

Report:

Military Transition Football Program with recommendations for recruiting Armed Forces.



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Introduction

In 2021, administrators at Thomas University (TU) began a military transition program that uses college football as a vehicle. Their two-year collaboration with the Georgia Army National Guard and various other military personnel, primarily within the U.S. Army recruiting command, has provided insight into challenges related to both recruiting and transitioning military service members. This report provides an overview of the TU program. The observations and recommendations that are contained within this report are limited in scope to the facilitation of the enrollment/military transition strategy. Nevertheless, there are clear implications for further study that relate to both military recruiting challenges, decreasing levels of public confidence in the U.S. military, and personnel adaptation throughout the military service life cycle.¹ As the program is nascent, no empirical data related to its efficacy has been generated and no research has been undertaken to assess any student or program outcome. Nevertheless, a key take-away from this report is that when the term ‘transition’, *i.e.* changing from one condition to another, is applied to a well-defined set of personnel at various stages within the life-cycle of service, researchers gain a platform for thinking in new ways about critical problems related to enlistment and civilian reintegration.

Why Thomas University

Thomas University (TU) is a small, independent college that is located in Southwest Georgia. It is a regionally accredited, non-profit, institution offering associate, bachelors, and master degrees. The University is consistently ranked among the nation’s top military friendly colleges and is partnered with the Community College of the Air Force, MYCAA (DoD Spouse education benefit), and Defense Acquisition University. TU is also a participant in the Department of Defense Voluntary Education Program (DODVOLED) and the Veterans Administration Yellow Ribbon Program. Although TU takes great pride in providing educational services to the U.S. military, there were four main reasons why the school set out to create a military transition football program (MTFP).

First, the university had the academic expertise to design the program. TU has historically served non-traditional learners and its academic portfolio is weighted heavily toward ‘helping professions’, e.g. clinical counseling, social work, nursing, criminal justice, etc. The graduate faculty within the Clinical Counseling and Rehabilitation Studies program developed the conceptual model for the MTFP and integrated both career counseling and mental health counseling into it. Included within that model is a formal classroom experience for transitioning service members that is overseen by the clinical coordinator who is both a U.S. Army Veteran and a retired VA Mental Health Counselor. In short, although the MTFP is an NAIA sanctioned college football team, its overall design is consistent with a pedagogy that combines formal classroom experiences, active learning components, and regular, ongoing, counseling.

Second, TU is suited to serving a military constituency. As the map below illustrates, the university is located near several military installations that are located in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. This is relevant because proximity to home is a determining factor of college choice and data, such as that generated by the Soldier for Life Analytical Team, suggests that many service members transitioning

¹ Younis, M., “Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades.” Gallup, July 21, 2023, www.news.gallup.com

from the military in both Georgia and Florida choose to stay in those states.² So too, Thomas University is a small, rural, relatively unknown, independent university. While reputation is a factor that impacts college choice, it also influences price. The local/regional status of TU gives it the latitude to respond to cost as a driver. For instance, it does not charge out of state tuition; it maximizes VA benefits with an undergraduate tuition rate that is close to PELL; it has direct control of budget and absorbs the cost of students who switch to the established tuition rate for military upon enlistment, and it has far more flexibility with awarding scholarships than what is afforded by affiliation with the NCAA. In short, while no university hits every driver of student college choice, TU is where the students are located, with tailored programming offered at a fair cost.



Third, Thomas University athletics competes in the NAIA which provides more operational flexibility than the NCAA. Among other things, for example, the NAIA does not have NCAA recruiting restrictions. This is important as military affiliated athletes require more contact from coaches as they prepare for college athletics upon completion of military service. The NAIA also boasts the opportunity to play which benefits service members who have not played football for a few years, are not visible through traditional recruiting pathways, and are unlikely to be competitive at the D1 and D2 levels of the NCAA.

Finally, TU recognized that an MTFP suggests solutions to a number of cross-cutting issues. For instance, only 23% of young Americans aged 17-24 are qualified to serve in the military. Most young people are disqualified on account of obesity, addiction, conduct, test scores, medical and behavioral health issues.³ Since college football involves physical fitness, drug testing, eligibility standards, and accountability it serves, as one company commander within USAREC noted, as a logical pathway that ‘incentivizes

²Ezarik, M. “Students Approach Admissions Strategically and Practically” *Inside Higher Education*, March 20, 2022. *Data Point. Factors that Influence Student College Choice*, US Department of Education, NCES 2019-119 (November 2018). *SFL Transition National Overview Packet, 2022*, January 27, 2023 pp. 83-92.

³ Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Status of Military Recruiting and Retention Efforts Across the Department of Defense. September 21, 2022, Washington D.C., p.15 www.armed-services.senate.gov

qualified individuals to join up and earn a college degree'.⁴ So too, there is ample evidence to indicate that the cost of college is still exceeding the ability of underserved students to pay, even with the help of financial aid.⁵ Yet, exchanging national service for student debt is rarely proposed as a solution despite the fact that the military is a recognized social elevator.⁶ As the open source data below illustrates, TU exists in a context of high poverty and low degree attainment. Combining college football with military enlistment creates a bridge for financial support and guaranteed career opportunity for low income students.

	DEMOG Updated Through: 08 Jul 2022 DEMOG Available Through: 2027 2027		W&P Updated Through : 18 Jan 2013 W&P Available Through: 2028 06			
	3E5A - ALBANY	3E5C - WAYCROSS	3E5D - THOMASVILLE	3E5N - VALDOSTA	3E5S - TIFTON	Company Total
DEMOGRAPHICS / INCOME						
Current Year Households - 2022	83,067	54,265	43,592	56,105	80,204	317,233
5 Year Projection - Households - 2027	83,839	55,623	44,031	58,369	81,087	322,949
Household Growth Rate (%)	0.9%	2.5%	1.0%	4.0%	1.1%	1.8%
Average Household Income	54,202	58,618	58,402	54,162	53,916	55,404
Median Household Income	38,814	44,060	41,765	38,019	39,717	40,204
% Households >= Poverty	79.3%	82.6%	82.4%	79.9%	79.2%	80.4%
% Households < Poverty	20.7%	17.4%	17.6%	20.1%	20.8%	19.6%
Military						
Active Military	200	53	182	2,927	246	3,608
Active Military %	0.4%	0.2%	0.9%	7.6%	0.6%	2.1%
Education (Age 17-24)						
HS Enrolled/HS Senior	3,604 15.3%	2,510 17.9%	1,780 17.7%	1,993 8.8%	3,398 16.0%	13,285 14.5%
HS Dropout	4,682 19.9%	1,444 10.3%	809 8.0%	7,054 31.1%	3,284 15.5%	17,273 18.9%
GED	492 2.1%	362 2.6%	289 2.9%	359 1.6%	514 2.4%	2,016 2.2%
HS Graduate	4,817 20.5%	5,638 40.3%	3,656 36.3%	2,564 11.3%	6,529 30.8%	23,204 25.4%
College Enrolled/AA/College Graduate	9,925 42.2%	4,030 28.8%	3,532 35.1%	10,703 47.2%	7,504 35.3%	35,694 39.0%

The MTF Program

The most striking feature of the MTFP is that *transition* is not treated as a single point in the life cycle of a service member, e.g. at the expiration of a term of service (ETS). Rather, transition is viewed holistically so the design of the program accommodates those entering, currently engaged in, and exiting military service. As such, the MTFP has a very diverse locker room that combines athletes of a variety of ages (currently the oldest team member is 26 and the youngest is 18) at a variety of stages in their careers, experiences, and aspirations who work together to play football, earn a college degree and prepare for a career, either civilian or military. In this light, the MTFP contemplates the expectations prescribed by Title 10, but exceeds the spirit of the law by viewing all stages of military service as formative rather than summative.⁷ To be concrete, the MTFP roster allows for roughly 35

⁴Although David Maloney focused on NCAA athletic programs with poor margins, he too rightly noted that college athletic programs contemplate the same population that the U.S. military needs. See, <https://stickandmove.substack.com/p/stick-and-move-772>

⁵ Coker, C and Glynn, J., "Making College Affordable. Providing Low-Income Students with the Knowledge and Resources Needed to Pay for College." Jack Kent Cook Foundation, (November 2017). Dancy, K, Garcia-Kendrick, G. and Cheng, D., "Rising Above the Threshold," Executive Summary, IHEP (June 2023)

⁶ Switzer, T. "The Unsung Hero of Social Mobility." *Profectus*, April 4, 2023

⁷ 10 USC ch. 58 sub. A pt. II sec.1141-1155. See also DoD Directive 5124.02 which establishes policies, responsibilities, and direction for the DoD Tap.

civilian athletes. They are mostly, but not exclusively, linemen who are too big to serve in the U.S. military. They are necessary for the game of football, however, and they are essential to the transition program because they are the first civilian peers with whom veteran-athletes will have to work, post-service, to accomplish a common goal. The number of veterans on the roster is undefined but sustaining a compliment of 20-30 is a reasonable expectation. Those who have served on active duty are leaders/mentors and they are joined by the roughly 50 National Guardsmen and Reservists who, as citizen-soldiers, provide an obvious balance between the other two groups. At the opening of its first season of play, the MTFP was at 80 athletes and every branch of service (save the Space Force) was represented somewhere on the team. The full roster caps at 110 athletes.

The football coaching staff is also purpose-built to fit the holistic approach of the MTFP. To illustrate, Head Coach Orlando Mitjans has served as the Assistant Head Coach at The U.S. Military Academy, West Point, and as a position coach at the Citadel. He has also worked with the NFL, ensuring his command of both the military and football. Among the military veterans are Defensive Coordinator Andy Wolfrum, an Army combat veteran and former head coach of West Point Prep Academy. Keith Harris, a veteran National Guard Soldier, and Mike Millikan, an Army Combat veteran are both making their debut in college football coaching. On the civilian side, Coach Al 'Buzz' Preston is an accomplished football coach with a fourteen-year run coaching offense for Georgia Tech. Coach Sean Jones, pride of Georgia Tech football, oversees the TU quarterback and Arena Footballer Chris Seay manages the defensive line. Ensuring the bridge between military and civilian, Coach Patrick Tresey has been on staff at West Point and coached in civilian programs. The same can be said of William Christopher who came to TU from the Citadel and also brings perspective from the high school level. These individuals view their jobs primarily as college football coaches and are learning to be sensitive to the mission of the MTFP, but their backgrounds ensure the breadth of experience that is required for creating a positive environment for DoD related athletes.

Observations and Recommendations

Efforts to build the MTFP began in earnest with the hiring of the Head Coach in January, 2022. On August 2, 2023 the MTFP played its inaugural game in front of just over 1,000 fans and won that game with a roster of roughly 80 athletes. The team secured only one other victory in its ten-game season but the number of fans regularly ranged between 500-1,000 and included community leaders, military veterans, and high school students from surrounding communities, *e.g.* Bainbridge, GA, Tallahassee, FL. *etc.* Although a period of one year is not sufficient for establishing trends related to the impact of the program, the process of constructing the MTFP provided enough experience to ground a few observations.

Observation #1:

The Georgia Army National Guard (GAARNG) fully embraced the recruiting potential that comes from integrating into a University. They accepted TU's invitation to place a recruiter on campus; branded their free on-campus office and used it regularly to establish a campus presence. They attended university functions that included faculty, staff, administrators, and community members, and they facilitated regular communication between senior Guard and University leadership on matters ranging from tattoo waivers to PR events. Operationally, GAARNG NCOs worked directly with college admissions staff to participate in campus visits by prospective students; they tracked and completed student enlistment/admission processes; devised joint reports with the university, developed joint

marketing plans to highlight the National Guard, TU, and a local High School; and they worked with university administrators to ensure that university systems accommodated student transitions into the National Guard. By fully embracing a partnership with the university, the National Guard has played a key role in the development of the MTFP. As benefit of their work, the GAARNG did pre-enlistment paperwork for 26 new recruits on the first day of spring-training and enlisted 5 more athletes from other sports. Over the course of roughly a two-year period, the GAARNG's efforts netted approximately 50 athletes from the MTFP, well exceeding normal recruiting expectations.

Recommendation #1. The GAARNG's engagement is unsurpassed by any other DoD component. As such, steps should be taken to propose the MTFP to the National Guard as a model that can be deployed nationally. To do that, we recommend that work be undertaken in three phases:

Phase I: Georgia Army National Guard and Thomas University officials should develop a short 'how to' manual that other colleges and Guard units can follow. Building an effective partnership requires attending to a number of operational details including the handling of tattoo waivers, student financial aid, academic and financial planning relative to MEPS and AIT, *etc.* Although TU and the GAARNG continue to work on these details, a dedicated focus to codifying what needs to be done will enable other colleges and universities to engage quickly and such a document will help senior guard leadership to grasp the scope of the project.

Phase II: It is strongly suggested that Senior Guard Leadership with an interest in the MTFP visit Thomas University to gain first-hand insights into the program. While on campus, a focused conversation with University officials to begin formulating long-term planning questions relative to NG ownership should take place. For example, if several colleges adopt the MTFP, what is the relative value and cost of post-season play, i.e. a National Guard Bowl game? Will the opportunity to play alleviate some pressure for accession and retention bonuses? If so, what are the off-sets? If the roster for the MTFP is fixed, what recruiting yield can the Guard expect to gain from other sports that are not specifically geared to transition? Will MTFP participants have a higher retention rate than non-MTFP participants? *Etc.*

Phase III: To gain adoption of the model at other schools, senior university leadership should introduce the MTFP through academic networks such as the Council of Independent Colleges and the NAIA. University buy-in is crucial and such associations are the best routes for stimulating interest in the MTFP. To be clear, instead of expecting the National Guard to find their way onto college campuses without an academic interpreter, we recommend a grassroots approach. By working through the above-mentioned organizations, TU and GAARNG should identify colleges from within the South East region, pair them with their local recruiting command, and then bring them to Thomasville, GA for a brief learning retreat that is held concurrently with spring football camp. A one- or two-day retreat led by TU and GAARNG leaders should set the tone for the necessary collaboration between the National Guard and the College representatives, facilitate discussion around operational timelines and goals, and clarify expectations for both parties.

Observation #2

The U.S. Army employees 63% of the DoD workforce in the State of Georgia. It is the largest active duty employer nearest to TU and, for that reason, was viewed as a primary interlocuter. Moreover, the local Army recruiting team was the first to spot the potential in the MTFP as a pathway to active duty service. Over the course of the recruiting period for the MTFP, however, the Army's active duty and reserves

components struggled in ways that hearkened to a 2005 study by the RAND corporation.⁸ According to that report, the Army is ambivalent about delayed entry programs (DEP). The source of the ambivalence is that while DEPs do provide for a pool of active duty soldiers to create off-sets during periods of low recruiting yields, the prolonged period for entry into service allows recruits to change their minds. That nearly ten-year-old ambivalence apparently still exists. To be concrete, the National Guard's success revealed that university stakeholders, *e.g.* football coaches, administrators, admissions personnel, etc. were necessary for steadying the resolve of athletes and ensuring that they complete the pre-enlistment process. Recognizing that, TU administrators approached the Secretary of the Army's office to explore whether the MTFP could be used to mitigate the negative side of DEPs. While officials in the Secretary's office seemed pleased that a civilian organization was trying to help with recruiting, the meeting itself was only modestly productive.

After the initial meeting, the secretary's staff did not follow up on their proposed course of action. Nothing can (or should) be inferred from "Big Army's" disengagement but it stood in sharp contrast to the actions of the Jacksonville Recruiting Battalion. Recognizing the potential for feeding recruits into compo one, Jacksonville recruiters tried to capitalize on the audience building capacity of the MTFP. Specifically, local recruiters deepened their relationship with the university by participating in a 5K fun run that was part of the MTFP launch and, with mixed success, secured both a band from Fort Moore and a K-9 unit from Ft. Stewart as a way to spotlight Army capabilities. They also used home games to gain better access to prospective soldiers from area high schools. In short, what the Jacksonville Recruiting Battalion rightly saw was that MTFP home games served as an overtly 'pro-military service' center of influence (COI). The execution of their efforts, however, were uneven. Contributing factors apparently included friction between levels within the Army's chain of command and siloed thinking, *e.g.*, bureaucratic delays in the effort to combine assets to support USAREC's mission. Despite this, the Jacksonville Battalion persisted and eventually gained permission to follow the example of the GAARNG by allowing a Reserves recruiter to hold office hours on campus. Although only the first step, that move did give the recruiter access to college students who participated in sports but were outside of the MTFP. Within two weeks of being on campus, the recruiter formed a relationship with 8 students, 4 of which qualified and completed packets for MEPS, 1 of those students has applied to the Army's Officer Candidate School.

Recommendation #2

Given the Army's long-standing ambivalence toward DEPs and the perception that some obstacles to solving the U.S. Army's recruiting crisis owe to fixed mindsets within its own chain of command, other branches of service may be better suited for integrating delayed entry programs into both the MTFP and the broader campus community. This is not to say that work with the Army should be limited to direct enlistment into Reserves or that Army pathways to compo 1 be set aside. Rather, the point is that the MTFP serves the entire DoD family and other branches have a greater readiness to meet college student expectations for enlistment through delayed entry programs. For example, before the creation of the MTFP, Navy recruiters from Jacksonville contacted university officials and offered a DEP to TU nursing students. After the MTFP was established, the Regional Recruiting Commander expressed strong

⁸ Buddin, R. "Success of First Term Soldiers. The Effects of Recruiting Practices and Recruit Characteristics." Arroyo Center, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monaca, 2005).

interest in advancing the NAVY Baccalaureate Degree Completion Program (BDCP) on campus. To successfully implement that, we recommend a 'crawl, walk, run, race' approach.

Crawl: Navy recruiters who are versed in both DEPs and Reserve should work with university officials to integrate into campus life. The dogged action by the Army Reserve recruiter revealed that the MTFP does have a halo effect on other sports (the enlisting students were largely from Women's Flag Football). Using zero as a baseline, it makes sense to bring the Navy BDCP to TU and begin tracking results. Again, taking the lesson learned from the Army's Jacksonville Recruiting Battalion, direct access to college students may also provide recruiters with measurable opportunities for leveraging university activities to reach high school students through peer-to-peer recruiting.

To walk: At the end of its first season (fall semester) the MTFP posted an embarrassingly low team GPA, despite having the same aptitude scores as other students. The causes of the poor performance are being studied elsewhere but the participation of first-generation college students from Title I schools does suggest the need for avenues that include more intensive formative experiences. Basic Training and AIT may be part of that solution. TU currently accepts basic training and AIT as ACE Evaluated, ungraded, transfer credit. Further, the American Association of Colleges and Universities recently called for greater courage in general education curriculum design that is grounded in life-changing, educational, social, and economic opportunities for all students. In response to that call, university officials should work with both Army and Navy to design an innovative general education offering that treats Basic Training as graded hours. There is data to suggest that such an experience will help the students in the remainder of their college careers.⁹ Additionally, on campus recruiters should explore ways to work with college officials for an appropriate way to discuss direct enlistment as an option for students who struggle academically.

To run: University officials should consider blending service members with appropriate analytical skills into the university faculty for purposes of further research and the codification of scalable best practices.¹⁰ If Army and Navy are not able to assign personnel for such research, TU should consider DoD SkillBridge as an option and make provision for the personnel to continue in the Department for Clinical Psychology and Rehabilitation Studies.

Finally, for the marathon: The Center for Military Life at TU should engage both its advisory board and other stakeholders in a grassroots campaign that urges legislators to review 10 USC 58, sec. 1142, which mandates that active duty service members be counseled to consider reserves. The law should also contemplate advising members in compos 2 and 3 of the advantages associated with compo 1 to ensure that young people who use the National Guard and Reserves to gain access to a college degree, see active duty as a viable career option upon completion of their initial contract.

Observation #3

⁹ The Student Veterans Association of America notes that nearly two-thirds of student veterans are first generation and that they have a 72% success rate in higher education with higher grade point averages than their peers. See, <https://studentveterans.org/research/nvest/>

¹⁰ On the benefits of using extracurricular activity to create affinity see, for example, De Sisto, M., Huq, A., and Dickinson, G., "Sense of belonging in second-year undergraduate students: the value of extracurricular activities," Higher Education Research & Development, (2022) 41:5, 1727-1742,

Although the focus so far has fallen heavily on recruiting, a few preliminary observations also can be made about the MTFP in relation to veterans. First, the counseling component, which is at the heart of the MTFP, is necessary. During a one-month period, the clinical coordinator assisted four homeless veterans. She also provided direct counseling services to several student veterans who had mentioned and/or displayed suicidal tendencies. At the time of writing this report, roughly 25% of the MTFP is enrolled in counseling services and the number is growing. Since suicide prevention is a team sport, the clinical coordinator took steps to raise awareness across the campus community through a series of suicide prevention events. Those gatherings consistently attracted audience sizes of between 125-200 people in a context of roughly 500 students. Although it is not possible to prove that programming like the MTFP prevents veteran suicide, it is safe to infer that the mental health component of the MTFP does disrupt self-destructive behavior and is valued by both the participating veterans and the supportive community of which they are a part.

A second insight is that growth in the veteran population for the MTFP is hampered by challenges similar to those noted above. For instance, prior to the pandemic, TU partnered with a veteran services organization (VSO) that ran combines on military installations. Those events provided coaches with the chance to evaluate the athleticism of those interested in playing college sports. Base lock-downs in response to the pandemic, however, crippled that VSO. Although the pandemic officially ended on May 11, 2023, an avenue for college coaches to assess and counsel athletes does not appear to have been restored. Viewed in the busy and larger context that is the U.S. military, overlooking the restoration of access is understandable. Nevertheless, its absence is harmful for transition efforts because it prevents coaches from guiding the preparation (physical, mental, clerical) for participation in collegiate sports. Simply put, ensuring a clean hand-off by attending to the details prior to ETS, especially for those headed to an MTFP, is to the benefit of the military, the service members, and the university.

The absence of an avenue for extra-curricular educators to work directly with transitioning service members also hints at some potential blind spots within DoD support services. For instance, when asked where to find veteran-athletes, one Educational Services Officer suggested that coaches attend a conference to network with each other. That off-target guidance raised a question in the minds of university officials as to whether the Voluntary Education Program is so tightly focused on didactic instruction that programming related to student well-being is overlooked. By contrast, TAP personnel did not offer any guidance. Rather, they simply declined to engage on the grounds that the MTFP relates to education as opposed to job placement and benefits counseling. In other words, the TAP may be another instance of a hardened silo that misses the idea that successful job placement in the civilian sector generally happens in a continuum of educated individuals who are mentally and physically sound.¹¹ One bright spot in the effort to connect transitioning service members to the MTFP, however, was Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR). Constrained by a variety of regulation, MWR could only point university officials to where service members 'might be' when off base and off the clock. That 'fishing' tactic did not yield athletes for the MTFP but the poor outcome was partially conditioned by university coaching staff who resented the approach, viewing it as too random and unproductive.

¹¹ The observation is not unique to the experience of building the MTFP. See, for instance, Whitworth, J., Smet, B and Anderson, B., "Reconceptualizing the U.S. Military's Transition Assistance Program: The Success in Transition Model." *Journal of Veteran's Affairs*. Vol. 6 n. 1 (2020) pp. 25-35.

Finally, and to the extent that it applies to the current recruiting crisis, conversations with the U.S. Marine Corps Recruiting Command revealed an intentional pathway back into national service through an Officer's re-enlistment program. It is a direct commissioning program that is purpose built for enlisted personnel who ETS, earn and college degree, and then re-enter the Corps. Army recruiters are aware of a program analog for their branch of service but the intentional and systematic use of such a track to improve enlistment numbers appears to be ill-fated in the context of the MTFP without better mechanisms for drawing the veteran population into the program and the Army's willingness to prioritize it as a pathway.

Recommendation #3

Step 1: Since MWR has athletic facilities under its purview and clearly grasps how extra-curricular activity builds resilience, it should collaborate with MTFP coaches to create events that both feed college sports programs and, at the same time, serves as revenue generating programming within the regular MWR portfolio.

Step 2: Although this report does raise concerns about Vol Ed and TAP, we caution that those concerns are anecdotal and that no major adjustments be made on their basis. TAP is uniquely positioned to both create awareness and direct veterans to relevant opportunities. The effectiveness of the clinical coordinator in serving the needs of veterans that was mentioned above, however, may contain the roots of a different model. She relied on a VSO coalition that was orchestrated by the VA and anchored in the university to custom fit resources to the specific needs of individual veterans. That experience suggests that hubs with a correctly positioned clinical coordinator may improve veteran outcomes for both winning and keeping jobs by extending tailored services beyond the normal 12-month TAP timeline. As such, further work on a VA coalition rooted in the university and enhanced with programs like the MTFP should be undertaken with an eye to exporting it to other college campuses.

Conclusion

As the foregoing suggests, there is still much to learn about how to best use college sports as a vehicle for military transition programming but the MTFP has established a body of work for researchers to begin setting baselines for more empirical analysis. What is sure, is that that embedding compos 2 and 3 in smaller private universities does yield positive outcomes that can be leveraged to off-set downturns in enlistment numbers. Given the high degree of confidence in using athletics as a draw for meeting recruiting objective, DoD stakeholders should engage officials at TU to develop plans to deploy such programming at other U.S. small, private colleges.

Finally, although not expressly stated above, it is important to acknowledge that the military transition football program is male dominated. As noted above, however, there is evidence to suggest that programs like the MTFP are just as attractive to female athletes. In the fall of 2023, for instance, coaches in two women's sports, flag football and softball, were instrumental in helping some of their athletes to enlist in the GAARNG and Reserves. As such, efforts are currently underway at Thomas University to explore whether a women's sport might also serve as a military transition program. That study will be important because, while the MTFP was purpose-built from scratch, there may be an opportunity to build from an existing sport that is centered on serving traditional learners. The difference matters because most colleges are likely to fit military transition programming into an existing sport and a conversion may provide valuable insights. Indeed, questions such as how the integration of

the transition curriculum into an existing team might play out, what kind of professional development will be required for the coaching staff to grasp military life and culture, and what the alumni perceptions of the change might be are a few to study. Even so, the lessons learned from creating the MTFP suggest that without better access to personnel who are separating from the military, the ability to measure the impact that veterans may have on both new recruits and prospective student/recruits and the effectiveness of colleges sports in helping veterans to transition into civilian life will continue to be hampered.