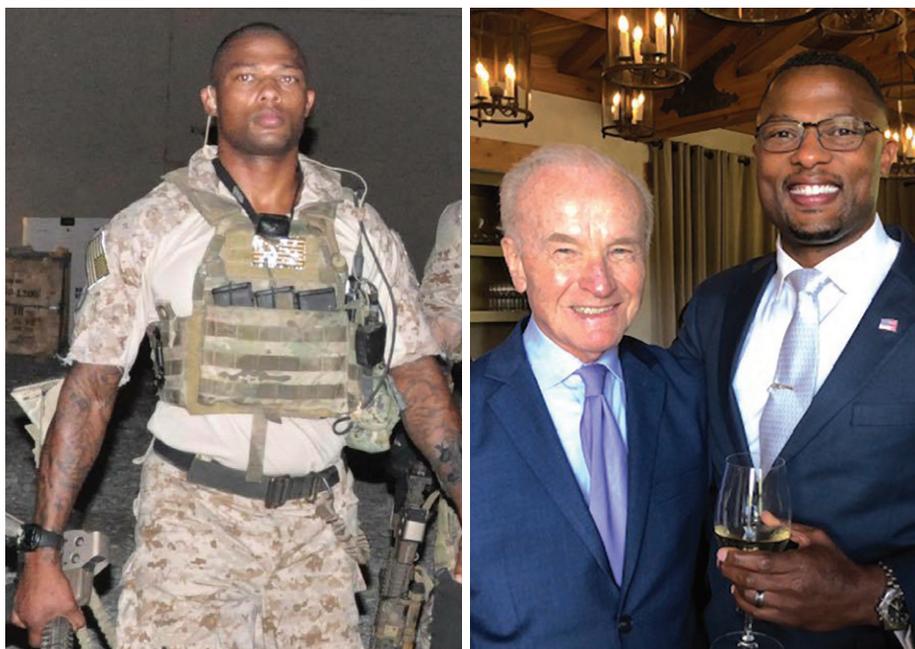


BUSINESS INSIDER

The University of Southern California has an MBA program for veterans that could serve as a model for universities across America



Ty Smith spent almost 12 years as a Navy SEAL. At right, he's pictured with his post-military mentor, USC professor Robert Turrill. *Photo courtesy of Ty Smith*

By **Richard Feloni** | September 17, 2018

AS 2015 DREW TO A CLOSE, TY SMITH WAS in a dark place. The death of his sister, post-traumatic stress disorder from his tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an uncertain future led to him questioning who he was or what he wanted from life.

Smith was an active duty SEAL also enrolled at the University of Southern California's Master of Business for Veterans

(MBV) program, and was on his way to both retiring from the SEALs and graduating that following May. When he returned to school after a few weeks off, a personal assessment questionnaire assigned in class forced him to reckon with who he was before and during his 20 years in the Navy, and who he was going to be.

"It forced me to look at myself in the mirror and make some decisions, because I wasn't happy with the person that I had become and I wasn't happy with who I saw myself becoming five years from that point in time," Smith told *Business Insider*. He reached out to the program's faculty director, Robert Turrill, and asked for help. Over the course of several weeks, Turrill,



The USC MBV 2017 cohort. USC Marshall Master of Business for Veterans/Facebook

- The University of Southern California launched the Master of Business for Veterans program in 2013.
- It is a one-year executive MBA program that is specially designed to transition its students from the military to professional life.
- Students and graduates say the community aspect gave them both emotional support and career opportunities they otherwise would have lacked.
- The program’s founder wants to expand it and see it replicated at other schools.
- This article is part of *Business Insider’s* ongoing series on Better Capitalism.

who served in the Army, would meet with Smith, having intimate conversations that would be out of place in virtually any other academic setting. And they helped. Smith graduated and began running his own startup full-time, and has kept in touch with Turrill.

The MBV program, Smith said, “is not just a traditional academic program — the transition side of it is very important, as well.” That is, it’s not just a standard executive MBA with some specialized marketing added. “So it’s very, very real.”

Meeting a demand

In 2013, USC appointed James Bogle, an Army veteran with a background in international relations, head of a program that would provide a Marshall Business School executive MBA experience tailored to veterans transitioning to civilian life. A statewide call to schools from the California Department of Veterans Affairs to develop programs for veterans planted a seed, and repeated requests from Marshall students confirmed the need, Bogle told me.

“There are three things that folks who leave the military universally find lacking in their lives,” he said. Those things had previously been provided by the military, he said. They’re “one, serving a higher

mission, two, camaraderie, and, three, a distinctive identity.”

The first MBV class had 38 students, and for the last two years each class has had around 90 students each. (Bogle said he wanted to keep the class closer to 70 students, but could not turn away qualified candidates.) Overall cost is about \$55,000, but Bogle said that all but one of the just over 300 students that have graduated, as well as the 86 currently enrolled, have benefitted from both scholarships and the GI Bill.

Most veterans looking to enter the workforce in a leadership role are older than the typical MBA student (the average age of an MBV student is 35), so Bogle and his team developed a year-long program with classes on Fridays and Saturdays, staffed with professors who also served in the military. The student body would be split in half and experience the program as a cohort, meaning each group shares the same classes at the same time, to encourage camaraderie among each other and with their professors.

And not only are the professors more personally involved with their students than in a typical executive MBA program, but current and former students told me that Bogle makes a point to meet each of the



An element of the MBV program is bringing students a USC experience, as opposed to just a series of lectures. *USC Marshall Master of Business for Veterans/Facebook*

MBV students and make himself available both during and after their experience.

Courtney Foster, MBV '17, who has served 28 years as a Navy commander, emphasized the importance of the steps taken to address the feeling of being out of place when returning to civilian life. "The 'big deal' there is it feels like home again," she said. "Sounds corny but it's true, and it matters."

She continued: "We may all be from different services, different ranks, different warfighting specialties, different experiences, but we get each other, share a language, experiences, and humor that doesn't always translate well with civilians." Foster convinced her husband, a former enlisted Marine, to join the MBV program the year after her, and she told me he immediately said he felt like he was "with his people again."

The power of a network

In both a traditional MBA or executive MBA program, students are on a career path that tends to be defined, and may be contingent on an employment agreement with the employer covering tuition. With the MBV, there's a strong emphasis placed on utilizing the school's and graduates' network to accelerate a transition into the business world.

As Scott Giles, a lead program integrator in the Air Force and a current MBV student told me, "On day one of orientation, the career placement team said, 'Don't come to us with your plan B, because we don't care about it. Let's figure out your plan A, and get you there.' The military transition programs, while solid and having the best intentions, tend to lead you towards civilian jobs that mirror your service history. The MBV program focuses less on what you have done, and acknowledges that this group of people will be successful in any environment, and helps you decide what you want to do."

Bogle said that the MBV program has built relationships with companies like Bank of America, the big four accounting firms, Disney, and Northrop Grumman. He told me that he spoke with an MBV graduate who utilized the network to land a job as a senior vice president with BoA after graduation — something that would have been highly unlikely without the validation USC could provide. It turned out the employee who recruited her was an MBV graduate who has brought on six other graduates to the bank.

Because "MBV" is a unique term, there's a challenge in that it takes explanation to recruiters not already in

the program's network, but Bogle wants to take it mainstream. He's convinced of the program's success and is looking to start a cohort in Washington, DC, and he also wants to see other schools launch their own programs.

Foster, who lives in Texas, may help with that. She told me that, even though it's a long shot, she wants to approach the University of Texas at Austin's business school and see if she can help launch a similar program. The way she sees it, veterans who want to get into business already have an advantage; they just need some help articulating and adapting the skills they've developed over years.

She told me, that compared to a typical, younger, MBA graduate, an MBV grad "is capable of implementing a much higher leadership role, already knows how to take a number of diverse problems, dissect them, understand them, then come up with solutions. She or he knows innately how to lead a team — it's so natural, in fact, she or he might not even be able to explain it to someone. MBVers hit ground running with much higher managerial and leadership level experience than most MBAs."

"We have all the experience we need," she said. "We just have to learn to couch it in the correct terms."

