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Fort Campbell Soldiers Get Entrepreneurship Training in Nashville

April Wortham

Seventeen years in the military has taught Army Capt. [Patrick Long](#) some valuable skills. How to start a business isn't one of them.

"The training the military provides you upon leaving the service, it's not geared toward being an entrepreneur," said Long, who is part owner in a Clarksville homebuilding business and hopes to start a health care company. "How do I take an idea that I know is a pretty good idea and turn that into a viable idea?"

Enter the Nashville Entrepreneur Center, which is working on a new initiative aimed at connecting military veterans with the training and resources they need to launch their own businesses.

Partnering with Lipscomb University and Fort Campbell, the entrepreneur center hopes to create a training and educational series specifically tailored to vets, including monthly networking events with other entrepreneurs and an online resource library.

Details of the initiative are being worked out with an advisory committee scheduled to meet later this month. But the goal is to have three or four veteran-led startups working out of the center's offices on Broadway by late spring.

About 17,000 Fort Campbell soldiers will be returning from the Middle East in the coming months, including about 7,000 members of the 101st Airborne Division and 101st Combat Aviation Brigade who are due back by the end of March. Many of those soldiers have been deployed for up to eight years, said entrepreneur center CEO [Michael Burcham](#), who spent six years in the Army National Guard to pay for college.

"They're coming back to a radically different economy, and this is a good time to think about how they might use their skills that they've gained to maybe create a business of their own," Burcham said.

Those skills don't always come from a textbook, said [David Hughes](#), assistant dean of students at Lipscomb and director of the university's Yellow Ribbon program. Launched in 2009, the program allows eligible veterans to attend Lipscomb and earn a college degree tuition-free.

"Not every veteran is an entrepreneur, but there are definitely some who've been tested in real-life situations where their decisions had heavy repercussions," Hughes said. "That experience coupled with a formal education works in unison to create an individual who can function in an entrepreneurial setting."

[Todd Vandawater](#), a retired Army captain who now works in commercial banking at Fifth Third Bank in Nashville, agrees. He said the military teaches many of the same skills necessary in running a successful business, such as how to develop and execute plans at a highly detailed level.

"Like (Burcham), I see there are a lot of skill sets necessary in business that are developed in the military, but you don't necessarily see the avenues of how to apply those," said Vandawater, a West Point graduate who is part of the advisory committee helping to spearhead the veterans initiative. "And with unemployment being higher than we've ever seen it, veterans certainly need other options."