

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Apr. 5, 2022

Innovative UT Collaboration Helps Veterans, Families Bridge Career, Social Challenges of Re-Entering Civilian Life

AUSTIN, Texas — U.S. service members, veterans and their families will benefit from an innovative, holistic career training and wellness program launched in March through a joint initiative of The University of Texas at Austin's [Center for Professional Education](#) and the [Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness](#).

UT Austin's new [Oscar Mike \(UTOM\)](#) program is being rolled out nationally to provide a steady path for re-entry to civilian life, in what can be a challenging transition for employment, health care, housing, finances, and often identity and purpose as service commitment winds down. (Oscar Mike means "On the Move" in military lingo.)

Not only will UT offer professional training programs allowing transitioning military to upskill quickly and make connections with veteran-friendly employers, but wellness and family life will be addressed through help with social, economic and mental health needs.

"With its focus on wellness, this new partnership is unique across the country. It supports not only transitioning service members, but also their spouses and families, as they re-enter civilian life while facing financial, housing and even food insecurities," said Joseph Kopser, special adviser for military leadership and strategy policy at UT Austin.

"UT is a world-class partner and destination for service members and their families. Just as they are on the front lines helping preserve our democracy, we as a university proclaim 'Disciplina, Praesidium, Civitatis,' meaning our mission is to guard democracy through education," Kopser said. "It is only natural that we put in place programs and opportunities to serve our veterans and their families."

UT Austin was recently ranked as the No. 1 school for veterans in the state of Texas by U.S. News & World Report and educates around 475 veterans and 1,300 spouses or children of current or former military members. The Oscar Mike program is expected to significantly increase those numbers with its holistic approach that ensures veterans and spouses can obtain educational credentials and social supports that will pave their way for a successful military to civilian transition.

"We care. We understand. We are military-led and military-spouse led," said Kopser, who served in the U.S. Army for 20 years. "Developers of this program came from the military, and we are taking it to the next level – a sense of purpose, beyond just a paycheck."

With emphasis on outreach to military installations conducted in partnership with the Expiration Term of Service Sponsorship Program, a national nonprofit dedicated to assisting service members making the transition to civilian life successfully, UTOM program support will begin before service members leave their military assignments so that they can graduate, separate, and move straight

into desirable jobs. Professional training lasting two to three months will be offered virtually and in the evenings with some options available for spouses. A virtual pilot program launches in June with a projected cohort of 60-80 trainees. Initial professional choices will be project management, human resources and personal training, with more options in the future from the robust Extended Campus, which serves more than 75,000 learners annually.

“Employers appreciate the experiences and skills that our veteran graduates bring. We are actively negotiating with corporate and government partners for this qualified worker pipeline,” said Liliya Spinazzola, senior director of professional education and strategic initiatives at UT Austin.

“Certificates through our training are in high demand among employers, particularly the booming technology-related sector in Central Texas.”

UTOM is positioned to enroll a growing number of veterans and spouses. Annually, more than 200,000 men and women leave the service to enter the civilian world. It can be a stressful time, with high suicide rates, for those lacking preparation or support. Spouses and family members can be overlooked, and they often miss long-term work histories, career training or community connections because of frequent moves.

“We are excited to partner with the University of Texas and bring these great opportunities to service members bound for Texas. By addressing the critical needs of employment and education for our new Veterans and their families, together we can set conditions for a smooth transition back to civilian life,” said retired Brig. Gen. Mike Eastman, Executive Director of the ETS program. “UTOM will serve as a model for similar programs in development across the country.”

Seminars on topics like housing and health care, connections to local resources, peer transition coordinators and a monthly social and emotional support group are some of the programs designed to ensure success.

“The Institute for Military and Veteran Family Wellness is a research center that focuses on developing effective programs that benefits spouses and veterans. We are honored to provide comprehensive support for transitioning service members and their spouses. Spouses in particular can be overlooked in the transition process,” said Elisa Borah, director of the institute, which is a joint effort of the [Steve Hicks School of Social Work](#) and Dell Medical School’s [Department of Health Social Work](#).

“Spouses of veterans often put their education and careers on hold, in support of their service members’ military careers,” Borah said. “We recognize that and have developed and tested effective employment and peer support for spouses. The university has so much to offer and by working across programs we can provide transitioning military families holistic help. There is no reason for families or spouses to be left out of the educational process.”

The UTOM collaboration echoes President Jay Hartzell’s strategic vision for bringing community, faculty, staff and students together with lifelong learning goals. Kopser calls the new program a one-stop shop for now and in the future. “We want our veterans and their families to know that they can return here at every transition, for new skills, certificates, whatever they need. We are here every step of the way,” he said.

For more information: <https://professionaled.utexas.edu/oscar-mike>

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