

Boots2Business: An Early View of an SBA Entrepreneurship Outreach Program

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Abstract

In this study, we investigate Boots2Business (B2B), a new entrepreneurship program developed in 2012 by the United States Small Business Administration (SBA) in cooperation with several partners. B2B is a program specifically tailored for military service members that are leaving active duty. It is a part of the United States Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (DODTAP). The program offers veterans a chance to learn how to start a new business through a two-day workshop followed by an 8-week online course offered through Syracuse University, in cooperation with the SBA. This study offers insights into the program based on first-hand observations, secondary information, and government reports, with an emphasis on the two-day workshop. In addition, we compare and contrast it with three other SBA programs: Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), SCORE and the Small Business Institute (SBI). We conclude by discussing the implications of B2B for policy makers and suggesting directions for future research.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Outreach, Small Business Assistance

Introduction

The role of small businesses in the American economy is well-established. Given their important role in our economy, several programs have been created in the United States to provide assistance to prospective entrepreneurs as well as the owners of small businesses. Some of the more well-known programs include Small Business Development Centers, export assistance, SCORE, and the U.S. Small Business Administration Guaranteed Loan program. In a recent study, Gu, Karoly, and Zissimopoulos (2008) identified as many as sixteen such small business assistance programs.

The primary federal agency tasked with helping small businesses is the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA primarily assists small businesses through SBDCs throughout the country and the SBA 7(A) and 504 Loan Programs. A third SBA program, the Small

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Business Institute (SBI), was funded at the federal level between 1972 and 1995 (Heriot & Campbell, 2002; Heriot & Campbell, 2004). The many programs identified by Gu, et al., (2008) serve the general population as well as targeted groups, such as small businesses seeking to export or small businesses pursuing government procurement contracts.

Recently, the SBA created a new program, Boots2Business. The program is devoted to encouraging veterans to start new businesses after they are discharged from military service. In this study, we will discuss the B2B program, compare it to other SBA programs, and highlight opportunities for future research of the efficacy and potential of this effort. Opportunities to support and enable veterans is an increasingly important area of study. Generally, the war on terror has received considerable media attention, and the impact of PTSD and veterans' health care (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2016), suicide rates in veteran populations (Basu, 2013), and the large number of veterans that are unemployed after leaving active duty (Plumer, 2013) have also been written about extensively. While there is likely a political component to the selection of veterans as a targeted population for outreach services, there is also compelling information about them that suggests they are a viable group to assist. Veterans are twice as likely as non-veterans to start a new business (Bressler, Bressler, and Bressler, 2013). Thus, seeking to capture the interest of service members leaving active service seems, on its face, to be a rational expenditure of funds directed at increasing firm births in the USA.

Background

The United States Department of Defense Transition Assistance Program (DODTAP) was begun in 1990 (<http://www.dodtap.mil>). The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 developed benefits and services to assist military service members transitioning to civilian life. In 2011, President Obama proposed more efforts to aid in this transition. Congress passed the VOW (Veterans Opportunity to Work) to Hire Heroes Act, which resulted in the current DODTAP. The impetus for creating B2B can be attributed to two phenomena. First, veterans seem to thrive as entrepreneurs, if not financially, certainly in sheer numbers (Lichtenstein, 2013). In addition, the looming drawdown of military personnel (Alexander & Shalal, 2014) and comparatively higher unemployment rates than civilian populations (Dewan, 2011), led to a growing interest in assisting veterans with entrepreneurship.

The current DODTAP program has three components, including pre-separation counseling, core curriculum and training tracks. In addition, there is an option to complete the three components online. The three training tracks include higher education, technical training and entrepreneurship. Boots2Business is part of the entrepreneurship training track.

Boots2Business was created in July 2012 with a pilot program. It is based upon a cooperative agreement between Syracuse University and the U.S. Small Business Administration. Within the SBA, the Office of Veteran Business Development is tasked with directing the B2B program. Syracuse has several academic programs devoted to entrepreneurship as well as outreach programs for scholars, practitioners, and veterans. Boots2Business was developed by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University (<https://ivmf.syracuse.edu>). Additional information about B2B may be obtained at the SBA's website highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Boots2Business Description

Boots to Business is delivered in partnership with SBA’s Resource Partners, SCORE Mentors, Small Business Development Centers, Women’s Business Centers, and Veterans Business Outreach Centers and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University. It is available free of charge at participating installations to service members and their dependents transitioning or retiring from the U.S. military.

Source: U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Veterans Business Development (<https://www.sba.gov/offices/headquarters/ovbd>).

Presently, Boots2Business workshops are offered throughout the United States as well as in locations overseas. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show most of these locations on two maps, respectively. Boots2Business courses are generally offered on or near military bases where service members may be stationed.

In the following section, we review the extant literature on small business assistance. In the third section, we describe the B2B program based upon information shared with the authors by the U.S. Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee, Syracuse University, and the Small Business Administration. Next, we provide analysis of the program based upon personal observations at one of the military installations in the State of Georgia. Finally, we conclude the study by highlighting our observations, discussing the implications for policy makers, and proposing directions for future research.

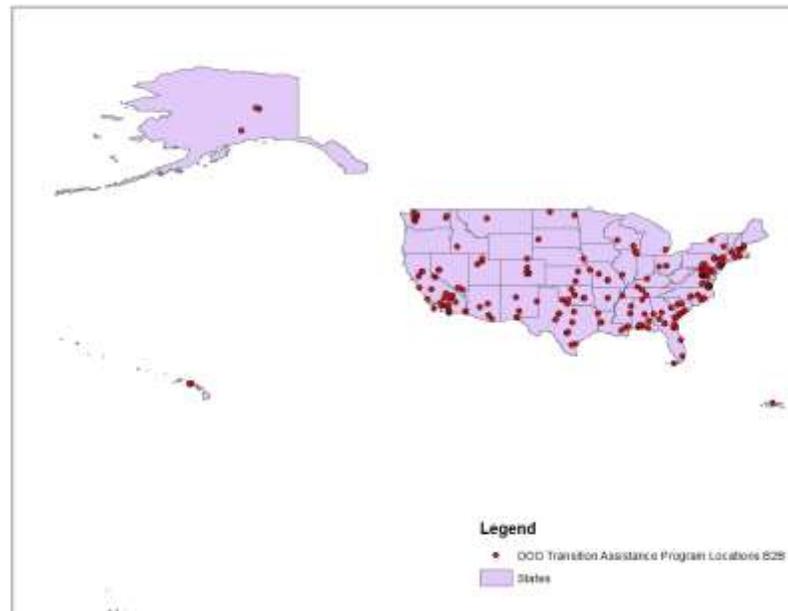


Figure 1. DOD Transition Assistance Program Locations (B2B) in the USA, Alaska, Hawaii, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

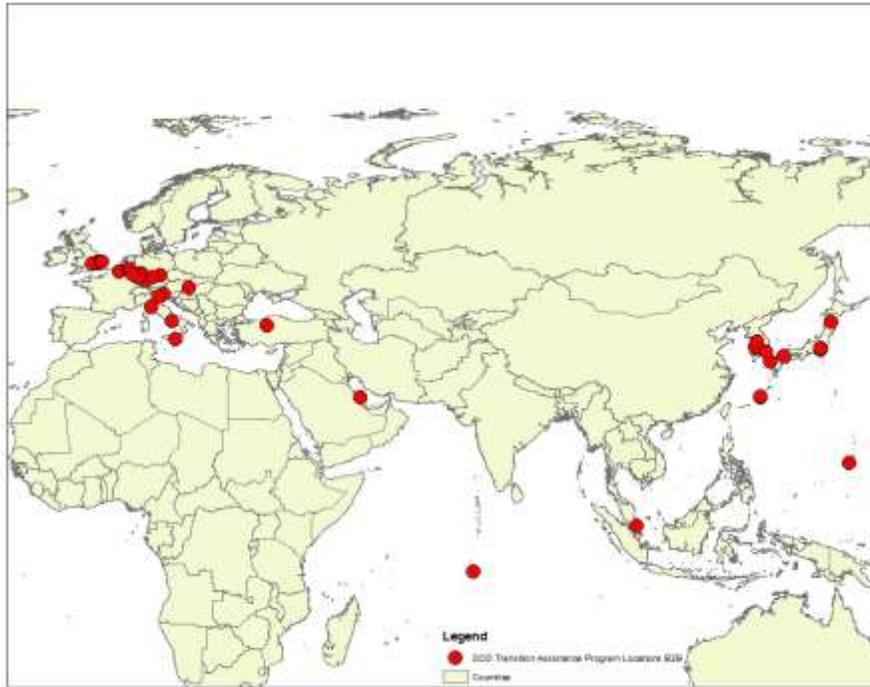


Figure 2. DOD Transition Assistance Program Locations (B2B) outside USA

Literature Review

Small business assistance has existed in the United States for several decades. Gu, et al. (2008) identified 13 major *small business outreach programs*.¹ The most well-known of these programs are the SBDCs, SCORE, and SBI. They are all affiliated with the Small Business Administration (SBA). While there are certainly other important programs, these programs are a logical choice for comparison to B2B because they were managed and funded by the SBA. Thus, rather than discuss research on all major small business outreach programs, we highlight research on these three SBA programs.

Gu, et al. (2008) explain that “the SBDC and Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) are two major programs offering counseling and training in all aspects of small business management” (p. 7). The Small Business Institute program was also a program that offered field-based consulting completed by college students supervised by college faculty. This program was operated from 1973 to 1995 (Heriot & Campbell, 2006). It is included in the analysis because it is quite similar to both SBDCs and SCORE, was managed by the SBA, and was devoted to existing small businesses.

¹ We do not make a distinction between entrepreneurship and *small business* ownership as there is no evidence veterans become small business owners other than by starting or buying a business or franchise as opposed to inheriting a family business. Thus, it is most likely some level of opportunity recognition and risk taking was involved in the veterans’ process of starting or buying the business.

Small Business Development Centers Program

When reviewing scholarly work about the Small Business Development Centers program (SBDCs), a single scholar emerges as an expert. Jim Chrisman has published the majority of the highly-cited work about this program. These studies generally report a positive relationship between the services and business outcomes (Chrisman, Hoy & Robinson, 1987). Furthermore, they report that the services are cost effective relative to the dollars invested (Chrisman & Katrishen, 1994; Chrisman, 2012).

In their review of research about small business assistance programs, Gu, et al. (2008) are highly critical of the research on SBDCs. They point out that of the 22 studies they evaluated, 14 of them were devoted to evaluating the program. They describe the research methodology of these studies as lacking rigor, with 12 of 14 studies using a weaker mean comparison or simple descriptive methodology.

SCORE

The SCORE program has not received attention from scholars. When SCORE is mentioned in research, it is largely to describe its purpose and the extent of its operations (Heriot & Campbell, 2004). One study in the UK advocated adopting the SCORE model in the United Kingdom (Botham, 2012). The SBA funds SCORE with about \$17 million (Gu, et al., 2008). This budget pales in comparison to the budget for the SBDC program which exceeds \$110 million. SCORE operates approximately 350 chapters and serves approximately 300,000 clients per year (<https://www.score.org>). It is not surprising that scholars have not studied SCORE, as it is not funded at the local chapter level with paid staff. SCORE mentors are volunteers. For example, unlike SBDCs, the SCORE mentors are not required to justify their economic impact or the benefits they provide their clients. In fact, Gu, et al. (2008) point out that by statute, “The SBDC produces an annual economic impact report of SBDC counseling services, conducted by an independent consultant” (p. 15). SCORE does not have such a requirement.²

Small Business Institute®

The U.S. Small Business Administration initiated the Small Business Institute® (SBI) program in 1973 to provide no-charge counseling services to area small businesses surrounding member colleges and universities. At its peak, the SBI program spent approximately \$3 million assisting 6,000 businesses per year at over 400 participating schools. Congress stopped funding and discontinued the SBI program in 1995. As a result, many schools discontinued their SBI programs due to a lack of federal funding. However, several schools continued to operate their SBI programs. Most of these colleges and universities were members of the Small Business Institute Directors’ Association (SBI, 2016), which was charged by statute, to provide advice to the SBA about the program. After the elimination of funding, SBIDA changed their name to Small Business Institute® (SBI). As of 2016, SBI has approximately 109 members. However, all of them do not operate a program (Walker, 2016). There have been very few, new SBI programs created in the United States (Heriot & Campbell, 2004).

² It is possible that SCORE does some sort of assessment of their activities, but the academic literature does not report a formal process as is associated with the review of SBDCs required by law.

Several studies evaluated the Small Business Institute program before federal funding was eliminated by the SBA (Brennan, Hoffman & Vishwanathan, 1996; Brennan, Hoffman & Vishwanathan, 1997; and Schindler & Stockstill, 1995). Most of the studies focused on the ability of the SBI program to provide clients with a viable consulting job (Matthews, 1998) or with the program's student-educational benefits (Elbert & Harmeson, 1999). For many schools, a primary impetus for starting an SBI program was the potential benefits for enhanced student learning experiences. The literature (Elbert & Harmeson, 1999; Hedberg & Brennan, 1996) provides considerable evidence that SBI programs are of educational value to students. In addition, recent evaluations of business schools have called for "a stronger practicum and projection emphasis in both curriculum and coursework" (Porter, 1997; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). The SBI program represents just such a practical approach to learning and applying business concepts (Schindler & Stockstill, 1995). In general, Gu, et al. (2008), find that

The effects of business assistance programs is far from complete and the methodological challenges in identifying the effect of business assistance programs on business outcomes are, in part, a result of data limitations and the lack of experimental design in program evaluations. (p. 3)

They state, "thus few studies are able to identify a causal relationship between small business assistance programs and business creation and subsequent economic performance of assisted small firms" (Gu, et al., 2008. p. 4). In their study of outreach programs, which was funded by the Rand Corporation, they pointed out that the extant research has not been able to identify the essential characteristics of effective small business assistance programs.³

Veterans and Entrepreneurship

The extant literature on veterans and entrepreneurship and small business assistance is limited at best (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016). The SBA provides some interesting descriptive statistics about the impact of veterans on the economy. In addition, some studies have reinforced the data collected by the government. Veterans account for approximately 13% of all small business owners. Yet, at the same time, veteran unemployment levels range from 30.4% for young veterans to 48% for black veterans in that same age group, and 12.1% for veterans overall (Bressler, et al. 2013; Lichtenstein, 2013).

Other researchers have found similar data based upon government records. For example, Loughran (2014) found that unemployment among younger veterans peaked at 29% in 2011. In addition, they found that workforce participation rates among veterans are low. In general, the conclusion of the Rand Corporation study was that veterans of all ages tended to have higher unemployment rates than non-veterans of the same age, with differences declining for older veterans (Loughran, 2014).

Hope, Chrisman, and Mackin (2009) found that veterans with 20 or more years of service reported higher levels of self-employment than other veterans. They also found that officers are 55.6% more likely to start a business than enlisted veterans. These results may not be surprising

³ In referring to characteristics Gu, Karoly & Zissimopoulos (2008) mean things such as the optimal services to provide, what works best for whom or in what geographic locale, and how program effects relate to program costs.

as one might assume that officers have more education and professional development in comparison to enlisted personnel, and a similar argument could be made for those with more service. Additionally, many service professionals with over 20 years of service may have marketable skills in the private, defense-related, industrial sector.

Regarding Boot2Business, there is only one study available for review. The study is a comprehensive review of B2B, undertaken by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families. The study is entitled, “White Paper: Operation Boots to Business Veteran Entrepreneurship Assessment” (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016). It discusses the B2B program, background information on veterans, and research on veterans and entrepreneurship. The IVMF study also thoroughly describes Boots2Business, provides a context for the program, and makes suggestions for evaluating B2B (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016). Furthermore, the white paper provides early evidence of the perspectives of veterans regarding B2B training. Surveys were administered, and respondents generally concluded that B2B makes a positive impact. However, the researchers noted that much needs to be done to understand fully both Boots2Business as well as the most effective ways to reach out to veteran populations (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016).

B2B Program Analysis

Our analysis of the B2B program is based upon SBA information, research observation, and the SBA’s own description of the program (<https://www.sba.gov>). Our comparison of the B2B program to other small business outreach programs follows our initial analysis of publicly available information and research observations.

Background Information.

The B2B program has unique organizational characteristics that make it distinct from other training programs. One of these differences is that it has multiple “resource” partners, rather than a single organization that delivers the material to service members. As noted previously, these partners are SCORE Mentors, Small Business Development Centers, Women’s Business Centers, Veterans Business Outreach Centers, and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University. It is possible that other local or regional shadow partners might be involved.

Table 1 highlights each of the SBA programs and illustrates some of the differences in these programs. Boots2Business is an educational program rather than counseling or mentoring like the other primary SBA programs. While SCORE and SBDC offer training seminars, those work requirements are not nearly as time consuming to their performance. The material used in the B2B workshops are closely related to, if not actually borrowed from, *Entrepreneurship: Successfully Launching New Ventures*, 4th edition, by Bruce Barringer and Duane Ireland. The format for sharing this information with service members is essentially a series of lectures broken into eight modules. The second step of the B2B program is an online course taught by Syracuse University. The online course focuses on writing a business plan.

Table 1. Summary of SBA Outreach Programs

Program	Timeline	Focus	Process	Comments
SBDC	1977 – Present	Assist Pre-venture and existing small businesses	Counseling	Largest SBA small business outreach program with over 1,100 locations
SCORE	1964 - Present	Mentor entrepreneurs and small business owners	Counseling	Volunteers serve in 350 locations throughout the US
Small Business Institute	1973- 1996	Assist existing small businesses	Comprehensive projects involving 80-100 man hours over a 10-15 week period	SBA Funding ended in 1995; continues as a 501c3 organization
Boots2Business	2012 – Present	Veterans	Educational	Expanded to All veterans through Boots2Business: Reboot

To date, over 40,000 service members and/or their spouses have taken the two-day Introduction to Entrepreneurship workshop, which is divided into 8 modules. Table 2 illustrates the year over year totals for courses, average course participation and total participation. The introductory course and the online course have very little in common with the services by SBDC counselors or SCORE mentors, who work one-on-one with an entrepreneur or an owner of a small business. In essence, the curriculum of B2B is similar to the content of entrepreneurship or business courses at a university. The delivery method of presenting the material as a college lecture also differs from counseling or mentoring. This is important to consider for future evaluation and research efforts.

Table 2: Introductory Course Participation 2013-2016

	2013	2014	2015	2016*	Totals
Courses	295	544	749	505	2,093
Class Participants	4,514	9,835	12,507	8934	35,790
Average Class Participants	15	18	17	18	17
Virtual Class Participants		4,541	2,196	1,380	8,117
Total Participation	4,514	14,376	14,703	10,314	43,907

Note: Adapted from “From military service to small business owners: Supporting America’s veteran entrepreneurs:” Hearing before the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, 103rd Cong. 2 (2014).

Discussion

Boots2Business represents a new approach to assisting veterans that might be interested in starting a new business after they complete their active duty military service. This study is the first scholarly attempt to describe the program and offer insights into it. Unlike other outreach programs, B2B has not been active long enough to be scrutinized by anyone outside the SBA or Syracuse University (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016).

Veterans represent a very specific target group in the American population. Clearly, other groups, such as minorities and seniors, might have been selected for a new outreach program. While there is likely a political component to the selection of veterans as a target population for outreach services, there is also compelling information about them that suggests they are a viable group to assist. Veterans are twice as likely as non-veterans to start a new business. Understanding which veterans are more likely to take advantage of this training, who benefits from this training and how they benefit is important for research on entrepreneurship as well as facilitating the success of veterans.

From a public policy standpoint, B2B should be evaluated in an objective manner. Gu, et al (2008), point out that studies of other, similar outreach programs have not been very effective at identifying causal relationships between the program and program outcomes. The only study to date was completed by Syracuse University (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016). The evaluation was biased on its face because Syracuse University, the organization conducting the evaluation, was a resource partner of the SBA. The actual survey method used to gather data was fraught with the same limitations of previous research on small business outreach programs.

There is certainly precedent for SBA to scrutinize the B2B program. In fact, the Small Business Administration Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 1994, requires the SBA to “develop and implement a biennial programmatic and financial examination of each SBDC” (<http://americassbdc.org>). Furthermore, according to the U.S.Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee, the SBA is required to update the Senate on its activities, including Boots2Business. (From military service, 2014). As of August 2016, none of these examinations or updates had been completed since the program began in 2012.

The structure of B2B is far different than anything the SBA has implemented previously. SBDCs are formally organized and have been in existence for over 35 years. They have State Directors and centers that report to them in some fashion. The consultants at the SBDCs are all state employees. In turn, each state must comply with SBA District requirements and all laws and regulations governing the SBDC program.

SCORE is the SBA program most like B2B. However, SCORE has a formal, not-for-profit organization in place to oversee the SCORE offices throughout the country, but both B2B program locations and SCORE offices operate largely autonomously. While SCORE Mentors must be certified, there is not a formal mechanism in place to certify B2B instructors. After reviewing existing forms of self-regulation, Michael (1995) argues that entities like B2B would be better served if the SBA developed a self-regulation procedure for them. We uphold that if a self-regulation procedure, similar to the external audits for the SBDCs program is not developed, Congress may impose some type of regulation or simply decide not to fund the program due to a lack of information to justify its existence.

Conclusion

This study is the first attempt to share information about Boots2Business with an academic audience in a public forum. Given how new the program is, there are far more questions that remain to be addressed and studied. It is likely somewhat premature to suggest future research efforts, but our understanding of this growing outreach program will only increase with further study. Nonetheless, we offer a few suggestions to public policy officials and scholars interested in evaluating B2B.

Veterans clearly have made important sacrifices for the United States. Thus, it is likely that B2B will remain active in the foreseeable future. Although the public will likely remain sensitive to the needs of veterans, Americans are also concerned about government expenditures, policy effectiveness and transparency. Thus, proper evaluation of the B2B program will be critical to increase its chances of survival.

Based upon the extant research on similar programs, we suggest that public policy makers and scholars studying B2B focus on three primary streams of research. The first stream of research is B2B *program outcomes*. B2B is clearly not the same kind of small business outreach program as other SBA programs, such as SCORE or the SBDC. It is more closely aligned with an entrepreneurship education program than with a counseling program. Thus, it is important to evaluate B2B differently than those programs, despite that that they both reach out to veterans. The white paper by Syracuse University emphasizes that B2B is best categorized as an education and training program (Institute for Veterans and Military Families, 2016). Entrepreneurship education and training programs have many tested methods of evaluation, and formally evaluating the short and longer term outcomes of participants is an important next step (Gorman & Hanlon, 1997; Vesper & Gartner, 1997; Solomon, et al., 1998).

The second stream of research should evaluate B2B program *process*. To date, neither the IVMF, nor the SBA or academics have evaluated the actual process involved in teaching and training veterans. Feedback was obtained using a survey of past participants, but the response rate was only 10%. However, feedback about the experiences of participants is not equivalent to a formal process of evaluating teaching and training.

Both SCORE and the SBDC have systems in place to certify their staff members. While it is reasonable to assume the faculty conducting the on-line courses are screened, it is difficult to make this conclusion about the initial B2B workshop. Given that this workshop is the gateway for further participation in the B2B program, it is critical that this component of B2B is more closely scrutinized. If these individuals are the “gateway” or “introduction” to entrepreneurship and future program participation, formal mechanisms to ensure that these individuals are properly trained and screened is critical to the success of the program.

Previous research on entrepreneurship education in universities considers a variety of perspectives, including *what* is taught, *why* it is taught, *how* it is taught, and *how well* it works (Gorman & Hanlon, 1997; Vesper & Gartner, 1997; Solomon, et al., 1998). A similar approach will likely benefit both public policy officials as well as scholars evaluating Boots2Business. Consequently, the following questions should be considered by both policy makers and scholars:

- Exactly who is teaching the two-day workshop?
- What preparation do they have for teaching the material?

Furthermore, teaching a two-day workshop in a classroom setting is very different than meeting one-on-one with a client. Many of the slides in the two-day workshop are from a college textbook (Barringer & Ireland, 2016) and thus, one could argue that the level of instruction required is complex and demands a core education, professional competencies, and the correct skill set.

The third stream of research should consider B2B’s *strategic scope*. B2B should be compared to other federal programs, especially programs targeting veterans and programs dedicated to entrepreneurship education. Therefore, the following questions should be considered by both policy makers and scholars:

- Is the program a duplication of small business outreach services that are presently available to veterans?
- Is the program cost effective?
- What is B2B’s cost per veteran, and how does its cost compare those of SCORE and the SBDC?
- Has there been a significant increase in veteran-owned businesses since the B2B program was started?

As previously mentioned, in 1995, the SBA eliminated the Small Business Institute® program. The argument made by the SBA was that the SBI program duplicated the activities of the SBDC program. Given the budget and national debt debates that are ongoing in the media, it is critical to policy makers that B2B is positioned in a strategic manner. If B2B is viewed as a duplication of existing services, that perception will be a threat to its survival. B2B would benefit from strategic consideration of where it truly fits into the government’s system of over 13 federal small business outreach programs.

The last issue overlaps somewhat with the previous commentary about research in entrepreneurship education. B2B must be evaluated based upon *what* is taught, *why* it is taught, *how* it is taught, and *how well* it works. A perusal of the extant literature reveals that despite

over 30 years of academic research, scholars do not agree on a common definition of entrepreneurship (Schindehutte, Morris, & Kuratko, 2000). Consequently, assessing entrepreneurship education is difficult because no generally accepted pedagogical model has been adopted in the U.S. or Europe (Solomon, et. al., 1998). Some researchers suggest that "[t]he concept of entrepreneurship is inadequately defined [, and] this lack of a clear entrepreneurship paradigm poses problems for both policy makers and for academics" (Carton, Hofer, & Meeks, 1998, p. 1).

Given these potential concerns and opportunities, the time is ripe for public policy officials and researchers to evaluate Boots2Business in a more comprehensive and strategic fashion. Opportunities to educate veterans about entrepreneurship should certainly not be ignored, but understanding the costs and benefits of these programs after several years of operation is important. While new business startups are a critical metric, it is also important to document information gathered from individuals that chose not to start a business because of information they obtained during the training and from individuals that found the education valuable without feeling the need to start a business. Finally, ensuring that the organizations involved in facilitating small business training efforts for veterans are complementary and collaborative and not redundant and competitive is a critical next step.

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