

The Boston Globe

Job-hunting veterans get a boost at UMass Lowell



PHOTOS BY JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

Edge4Vets founder Tom Murphy leads a recent employment workshop helping to connect veterans and area life-sciences companies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

By Nick Kapteyn | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 24, 2014

Jeremy Alaniz was an economics student at Texas A&M University when he watched United Airlines Flight 175 crash into the south tower of the World Trade Center.

He made the same decision as thousands of other young Americans that day in 2001 after watching the 9/11 attacks live on television: He resolved to enlist in the Army.

About 11 years later, Alaniz is nearing completion of his second bachelor's degree — this one in chemical engineering — at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Alaniz, 33, also is participating in [Edge4Vets](#), a program at the college that helps veterans translate skills learned in the military into tools for the civilian workforce.

During three workshops this summer, four Boston-area life sciences companies — Covidien, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Fresenius Medical Care, and Thermo Fisher Scientific — sent human resource professionals to mentor veterans like Alaniz.

They answered questions, critiqued interview skills, and at the end of the program were connected with veterans who best fit their openings for jobs and internships.

"Having the face time with hiring managers, with people in the industry, it makes a world of difference," said Alaniz. "When you're talking to them, you're working on your elevator speech, or your pitch," something, he said, that's usually not the case with personnel managers and job recruiters.

Now a Lowell resident, Alaniz, a native of San Antonio, learned leadership skills in the Army. He chose to finish his degree in economics at A&M before enlisting in 2003, which allowed him to become an officer two years after leaving for basic training in 2004. He deployed to Iraq in 2008 as part of a military transition team, a group of about 12 to 15 soldiers that provided training to an Iraqi Army unit.

While visiting his brother at MIT, Alaniz met his future wife, Eva, and after he left the Army as a captain in 2009 the couple decided to live in Massachusetts. He hopes Edge4vets helps him find a career in chemical engineering.

The first Edge4Vets session took place in 2011 at Fordham University in New York. It evolved after Tom Murphy, director of the [Human Resiliency Institute](#) at Fordham, saw the impact of a program he started that taught airport employees how to handle stress in the post-9/11 workplace.

Murphy noticed that many veterans either didn't attend job fairs or didn't get full use of them.

"It occurred to me that the missing piece was they weren't ready for the job fairs yet," Murphy said. "They needed support to translate their skills. It can't be assumed that they know how to do that."

A year after Murphy founded Edge4Vets at Fordham, he was contacted by Mike Dunford, senior vice president of human resources at Covidien, a global health-care products company with its US headquarters in Mansfield. As a retired Marine lieutenant colonel with 21 years of combined active and reserve duty, Dunford could envision the value of the program and worked to bring it to Massachusetts.

"It's another talent pool we can draw upon to fill jobs, because we want to fill jobs," said Dunford, a longtime Bridgewater resident. "I saw an opportunity to actually put companies in a room with veterans, and those companies have actual openings."

Last summer, Dunford initiated the Massachusetts pilot program in Boston.

Janine Wert, director of the UMass Lowell's [Office of Veterans Services](#), was eager to bring Edge4Vets to her city after being invited to witness the pilot program in action. "Our veterans have reported that it's life-changing," Wert said.

The number of veterans in UMass Lowell's student population made it a logical choice. Last fall, there were 1,450 vets enrolled, up from 550 just two years earlier. Ranked among the top 50 postsecondary schools for veterans this year by [the Military Times](#) publication, UMass Lowell was the only college in the state to make the list.



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Cham Yim, a veteran of the Air Force and a member of the Air National Guard, graduated from Northeastern University in May and lives in Rhode Island. When he heard about Edge4Vets, he decided to give it a shot.

"It was kind of perfect," said Yim, 28. "They really teach you how to sell yourself well."

Yim has six job openings on his radar at three companies where he established contacts through Edge4Vets.

The UMass Lowell sessions are expected to grow to at least 50 veterans and 50 mentors this fall, according to Wert. The program also is seeking to expand its reach to assist veterans across the state, with UMass Lowell serving as the hub. Suffolk University in Boston expects to host its first session next spring, and Wert plans to invite representatives from Worcester area schools to attend the fall session in Lowell. Diversifying the career fields offered by participating companies is also a priority.

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