 32 U.S. states and territories



There is still work to be done to expand the racial and ethnic diversity of future cohorts. Just under 30% of Veteran Leadership Program Scholars identify as a race other than White. Each year, our program team develops a robust recruitment plan with the goal of attracting diverse applicants to future cohorts. We rely on our growing alumni community, our wide Bush Institute network, strategic organizational outreach, and advertising targeting specific demographics.

While increasing the diversity of each cohort remains a goal and growth area of the program, Scholars overwhelmingly agreed that the Veteran Leadership Program has influenced the ideological, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of their network (88.5% agree or strongly agree), as well as their network's diversity by organization and industry sector (96% agree or strongly agree).

Moreover, 88% of alumni believe the diversity of their network is growing. This indicates that the program's goals regarding network building and the inclusion of diverse perspectives remain relevant to the Scholars after they complete the program.

88%
of alumni agreed or strongly
agreed that their network
continued to become more
diverse after they completed
the program.

Alumni network

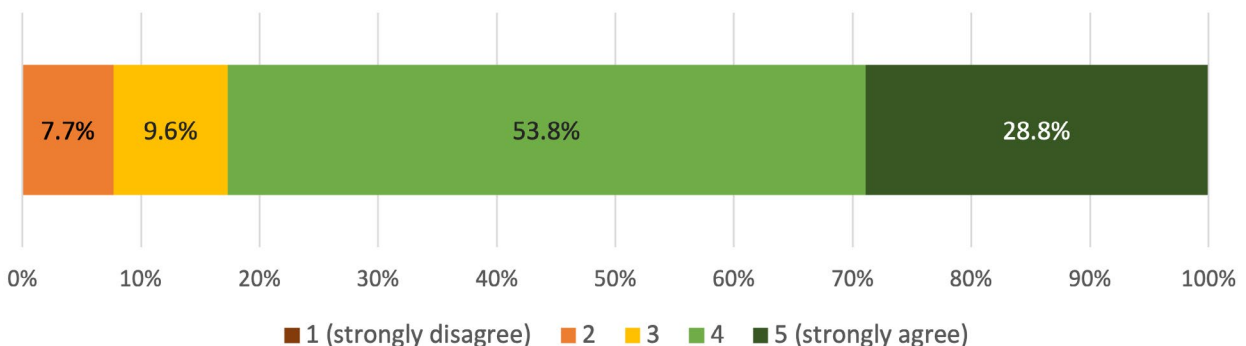
One of the greatest assets a Scholar receives upon completing the five-month program is access to the alumni network. The Veteran Leadership Program encourages Scholars to continue to engage with each other for professional and social reasons after they complete the program. The program fosters this continued engagement through several channels:

- Providing a private social network for alumni;
- Inviting alumni to participate in programming for the current cohort, such as mentoring them on their careers, projects, or other topics, coming back to the program as a guest speaker, or simply joining the current cohort for a dinner or a reception;
- Hosting alumni events, such as leadership training webinars, regional events, and alumni reunions;
- Offering collaboration and participation opportunities within the broader Bush Institute portfolio, including the work of the Veterans and Military Families team;
- Giving access to influential speakers and content experts within the Bush Center network.

Over 82% of Scholars agree that the Veteran Leadership Program provides opportunities to continue growing their network after they complete the program.

Figure 5: The program continues to provide Scholars with opportunities to grow their network as alumni

Please indicate how much you agree that participating in the Veteran Leadership Program influenced your network in the following ways:
The program has provided me with proper and adequate opportunities for effective network growth since graduation.
n = 52, mean = 4.04, standard deviation = 0.84; Source: 2021 Alumni Survey (Q22)



Scholars report that they stay connected with each other after the program concludes for social and professional reasons, including collaboration on professional projects, networking, and to gain valuable perspective from one another.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT CONTENT

The Veteran Leadership Program features a unique curriculum designed to teach participants the essential skills to be changemakers in the veteran and military family space.

Our content is developed from today's foremost thinking and research on leadership. The core curriculum aims to teach the most fundamental skills every leader must master to be successful in advancing social change, including vision and communication; decision-making; influencing and persuading others; and developing partnerships and collaborating, especially by working across traditional divides. The curriculum is designed to give Scholars experiences and interactions that help them reflect on their own leadership.

The program team spends as much time thinking about *how* to deliver our content as determining *what* content to deliver. The program's leadership and veteran-specific content is delivered through interactive sessions taught by the Bush Institute's world-class faculty through a series of modules and workshops. The sessions introduce the best evidence-based models, concepts, frameworks, and tools associated with the topic being highlighted in each module.

For example, Keith Hennessey, the David Rubenstein Fellow at the Bush Institute and lead faculty member, teaches decision-making through an exercise simulating a high-stakes White House meeting, where participants must come to consensus on difficult issues. Scholars play roles such as White House Chief of Staff, Secretary of Defense, and Domestic Policy Council Director. The exercise gives Scholars a chance to experience the decision-making model being taught in a safe – but still pressured – environment. Scholars then have access to Hennessey's decision-making tools and worksheets that they can translate into their own work.

Another example is a session led by Hennessey in partnership with Nicole Bibbins Sedaca, the Kelly and David Pfeil Fellow at the Bush Institute. The "Healthy Debate" exercise encourages Scholars to take a stand on current issues and debate them in a constructive format with members of their cohort, this allows them to understand that differences of opinions are OK and expected, but they provide a great opportunity to be challenged while learning to do so in a respectful manner.

I loved the session with Keith Hennessey. The simulation was a great way to fully immerse in the difficulties of complex decision making.

— Cohort Three Scholar

Table 1: Bush Institute leadership pillars

The Stand-To Veteran Leadership Program features a unique set of leadership development curriculum taught by world-class faculty and designed to teach participants the essential skills to be impactful in advancing social change. This curriculum is delivered through four pillars, each described in further detail below.

Leadership Pillar	Description
Engaging others through vision and communication	Telling your story or your organization’s story through effective communication is an essential leadership skill. The program curriculum includes instruction on identifying spheres of influence and shaping messaging to meet the needs of unique audiences.
Making decisions	Making the right decision and getting buy-in from key stakeholders on that decision is an integral part of strong leadership. The program curriculum teaches Scholars how to set up a process for effective decision-making. The program places emphasis on the importance of seeking outside input and diverse points of view, as well as strategies for increasing buy-in and successful execution.
Influencing and persuading stakeholders	After a key decision has been made, often the next step is to persuade relevant stakeholders to align with that choice. The program curriculum teaches Scholars to identify their spheres of influence and utilize tactics to influence long-term change.
Building strategic partnerships	Recognizing that building coalitions is key to the successful implementation of impactful projects and programs, the program provides instruction on building strategic partnerships. Scholars learn to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and utilize that knowledge to identify partners who bring unique strengths and perspectives to the table. Scholars also learn to consider the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion and manage difficult conversations with partners.

The Veteran Leadership Program instructs participants on factors that contribute to improving outcomes for veterans and their families. Scholars often enter the program with deep knowledge of an issue or sector; the program focuses on providing a big picture overview of the veteran space to complement this knowledge and fill in gaps.

Scholars found the sessions valuable to advancing their impact on veteran and military families through their jobs and their personal leadership projects. One Scholar noted that “the sessions made me better at my job, better at representing the population we serve. I’m able to generate the resources necessary to serve more people.” Close to 90% of program alumni agreed that participating in the five-month Veteran Leadership Program has led to increased leadership opportunities and responsibilities after completion.

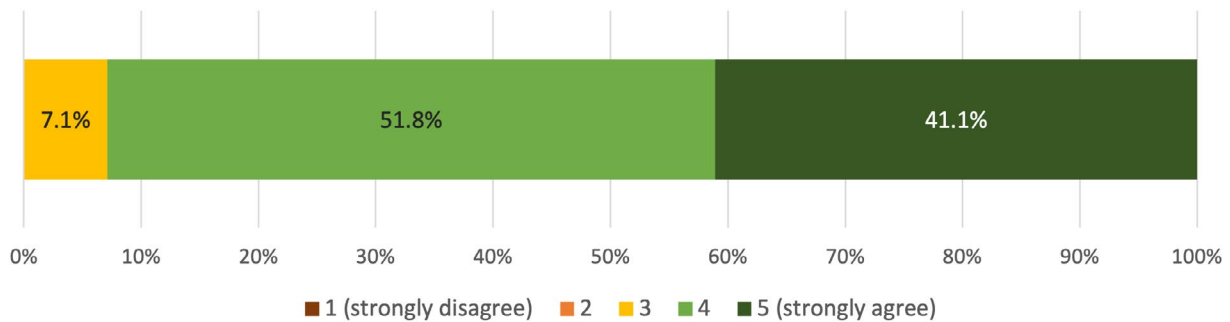
The program is also piloting content that encourages Scholars to measure their work’s impact in their communities and provides them with tools to do so.

“I think the fact that it was broad and all-encompassing, that we were going mile wide and inch deep, in general, on topics of the military-connected community was helpful... It let you see everything, but then know where the resources were to draw from.”

— Cohort Two Scholar

Figure 6: Through the program, Scholars gain leadership skills that increase their ability to make an impact

Please indicate whether and how much you agree that participating in the program has significantly influenced your life in the following ways:
I gained leadership skills and abilities that improved my ability to make a difference.
n= 56, mean = 4.339, standard deviation = 0.611; Source: 2021 Alumni Survey



Over 90% of alumni indicated that through participation in the Veteran Leadership Program, they gained leadership skills that improved their ability to make a difference in the lives of others.

Almost 95% of program alumni say they believe they have the leadership ability needed to succeed in effectively serving veterans. An overwhelming majority of alumni either strongly agreed or agreed that they are satisfied with their impact in serving veterans, indicating that the leadership skills taught in the program are being translated into real action.

INSPIRATION

One of the most powerful results of the Bush Institute's Veteran Leadership Program is the degree to which participants adopt a more expansive view of their role as a leader and their capacity to drive change.

Scholars have the opportunity to hear guest speakers discuss their personal experiences with leadership. These “off-the-record” conversations highlight examples in which the speakers had to make difficult decisions, build coalitions, and persuade others to follow them.

Past inspirational speakers have included former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald, astronauts Dr. Jonny Kim and Commander Victor Glover, Brigadier General Nadja West, and General James Mattis. These leaders talk about tough decisions they have made and don't shy away from answering difficult questions from Scholars. Many times, guest speakers also connect with Scholars after the in-person programming to help them along their career or personal leadership project paths.

“Prior to the Veteran Leadership Program, I always deferred to...my boss...never really stood up for values that I agreed with in a decision, or where I felt like my values contributed to decisions that were being made. And through the program – and certainly in the last year – I've really become a very vocal leader...I certainly did not have the confidence to do that two years ago.”
— Cohort Two Scholar

The program doesn't expect that Scholars will agree with everything the speakers say – learning from experienced leaders with diverse perspectives is just as valuable as learning from those you agree with. The goal is for Scholars to leave these sessions inspired – or in some cases reinspired – to face their own tough leadership challenges. Scholars also frequently report that they draw inspiration from their peers. The relationships developed are authentic and last beyond the five-month program. Not only are Scholars motivated

by the amazing accomplishments of their peers, they also become cheerleaders for one another, supporting each other in using their voices and stepping out of their comfort zones.

The Veteran Leadership Program emphasizes that extraordinary leaders must have the humility to recognize their own weaknesses and the vulnerability to accomplish something that requires more capacity and capability than they currently possess. This, coupled with the culture of trust that the program seeks to foster, encourages Scholars to explore challenges and weaknesses with each other. Participants motivate each other, learn from each other, and ultimately inspire one another to be better, do more, and aim higher.

After completing the program, Scholars overwhelmingly responded (91%) that they were motivated to achieve the impact they envision for the military-connected community. Participants also indicated that their inspiration to accomplish more and achieve higher has grown since the start of the program.

Interactions with peers and guest speakers not only lead to enhanced inspiration, but also an increased sense of purpose and passion for helping others. Four-fifths of program alumni believe their sense of purpose and role as a leader has grown since the beginning of the Veteran Leadership Program, and 82% agreed that their participation in the program increased their passion for improving society.

“My fellow Scholars serve as a constant source of inspiration. They are each pursuing something impactful and important to them, and it is motivating to follow their journey!”

— Cohort Three Scholar

85%

of Scholars agreed or strongly agreed that the Veteran Leadership Program inspired them to dream bigger and accomplish more.

Cohort Three Scholar Verence Castillo is the Founder and CEO of the Military Spouse Advocacy Network, whose

mission is to create stronger military families through education, empowerment, and support. Castillo cites the Veteran Leadership Program as instrumental in the growth of her organization’s Military Spouse Mentorship-HUB (Help Us Bridge). It helps connect military spouses from every branch of the Armed Forces, caregivers, and Gold Star/surviving spouses with their surrounding communities through virtual education and resource centers, military spouse mentorship support, and leadership development programs. The HUB provides military spouses and their families with a sense of community and 24/7 peer-to-peer mentorship with an outreach of over 418,000 families. Through the resources and network Castillo gained during the Veteran Leadership Program, MSAN has partnered with the State of Alabama on a new initiative providing Alabama military families with their own HUB uniquely curated with local connections to resources in the state.



“The program gave me a unique opportunity to strengthen my leadership skills and learn from an amazing network of leaders in our community. Thanks to this program, MSAN has grown its outreach, and thousands of military spouses are now receiving peer-to-peer mentorship.”

—Verence Castillo, Class of 2021

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

The Veteran Leadership Program aims to provide Scholars with access to the resources they need to expand their leadership capacity and drive change.

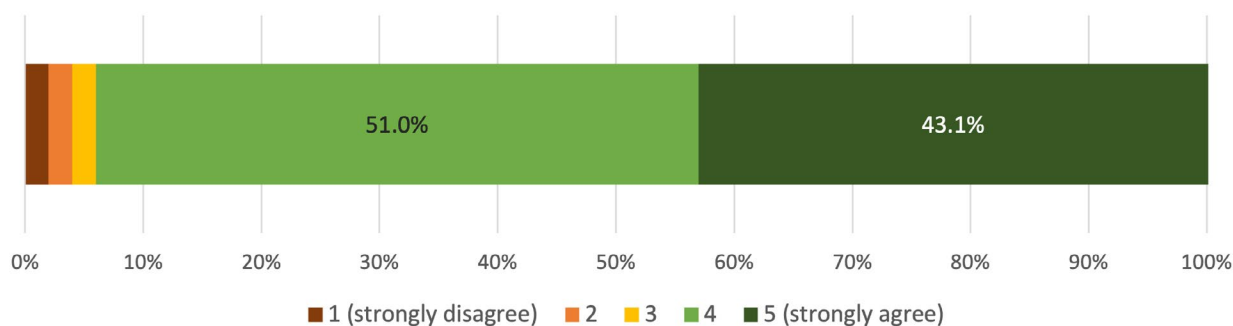
These resources often synergize with the value gained from the inspiration, network, and leadership curriculum pillars. Scholars work with their peers to access new connections, partnerships, and sources of funding that can help catalyze their impact on veterans and military families. Program faculty provide Scholars with tools and frameworks for enhancing their ability to define and communicate their vision, making decisions, building strategic partnerships, and influencing and persuading others.

Based on conversations with other Scholars and speakers in the program, one Scholar was able to make significant changes in his organization. This action helped more than triple the number of veterans served. He commented, “It wasn’t just the fact that they were teaching communication, it was that I had access to board members, executive directors, founders, people I could just engage with and learn exactly how a veteran leadership or veteran service organization industry [person thinks], and I think the classmates were one of the most important parts of that.”

Ninety-four percent of alumni strongly agree or agree that the access to resources provided through the program assisted their development and success as a leader.

Figure 7: The Veteran Leadership Program provides scholars with resources that contribute to their success as a leader

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:
“The amount of access and resources provided me through the Veteran Leadership Program has helped my development and success as a leader.”
n = 51, mean = 4.31, standard deviation = 0.79 ; Source: 2021 Alumni Survey (Q27)



Guest speakers also provide access to resources. Secretary McDonald helped connect one Scholar with top officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Scholar stated, “Several months later, [the secretary] took my call, read my email, and then had introductions for me.” The connection led to a collaboration with the VA on veteran mental health and well-being.

Cohort One Scholar Richard Casper credits the Veteran Leadership Program with the expansion of his personal leadership project, CreatiVets, which helps veterans cope with service-related trauma through art, including songwriting, visual arts, music, and creative writing. The Veteran Leadership Program helped Casper realize that if he collected quantitative data on his programs, he could apply for larger grants and have more conversations with the government and larger nonprofit groups about funding and partnerships. Due to connections made through the program, CreatiVets got a \$75,000 grant that allowed the organization to expand its songwriting program, which pairs veterans with accomplished songwriters who help the veteran share their story through music. The expanded songwriting program eventually led to a record deal allowing the songs to be recorded by artists and released to the veteran.



“The Veteran Leadership Program changed us forever. We grew so quickly because of the Bush Institute, and most of the achievements that happened since then were because of VLP.”

— Richard Casper, Class of 2018

PERSONAL LEADERSHIP PROJECT

Scholars come into the program with a personal leadership project, a unique, scalable project with the potential to positively impact the veteran community. The impact of Scholars' participation in the program is measured not only by the personal growth of the Scholars, but also through the real-world actions they take to advance and enhance the lives of veterans and their families.

The personal leadership projects allow Scholars an opportunity to apply their newly acquired skills to their own work. Faculty use the projects as teaching tools in their sessions, encouraging Scholars to think about how the concepts being taught apply to their projects. In the first module, Scholars are assigned to a peer feedback group with three to four other Scholars. The group members help each other refine and advance their projects, providing advice and connections to outside experts and resources.

At the end of the program, Scholars give brief presentations on their personal leadership projects to their fellow Scholars and invited guests, including a panel of experts who provide feedback on the presentation and project.

Many Scholars catalyze their project and increase their impact on the veteran and military-connected community due to the programming. Scholar initiatives have led to legislation that recognizes the contribution of black, female veterans, creation of mentorship opportunities for military spouses, increased visibility and opportunities around veteran education and employment, and more veteran connections to high-quality care in an effort to prevent suicide. And sometimes the most impactful thing that can happen is a Scholar declaring to end or change their project. They learn through the program when to pivot and use their valuable time and talents elsewhere.

“Being able to talk to so many people from diverse backgrounds, whether it would be from a data science background or someone who works on the corporate side, to run an idea by them and understand what resonates with them and what doesn't, that helps to build confidence and direction and how we frame the project to ensure it makes sense to people from different backgrounds.”

— Cohort Two Scholar

CONCLUSION

Training and supporting leaders are key ways the Bush Institute helps to address the challenges facing our veterans and their families. Now that the program has 176 alumni, the team has learned a few things. They include five key components that will make a difference for the participants:

1. Creating a vibrant, engaged, and diverse network that lives beyond the five-month program.
2. Delivering strong leadership development content that is experiential in nature and provides space for participants to reflect on their own leadership journey.
3. Reinvigorating the Scholars who go through the program and who are in the alumni network with inspiring stories, interactions, and peers.
4. Giving access to key resources to participants so they can expand their toolboxes and networks.
5. Using a personal leadership project as a teaching tool, which may also lead to strong outcomes for veterans and their families as a result.

The Bush Institute is committed to continuing this work. Each year, the team selects a new cohort of Scholars. To learn more about the application process, visit our website at bushcenter.org.



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