

# Issue BRIEF

## Helping Veterans Transition to Civilian Manufacturing Careers: Michigan's M-CAM Experience



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### ABOUT THIS PROJECT

*The lessons in this brief are drawn from Social Policy Research Associates' (SPR's) evaluation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. M-CAM is a coalition of eight community colleges in Michigan that used grant funds to strengthen four career pathways—Welding/Fabrication, Production, Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics, and CNC Machining.*



### ABOUT THE TAACCCT GRANTS

*The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. TAACCCT funding assists community colleges in expanding and improving training programs that can be completed in two years or less for high-demand, high-skilled occupations.*

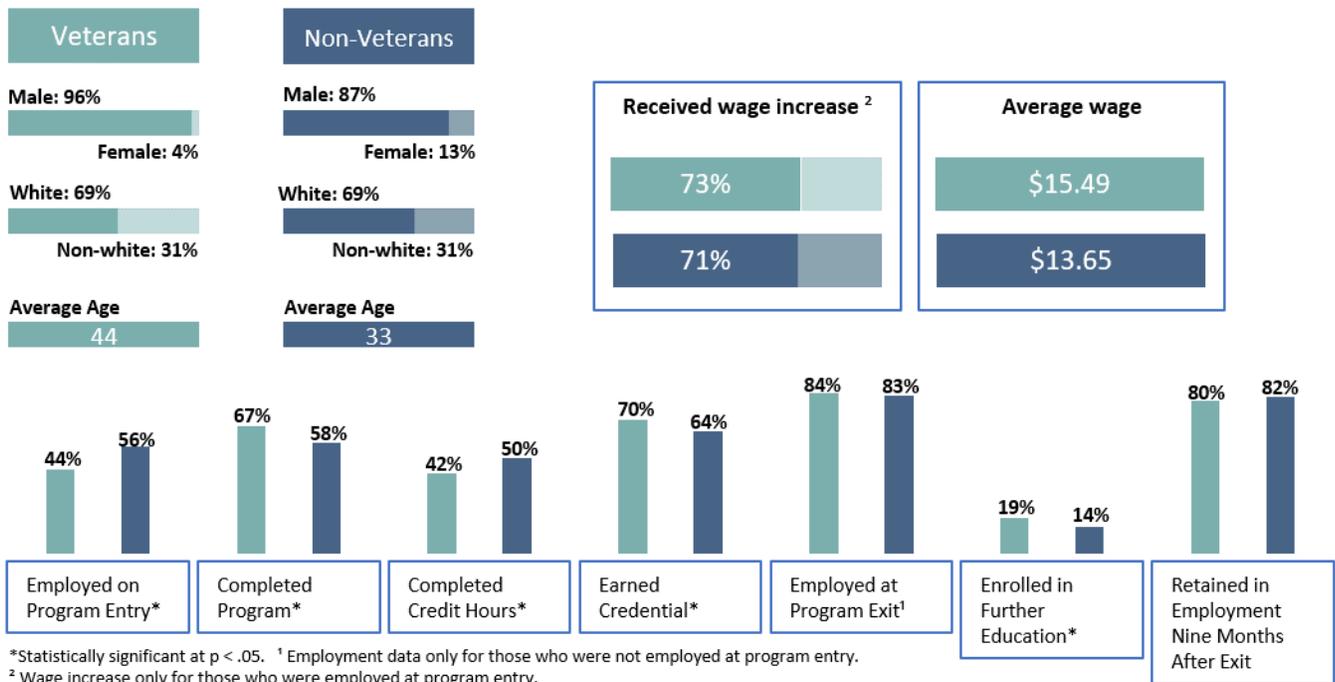
Veterans are unique in that they bring years of military education, training, and experience with them when pursuing a college education. While most of these experiences are positive, veterans face some unique economic and employment challenges, including difficulty understanding the local civilian labor market, difficulty describing their military experience so that it maps well to skills needed for civilian occupations, employer preconceptions that they face mental or physical health limitations, and difficulty finding civilian employment that matches their military paygrade. Community colleges can play a key role in helping to address these areas and in assisting veterans with their military-to-civilian transition process.

This brief draws on data from 251 veterans who enrolled in the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) training programs over a three-year period (2014–2017). It draws on qualitative and quantitative data to explore both institutional and M-CAM-specific efforts to serve veterans across eight consortium colleges, including veterans' motivations for pursuing training, their educational histories, their views of the local manufacturing labor market, the types of training they pursued, and their satisfaction with training programs and post-program employment. These findings can inform community college efforts to improve veterans' transition from military service into educational training programs and eventually the civilian labor force, particularly in the manufacturing trades.

### WHAT WE LEARNED

- Veteran students were older than nonveteran students and were more likely to earn credentials and complete their programs of study. They were also significantly more likely to enroll in further education after completing the M-CAM program.
- Support services designed for veterans and provided by the college or by veteran-serving organizations played important roles throughout veteran students' participation in the program. These services ranged from connecting veterans to the program; to supporting their mental and physical health and financial needs; to helping translate skills, college administrative processes, and the job search process so they could better navigate learning and work in the civilian world.
- Business outreach that helped companies understand the full range of assets veterans bring to the workplace—including a strong work ethic, loyalty, and an understanding of command structures—was also important in helping veterans secure work commensurate with their skills and experience.

Exhibit 1: Key Statistics



## By the Numbers: Veterans Served in M-CAM Manufacturing Programs

A total of 251 veterans enrolled in M-CAM, representing just over 6 percent of the total number of individuals served under the grant.<sup>1</sup> Many M-CAM colleges reported having difficulty attracting veterans to their advanced manufacturing programs, but were unable to pinpoint reasons for their low enrollment, even though colleges paid special attention to attracting this target group. As shown in Exhibit 1, veteran students were, on average, 10 years older than nonveterans, which is not surprising given that they attend college after completing their military service.

At the time of enrollment veterans had relatively high educational attainment levels: 41 percent of veterans possessed their GED or high school diploma (compared to 59 percent of all participants); and 59 percent possessed an associate’s degree, some technical or college education or higher (compared to only 37 percent of all participants).

Veterans were significantly less likely to enroll in credit programs, opting instead for short-term, noncredit programs so that they could return to the civilian labor force quickly upon program completion. The short-term nature of the noncredit training programs was one reason that veterans were significantly more likely to complete their programs of study and earn college certificates than were nonveteran students. In addition, veterans were also significantly more likely than nonveterans to enroll in further education, which may be due to the additional educational benefits they receive from their years of military service.

## Experiences and Perspectives of Veterans in Manufacturing Programs

Like many older students, the veteran students we interviewed saw the M-CAM program as an opportunity to upgrade their skills so they could access better job and career opportunities in the civilian labor market. A few veterans reported that the credentials they earned through M-CAM validated the skills gained during their military experience, especially for those who had served in equipment and mechanical support positions. One veteran commented that after coming out of the military he quickly obtained work on a production line, but found the work mundane. After seeing a flyer about M-CAM, he decided to pursue a noncredit Multi-Skilled program and now has a successful career as an industrial maintenance technician. Referring to his initial production job, the veteran stated that *“It was more, and I hate to say*

it like this, but it was a job that anybody could've done. All you had to do was be there." In comparison, his multi-skilled industrial maintenance technician job was more mentally challenging and allowed him to use his advanced skillset to repair equipment, including robotic equipment: "This here, it's more of a skill—what you learned and what you know. It's repairing and it's hands-on. It feels more like man's work instead of monkey's work, if you understand that." Most veterans whom we interviewed found that the hands-on nature of M-CAM training programs suited their learning styles and that they learned best "by doing."

## Strategies for Addressing Education and Employment Challenges Faced by Veterans

College staff and veterans' service organizations identified the following as helpful in recruiting and effectively serving veterans:

- **Specialized job placement staff helped prepare veterans for civilian employment.** Interviews with college staff, public workforce professionals, veterans' organizations, and veteran students revealed that many veterans were unprepared to find suitable employment after leaving the military. Many veterans lacked a solid understanding of how they could transition their military skills, abilities, and training into civilian employment: this was particularly true for veterans who had separated from the military while holding a relatively low rank, had a service-connected disability, had received a dishonorable discharge, or had served in support occupations.<sup>ii</sup> To assist veterans, the eight M-CAM colleges provided coaching services, which were built into the grant's case management and service delivery structure for all M-CAM students. These career coaches assisted veterans with enrollment, benefits coordination, understanding the local labor market, academic advising and career counseling, and referrals to supportive service providers. In some instances, these services were available from a specialized veterans' coordinator at the college. M-CAM career coaches also provided individualized job search and placement assistance, such as assistance with interviewing skills and developing personal online profiles, such as LinkedIn and Monster.
- **Community-based organizations provided a source for recruitment and key wrap-around services for veterans.** M-CAM and veterans' organizations staff reported that veterans often face barriers that limit their employment opportunities, such as mental health challenges, substance abuse, and homelessness, all of which make them difficult to recruit for educational programs. To reach this population, a few M-CAM colleges recruited veterans directly from homeless shelters and organizations for at-risk veterans. M-CAM career coaches who served this population said that these vulnerable veterans had a strong desire and willingness to change their lives and appreciated the additional support the colleges provided. To assist these veterans with mental health and substance abuse issues, the M-CAM career coaches worked with the referring organizations to provide licensed professional counseling services or referrals to these services. The M-CAM career coaches also helped veterans navigate the educational environment and provided academic supports such as tutoring. Overall, colleges provided the educational and career planning component, while the service organizations provided a suite of services that helped make college and career possible for veterans.
- **Veterans' departments at colleges provided vital supports and services.** In addition to the M-CAM career coaches, the colleges also had specialized staff to assist veterans with benefits-focused counseling, veterans-only resource areas, job search and placement assistance, and nonacademic support such as child care and housing assistance. These additional supports helped make veterans feel welcome and more at ease in attending the colleges. Many of the M-CAM colleges also had special funding sources to assist veterans with educational and other support such

*"The college offered an excellent program to target homeless veterans .... A lot of the guys that were homeless at the time when the program was introduced and actually went through the program—they're not homeless anymore."*

- Homeless Shelter Service Provider

*"A veteran's service, called SOS, gave me money to get my [wheel bearing] repaired on my car as well as some gas money once and it definitely helped."*

- 39-year-old male, Multi-Skilled student

*"My heater went out: they fixed that. I needed clothes for the interview, they took care of that. [The extra money] got me through."*

- 50-year-old male, Multi-Skilled student

as transportation, housing, utilities, and supplies.

- *Colleges played a vital role in helping employers understand the benefits of hiring veterans.* Several M-CAM career coaches worked closely with employers to highlight the benefits of hiring veterans, such as their ability to follow a chain of command, their strong work ethic, their loyalty, and their ability to quickly assess a situation and respond appropriately. With individualized job search and placement assistance from M-CAM career coaches, veterans were placed with local employers that fit their unique circumstances. For example, a veteran at one college stated that while he enjoyed “tinkering with things” he could not work in a shop with a lot of noise because it flared his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). After the veteran completed his for-credit Welding program, his M-CAM career coach helped secure him employment in a small foundry with less noise that also provided him with a quiet space where he could retreat if his PTSD surfaced while on the job.

## Implications

Community colleges can take better integrate veterans into their colleges by taking the following steps:

- **Actively market services to veterans at transition events before they leave military service.**
- **Provide holistic services to veterans—not just benefits counseling—including customized academic, nonacademic, and employment assistance.**
- **Provide flexible scheduling, such as open entry times, for veterans so they can quickly transition to educational programs without having to wait for the next cohort or semester to start.**
- **Coordinate articulation and prior learning assessment policies to ensure veterans obtain credit for military training and work experience to maximize their educational attainment.**
- **Connect with veterans’ organizations to coordinate the full range of veteran services across organizations, including education, job search and placement, and supportive services.**

M-CAM College Veterans-Specific Supports	
	<b>Specialized Department Focused on Veterans.</b> Seven colleges had a specialized department focused on veterans’ services.
	<b>Specialized Veterans Coordinator.</b> Eight colleges had a specialized coordinator to assist veterans in navigating educational benefits and the college enrollment process.
	<b>Veteran-Focused Web Content.</b> Eight colleges had specialized website pages for veterans on their college websites
	<b>Veterans’-Specific Services.</b> Eight college provided veterans with specialized services such as early enrollment periods, referrals to outside organizations, reduced costs for event tickets, etc.
	<b>Student-Oriented Club.</b> Three colleges had a special student-oriented veterans’ club that served as a support system for veteran students.
	<b>Special Resource Room.</b> Five colleges provided veterans with special resource areas, such as meeting and computer rooms.

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<sup>i</sup> Eligible Veteran Status refers to an individual who served in the active U.S. military, naval, or air service for a period of more than or equal to 180 days and who was discharged or released from such service under conditions other than dishonorable. The percent of veterans served under M-CAM may be underrepresented because it was self-reported data.

<sup>ii</sup> Sara Kintzle, et al., *Exploring the Economic and Employment Challenges Facing U.S. Veterans: A Qualitative Study of Volunteers of America Service Providers and Veteran Clients* (Los Angeles: USC School of Social Work, Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, 2015).

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