

ASU business program helps veterans transition from battlefield to boardroom

AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans emphasizes values over placements when navigating the next phase of veterans' lives

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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On a rainy fall afternoon, the McCord Hall conference room on Arizona State University's Tempe campus carried the quiet hum of anticipation. A group of veterans that included both men and women who had worn uniforms across decades, continents and conflicts, settled into their chairs with the easy discipline of people used to showing up early. All came here for one reason: to figure out what comes next.

At the head of the classroom stood [Michael Guggemos](#), tall, broad-shouldered and carrying the kind of presence that doesn't need to be announced. He wasn't there to deliver a lecture or to present a PowerPoint. He was there to tell the truth; the kind of truth only someone who had lived through the gauntlet of transition from military life to the corporate battlefield could deliver.

"This isn't about titles or corner offices," said Guggemos, a professor of practice in the [Department of Information Systems](#) at the [W. P. Carey School of Business](#). "It's about knowing who you are, what you value and how that lines up with the life you want to live. If you don't start there, none of the rest matters."

Around the classroom, heads nodded. Some of the veterans had been out of the service for decades, others only a few years. But all carried the same questions that gnaw at every soldier-turned-civilian: What's my mission now? Who am I without the uniform? What does my next chapter look like?

A mission reimaged

For Guggemos, those questions weren't theoretical. Long before he became a respected executive mentor to veterans, as well as an executive at multiple global Fortune 500 companies, he faced them himself. His decade-long stint in the U.S. Army had shaped his worldview that mainly focused on discipline, service and loyalty. However, it was the messy process of leaving that world behind that forced him to redefine what success meant.

That journey eventually led him to play a central role in shaping the [AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans](#) program, a business-focused initiative designed to help veterans bridge the daunting gap between military life and civilian careers. It's a free offering for veterans and current service members interested in business, and those who have recently transitioned and want to increase their business knowledge.

Made possible by a U.S. Department of Labor grant and sponsored by [AZNext](#), the program is offered a few times a year. Billed as being "for vets, by vets," it brings together a team of instructors who are experienced business leaders, most of whom have served in the military.

Interested in the program?

Those interested in AZNext's Business Readiness for Veterans can [register online](#) or [find more information](#).

The thing that makes this work is authenticity.

Mike Guggemos

ASU professor of practice

"We put the program together based on feedback from both industry and veterans, noting that veterans, while highly sought after for employment, sometimes had difficulties adjusting to work in a high-tech business. They had the knowledge, but they used a different terminology, and were used to different priorities," said [Rob Buelow](#), program director for AZNext. "So our program helps them translate those service skills into corporate skills by showing them how to connect the dots to what they did in the service and how that works organizationally in the corporate world."

On paper, the program looks fairly straightforward: modules in communication, human resources, finance and accounting administration, operations, cybersecurity and IT. But in practice, it's a place where veterans strip away the cliches, share the unvarnished truth of their experiences and rediscover how to translate battlefield skills into boardroom credibility.

"The thing that makes this work," Guggemos says, "is authenticity. Veterans know when someone's faking it and they also know what organizations say they expect is rarely what they tolerate. What they need isn't another seminar. They need people who've been where they are, who've made the same mistakes, who know the cost of getting it wrong."

For Navy veteran Deirdre Martin, the program meant far more than classroom lessons. It was more of a lifeline, a chance to reclaim her future when the stakes couldn't have been higher.

Martin enlisted in 1994 and entered as a ship serviceman, responsible for maintaining both the inside and outside surfaces of the vessel. But just as she was settling in, her body began to betray her. At only 21, Martin developed severe joint pain and had difficulty walking. Doctors initially dismissed her symptoms as overuse.

“They thought I’d just overworked my knees, that my ankles needed rehab,” Martin said. For a year and a half, she was misdiagnosed and treated for conditions she didn’t have. Finally, a physician at Portsmouth Naval Hospital diagnosed her with lupus.

Medically retired in 1997 with a disability rating she describes as “lowballed,” Martin left the Navy with little guidance and few resources. Over the years, lupus continued to wreak havoc on her health.

Today, Martin works part time for her church in South Phoenix, where she settled in 2020 after buying a home during the height of the pandemic. While grateful for the job, she realized recently that it wasn’t enough to sustain her long term.

“I woke up and thought, ‘You’re a woman of a particular age. This is good work, but it’s not going to cut it. You need to figure out what’s next.’”

The next step arrived in the form of an email about a veterans’ business cohort.

“I do have an opportunity to go into financial management,” she said. “I signed up two nights ago for this class and thank God they had space for me. I believe it’s divine, and that’s why I’m here.”

More than job placement

The business world loves metrics: revenue growth, market share, quarterly returns. But as Guggemos and his colleagues emphasize, measuring their success goes far beyond job placements or salary bumps.

For many participants, the true impact lies in personal clarity. They want to understand not just what kind of job they want, but what kind of life they’re building. Veterans leave the program with sharpened mission statements that evolve from simple career goals to value-driven philosophies. They begin to see that success isn’t just about climbing a ladder but about aligning work with purpose.

That’s exactly why Charles Husted signed up for the program.

Husted served in the Marines from 2010 to 2014 to see the world. An infantry man, he spent much of his time on Marine expeditionary units, traveling with the Navy on the high seas to project presence abroad.

When he left the Corps, Husted was fortunate to step almost immediately into a promising opportunity. Microsoft had just launched its Software Systems Academy, designed to help transitioning service members move onto IT roles.

From there, Husted’s career accelerated. A former Marine pilot hired him into a corporate role at LA Fitness, where he climbed steadily from quality assurance to developer to data warehouse

developer.

“I was working my way up,” he said. “And then COVID-19 happened.”

But rather than retreat, Husted doubled down on education. He enrolled at ASU, earning a bachelor's degree in business data analytics, and is currently pursuing an MBA at ASU's W. P. Carey School of Business. Still, he acknowledges finding his way hasn't been easy.

“I can see where I am, and I can see where I want to go,” Husted said. “But how to get there still eludes me. That's why I'm here, learning from people with experience. I know someone in this room knows something that can help me get to the next level.”

Word of mouth is what keeps the program growing. Veterans talk, and trust spreads quickly when it's earned. From coast to coast, stories circulate of former service members who found not just a new job, but a new sense of belonging.

At the center of many of these stories is Guggemos; equal parts mentor, coach and truth-teller.

Lessons from Motorola

Years before he ever sat at the head of a table full of fellow veterans, Guggemos was climbing the ranks at Motorola from night shift manufacturing to senior global technology executive for one of America's most storied technology companies. Its position has faded in the last few decades, yet he arrived during a period of broad market dominance and rapid transformation. The company was evolving from its two-way radios roots into a global player across all forms of mobile communications.

“I was excited to be a Motorolan,” Guggemos said. “I used their kit when in the service, believed in their mission and values.”

By the time Guggemos left, Motorola been through multiple boom-and-bust cycles and ultimately co-led the global splits of IT systems and teams into separate multibillion-dollar global companies across 67 countries. The scale was enormous, the pace relentless and the stakes, which turned out to be both financial and personal, were staggering.

On paper, he was the definition of financial and career success. Senior executive roles followed across multiple companies but life, Guggemos would learn, isn't lived on paper.

“COVID-19 created global chaos, and as a result, opportunities were greater than ever,” he said. “Network was hot, and opportunities were plenty. But at home, it was a different story.”

Ongoing health issues in Guggemos' family forced choices few ambitious executives are ever ready to face: continue on with greater challenges or step aside. For Guggemos, the decision was wrenching but clear. He stepped away from business, not because he lacked ambition, but because he understood something many business leaders only grasp in hindsight. That is, career achievements mean little if they come at the expense of family.

“It wasn't easy, yet was ultimately simple,” he said. “I enjoy work. I get excited simplifying complexities of people, processes and technologies interacting at global scale, but I worked *for* my

family. I talked about family first for years but did not live it. (That) realization was humbling.”

The decision reshaped not only his life, but his worldview. He began to see career paths less as linear ladders and more as values-driven journeys. For him, success wasn’t about stock prices or executive titles. It was more about whether work aligned with things that mattered most to him.

From goals to values

That evolution in thinking now underpins much of the program. Too often, veterans leaving the military are handed spreadsheets of potential job titles, lists of transferable skills or well-meaning advice to “network.”

What’s missing, Guggemos argues, is the grounding question: What do you actually value?

“When I was younger, my mission statement was all goals. Pay rent, hit this target, achieve these goals, buy a house in this neighborhood,” he said. “Over time, it shifted. Now it’s about values. If you don’t know your values, you’ll take a job that pays well but eats you alive; been there.”

That insight has become one of the program’s guiding principles. Veterans are encouraged not just to chase jobs, but to interrogate whether those jobs align with who they are and what they want their lives to stand for.

It’s a message that resonates because Guggemos himself has lived the structured clarity of military life and the messy ambiguity of corporate America. He knows what it’s like to leave a defined, action-oriented mission and enter a world where success is often measured in unfamiliar ways.

For Alyssa Ebers, military service meant clarity of mission and confidence in leadership. A reservist and Air Force officer, she rose to the rank of captain and served as branch chief leading a team of 20 across three different units.

“I had Navy, Army and Air Force under me,” said Ebers, who traveled from her home in Flagstaff, Arizona, to attend the program. “We had a very distinct mission. We knew what to look for, where to look and what could affect our aircraft. It was clear, and I thrived in that environment.”

The transition to civilian life, however, has been less straightforward. Today, Ebers works as a specialist. It’s an important role, but one that feels like a step down from the leadership positions she once held.

“It seems like a very significant decrease from what I was doing,” she admitted. “I can see what I’m doing has impact, but it’s not nearly as significant. I’m not leading a team. I’m not right where I want to be, because I like leading. I like building up teams. I like projects. And right now, I’m just part of a team.”

Her first impressions of the program have been encouraging.

“It does seem like people are invested,” Ebers said. “I’ve had experience with other veteran mentorship programs where people sign up but really don’t know why they’re there. This one feels different. It seems very established, and people genuinely want to help. That’s a good sign.”

Mentor Patrick Gallagher said he's 100% invested and wants to help people like Ebers find meaningful employment again.

"My military experience got me my job, but it didn't give me a career," said Gallagher, a Marine Corps veteran who now serves as one of the program's senior mentors.

Gallagher lives in Chandler, Arizona, but works remotely as an engagement manager for TEK Systems, an IT services company based in Maryland. Gallagher has spent decades navigating the transition from military to civilian life with remarkable adaptability, which is why he has turned a lot of his focus to mentoring veterans.

It was through this work that Gallagher connected with Guggemos, whose corporate training class he initially intended to audit. Instead, he became a full participant and one of its biggest advocates.

"The training was probably the most important I've received in the last 20 years," Gallagher said. For Gallagher, the experience reinforced a lesson he learned in the Marines: In order to be effective, one must understand the broader mission and the roles everyone plays in achieving it.

At its core, this class is about honesty. We're talking honestly about who you are, what your struggles are and how the world works.

Jake Crown

AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans mentor

Building trust through honesty

Unlike many career-transition workshops, the program doesn't start with resumes or job boards. It starts with conversation.

Veterans sit around a table and talk about their fears, their failures, their doubts. They share stories of interviews gone wrong, of civilian bosses who couldn't understand military jargon, of marriages strained by the stress of starting over.

The goal isn't therapy; it's honesty. And in that honesty, trust begins to form.

"Credibility doesn't come from a title," Guggemos reminds them. "It comes from the person being real about where they have been, mistakes made and doing the work to improve. There are no secrets, only awareness and work."

Entrepreneur Zach Fuller certainly has credibility in the business world, and he is using his military experience to help other veterans.

An Army Green Beret, Fuller spent five years in the service mastering unconventional warfare and human intelligence operations, including interrogation, surveillance and countersurveillance. Today, he applies that same disciplined mindset to the cybersecurity industry, where his company, Silent Sector, provides professional services to mid-market and emerging businesses across the United States.

“The Army gave me the ability to go in and accomplish a mission regardless of what resources you have available,” he said. “Once we set a goal or an objective, we build those resources, bring the people together that we need, and execute on that objective. The same is true in entrepreneurship. You start with little to nothing and over time build multiple businesses.”

Based in Scottsdale, Arizona, Silent Sector has grown beyond its local roots, employing team members in eight states from Texas to Oregon. Even though his time is limited, he makes sure to carve time out for Guggemos’ program.

“Instead of staying tied up in your day-to-day operations, this course helps you step back, look objectively at where you can improve and focus on your career paths, strengths and weaknesses,” Fuller said. “It’s powerful to have instructors who think differently.”

The weight of leadership

Jake Crown grew up surrounded by military influence, though he never wore the uniform himself. His grandfather served, and his father and uncle moved frequently as part of a military upbringing.

“Those military values and lifestyle were instilled in me growing up,” said Crown, who is a mentor in the program.

Today, he carries those lessons into his role as vice president of development at AZ Crown Investments and into his commitment to helping veterans transition into civilian life.

“The headlines around veteran suicide or the health outcomes associated with transitioning out of the military life are kind of astonishing,” he said. “I’ve always thought a lot about how to live an impactful life, and this is one of those areas where I feel I can make a difference.”

Part of that difference, Crown believes, is giving veterans tools that don’t require decades of experience, but rather the right kind of mentorship.

“There are certain skills and principles you just need to walk someone through,” Crown said. “At its core, this class is about honesty. We’re talking honestly about who you are, what your struggles are and how the world works. That honesty helps people change the way they view themselves and how they value their prior military service.”

Because he never served, Crown said he brings a slightly different perspective to the room. From his vantage point, the hardest part of the transition for veterans is redefining their identity and adjusting their mindset.

“In the military, the respect of the chain of command is instilled in you from day one,” he said. “But in the civilian world, that chain of command isn’t as rigid — or as respected. Communication is also completely different. In the service, you’re trained to get right to the point, strip out the emotion and

commentary. But in business, emotion and politics aren't avoidable, they're required. You have to build consensus."

It's an art form that David Thralls is still trying to perfect.

He joined the Marine Corps in 2000, when he was just 19, eager for challenge and purpose. For the next four years, he served with the Second Battalion, Fifth Marines as a mortar man, working in the fire direction control center.

The work was demanding, but it was also straightforward in its clarity. Life after the Marines, however, proved much more complicated. Thralls left the service in 2004, just a year after returning home from Iraq, where his daughter had been born while he was deployed.

"I came back, and now I had no job and a family to provide for at 24 years old," he said. "It's a ton of responsibility. The Marine Corps gives you lots of tools, but they don't necessarily teach you how to translate those tools into the civilian world. I've always had rough edges, and that doesn't always mesh well outside the military."

Thralls admits his blunt style sometimes worked against him in corporate settings.

"I'm really good at handling pressure, but when my meter tops out, I don't always articulate things the best way. That's something I've had to work on."

As he moves forward, focusing on a career in IT, Thralls is finding inspiration in the openness of his peers and mentors.

"Hearing people share their experiences makes me want to tell more of my own story," he said. "I've always preferred to fly under the radar, but being around other vets — it grounds you. It reminds you we're all figuring it out, and we can learn a lot from each other."

Shared experience, shared language

Mentor Matt Silverman, who currently serves as a colonel in the United States Army Reserve, said the gap between military and civilian life isn't about ability but language.

"Soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines don't always have the vocabulary to explain how valuable they are," said Silverman, who runs AIB Partners out of Madison, Wisconsin. "This program helps them build that transition."

His perspective comes from experience. From 2004 to 2008, Silverman served on active duty, spending 15 months deployed in Iraq. That time, he says, taught him both the strengths and challenges of military life. Lessons that surface again during the transition to civilian careers.

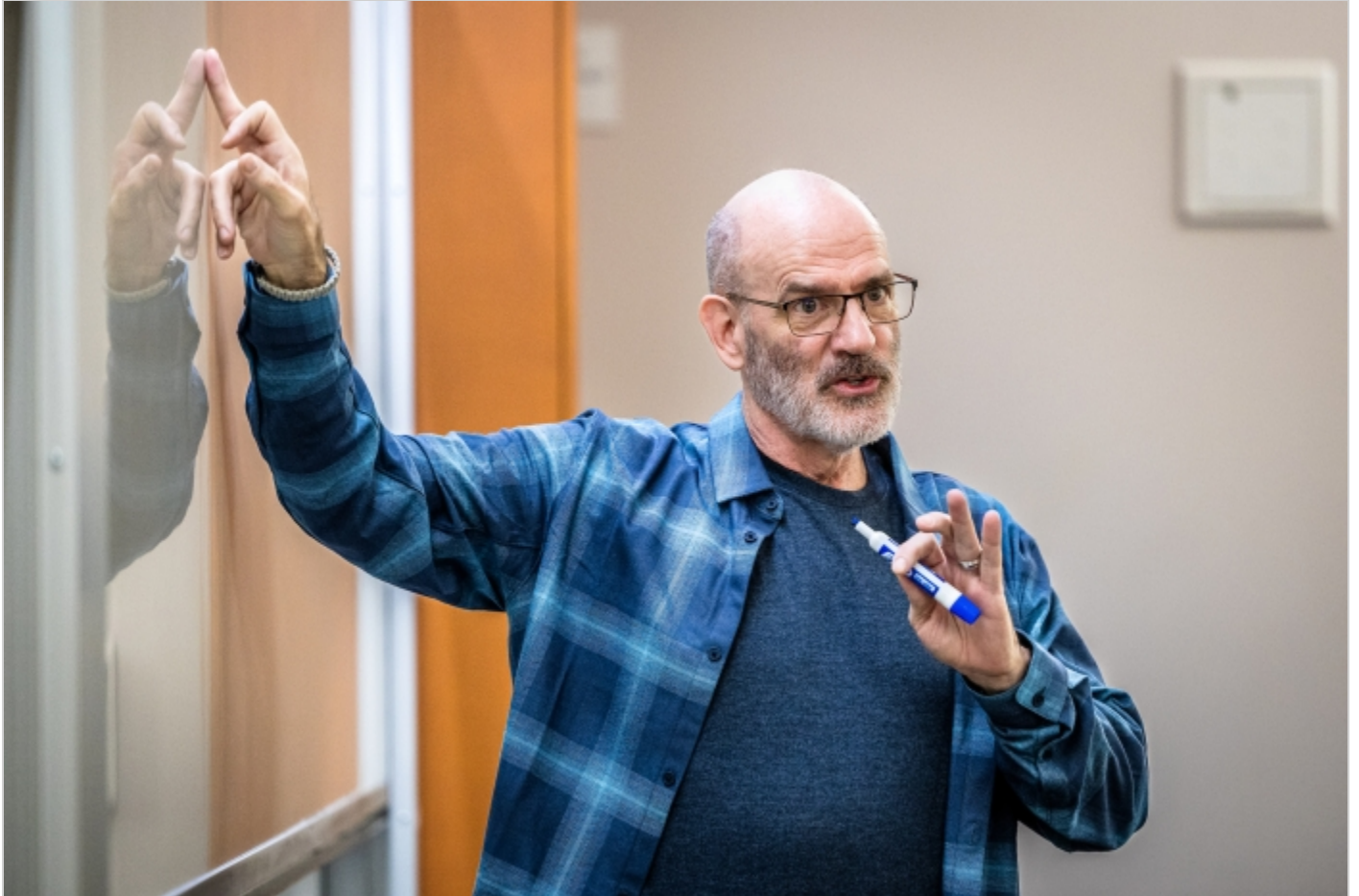
"Everyone's experience is different," he acknowledged, "but a lot of us struggle to find purpose and meaning outside of the military. Civilian organizations are structured differently, and even the basics — like finance — operate in ways we never had to think about in uniform. In the Army, there's a budget, you spend it, then ask for more. In the civilian world, finance and accounting drive the business."

For Silverman, mentoring isn't an obligation; it's a calling.

"Veterans are my people," he said with conviction. "Anything I can do to help them in a meaningful way brings joy to my life. I'll go out of my way to do that whenever I can."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Professor of Practice Mike Guggemos, a veteran and experienced business executive, leads a group of veterans in a workshop on Friday, Sept. 26, at McCord Hall on the Tempe campus as part of the AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans program. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Retired and active military members, including Alyssa Ebers (center) and Deirdre Martin (right), listen as ASU Professor of Practice Mike Guggemos, a veteran and experienced business executive, leads a workshop about shifting from a military to a civilian entrepreneur mindset on Friday, Sept. 26, at McCord Hall on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Air Force veteran Alyssa Ebers, from Flagstaff, Arizona, speaks about her mission and experiences in the military during a AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans workshop. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Army veteran and AZNext Business Readiness for Veterans program graduate and returning mentor Zach Fuller, from Boise, Idaho, speaks during a Sept. 26 workshop. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News