



**Syracuse University  
IVMF Campaign  
Fall 2014**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to execute a successful messaging strategy and execution plan for the Institute of Veteran and Military Families (IVMF), it was imperative to learn the nature and background of the organization. By researching the situational analysis of the organization, our team found different political, economic, social and technological trends that affect and make up the environment surrounding veterans, veteran families, and organizations that continue to serve with and for veterans in different communities, including IVMF.

The political factors include federal laws and initiatives such as the Veteran Choice Card, the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act, PA 13-63, Careers for Veterans Act of 2013 and the Veterans Small Business Opportunity and Protection Act of 2013. Economic factors such as disabilities and unemployment are also listed. Social trends include the fact that 74 percent of veterans actively seek out benefit and service information, yet only a third of all veterans know that there are educational support services out there specifically for them, or actually use these services. Technologically, the three ways that veterans respond well to gaining information is face-to-face interaction, Internet websites or email.

Looking at the current communication strategy through the IVMF provided certain insights as to how to go about effectively reaching out to veterans and their families. Those who are aware of IVMF and its services actively search out the website to find more information about the services provided. The website is also the main source of contact between veterans and the organization. The search terms "IVMF" and "Colonel James D. McDonough Jr." as well as phrases pertaining to veteran well-being and importance led people to the IVMF website. The remaining site traffic came from Reddit, and other social media outlets. With a significantly high amount of followers on Facebook and Twitter, participation exists within the community and IVMF's social accounts to drive more users to pertinent and relevant information. Pitching more human interest stories and creating original content will help with this.

Our team then looked at similar organizations and their strategies pertaining to content and interaction with the veteran and veteran family communities, as well as the communities they operate within. We sought ways to improve IVMF communication through comparison with these organizations who operate within the same sphere as the IVMF. These organizations include: American Veterans, the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, the Wounded Warrior Project, Swords to Plowshares, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors and Volunteers of America. Our team also created a survey through the Qualtrics program for IVMF to use at its disposal. The questions are targeted towards veterans, veteran families, active duty personnel, and participants in the IVMF program.

Through this secondary and primary research, our team concluded that IVMF's messaging strategy moving forward should focus on IVMF's programs and community outreach to create awareness of IVMF as a thought leader in the veteran community. The two main messages thought to better impact and serve this community are: "We are the place that gives veterans the tools they need to succeed after leaving active duty," and "we don't just help veterans; we understand them." These two messages support the IVMF's purpose of being an empowerment program for veterans, while also capitalizing on the research component of the organization.

The execution plan for these two messages and the objectives that fall under them, which are gone into further detail within the pages of this report, includes the three main sources of media that contribute to IVMF interaction. These include shared, owned and earned media. The messages utilized in these media strategies are emotional stories that capitalize on the importance of veteran success, not only from IVMF, but also from the veterans themselves. Human interest pieces focusing on success stories and advice to veterans can push the IVMF purpose and overall message to the veteran community forward.

Shared media includes all of the IVMF social media platforms. Growth for these platforms is necessary and attainable. Becoming an active participant on social media sites that are shared by and within the community can foster community engagement and an increase in reputation for IVMF. Creating original content that fits the messaging strategy provided in this report will not only impact the veteran community, but also inspire them.

Effectively impacting and inspiring the veteran community directly correlates into the other two media sources that IVMF can use to become a thought leader and major organization in the veteran community. Owned media includes the IVMF website and blog. Currently, the blog is hard to find and underutilized. Making sure that “Voices” stands out as the veteran communication hub of the website, for and from the men and women served by IVMF’s programs, will benefit the organization greatly. Earned media is obtained by outside publications, speaking about IVMF and its services. Leveraging current partnerships and reaching out to local media to share stories of veteran success and impact within their own communities are two ways to achieve this extra coverage.

The messages and strategies within this report combine the effectiveness of the current IVMF communication plan, while also suggesting ways to improve and become a partner with and for the veteran community.

# RESEARCH

## SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

### **Organizational Description**

In 2011, Syracuse University launched the nationally focused Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). JPMorgan Chase continued their existing collaboration with SU and extended their expertise to provide industry leadership. According to the IMVF websites, “the IVMF develops and nurtures a community of interdisciplinary scholarship—including the arts, humanities, social sciences, business, medicine, education and law—positioned to investigate and confer insight into the social, psychological and economic issues impacting this community.”

### **Political**

There are several federal laws that make up the current political environment for veterans issues. In general, it is favorable by creating opportunities and providing services to assist veterans after they return from active duty.

#### *The Veteran Choice Card*

Provides veterans with a card that allows non-VA healthcare providers if they have to wait more than 30 days for an appointment or live 40 miles from a VA medical facility.

#### *Post-9/11 GI Bill*

\$2 billion dollars of funding which would require in-state university tuition for certain post-9/11 veterans and extend education benefits to surviving spouses of service members who died in the line of duty while on active duty, in addition to enhancing the delivery of care for troops who experience sexual trauma while serving in the military and continuing a program about to expire for veterans struggling with traumatic brain injuries.

#### *The Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act*

Requires postsecondary institutions with federal contracts of \$100,000 or more to implement an affirmative action program for the following categories of veterans: Disabled Veteran, Qualified Disabled Veteran, Other Protected Veteran, Recently Separated Veteran, and Armed Forces Service Medal Veteran. Said program is not necessarily limited to employment connected with the federal contract. Provides reemployment rights.

#### *PA 13-63*

The Unemployed Armed Forces Subsidized Training and Employment Program offers wage subsidies and training grants to certain employers that hire eligible unemployed veterans. It is administered by the state Department of Labor.

#### *Careers for Veterans Act of 2013*

Each federal agency needs to develop a plan for hiring qualified veterans positions within the federal government. It includes (1) are disabled or recently separated; (2) served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized; or (3) while serving on active duty, participated in a military operation for which an Armed Forces service medal was awarded.

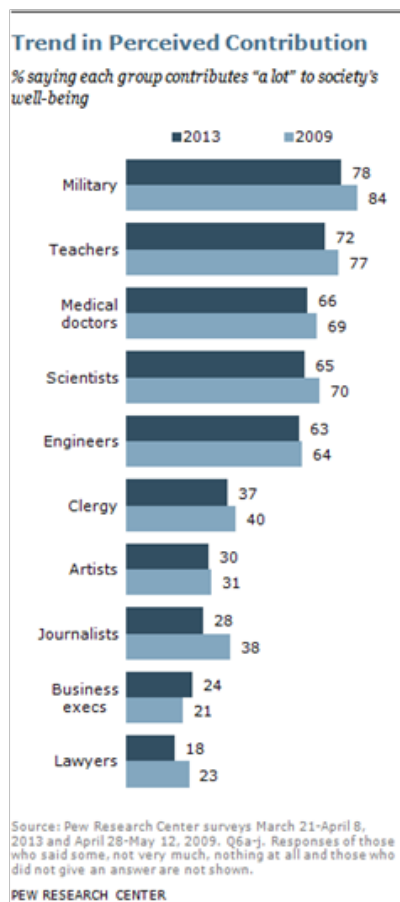
### Veterans Small Business Opportunity and Protection Act of 2013

Treats the surviving spouse of a service-disabled veteran who acquires the ownership interest in a small business of the deceased veteran as such veteran, for purposes of eligibility for VA service-disabled small business contracting goals and preferences, for a period of: (1) 10 years after the veteran's death, if such veteran was either 100% disabled or died from a service-connected disability; or (2) 3 years after such death, if the veteran was less than 100% disabled and did not die from a service-connected disability.

### Economic

There are a lot of rampant issues for recent veterans economically. Though veterans overall, including veterans from the Vietnam, Gulf, and Korean wars, have an unemployment rate of 5.6%, veterans from after 9/11 have an unemployment rate of 7.6% according the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consistently, female veterans have higher unemployment rates than male veterans.

Also, one in three veterans with a service related disability end up working in the private sector, while only one in five without disabilities works in the public sector. Of disabled veterans, 28% say that it prevented them from getting a job. In fact, according to a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs, an increasing number of veterans, 77.7%, are saying that disability compensation is important to helping them met their financial needs. Health insurance also still seems to be an issue for veterans. About 13% of veterans report not have any health insurance. About 20% reported using VA Health care, TRICARE or another military health care option. Still, less than half, about 49% agree that the healthcare they have provides adequate care for them and their family.



### Social

This section explores the social trends of attitudes and opinions of and about veterans. Veterans say that they understand the benefits and services that the government offers at a level of 41% according to a Survey by the Department of Veterans Affairs, with more recent Veterans claiming a higher rate of understanding at 60.5% of the benefits and services. However, when asked more granular questions about specific services. For example when asked about life insurance benefits, understanding dropped to 20%.

In good news, a fairly high percentage, 74.2% of post-9/11 veterans claimed that they actively sought information on the benefits and services offered. This seems to indicate that veterans are fairly proactive in seeking aid. However, only 37% of veterans have used VA educational benefits which declined from the last time the survey was issued. More than a third, 36%, said that they did not know that these benefits were available to them. Specifically the use of benefits for business, technical or vocational school has dropped by 14% to 23.5% of veterans using these benefits. However, the 73% of the veterans who indicated using those benefits reported that they were extremely or very important in preparing them to get a better job.

On the other hand, more than half active duty veterans have used tuition assistance, and 34% of those that did not indicated that they planned on using it after leaving service. However 27% reported that they did not know that VA

offered educational benefits. These numbers indicate that there is a lot of unawareness to overcome, but that veterans who seek help and make use of the resources available to them are better off because of it.

There also seems to be a trend of good images towards veterans. Amongst themselves, 60.6% of veterans serving after 9/11 indicated that their military experience applied to their job in some way. Also a Pew Survey in 2013 indicates that 78% of people believe that the military contributes “a lot” to society’s well being.

### **Technological**

According the Department of Veterans Affairs survey, a vast majority of veterans have access to the internet, especially younger veterans below the age of 30 and active duty service men and women. Of them, 98.7% and 99.1% respectively use it and almost all of them use it at least weekly if not daily. This group of veterans also shows a high willingness to use the Internet to research services available to them as veterans. Amongst active duty service members the preferred ways to receive information were face-to-face (31.2%), the Internet (26.8%), and email (21.8%). According to this information, Internet is probably the best place to focus efforts on providing support for recent veterans because of its frequency of use. However, low tech options such as Face-to-Face visitations and partnerships with civilian transition offices should not be discounted.

## CURRENT COMMUNICATIONS ANALYSIS

### Website

The main way that IVMF seems to communicate with its audiences is through its website. Using the analytics tool SimilarWeb, we were able to see that there were 45,000 site views in October, 25,000 in September, and 35,000 in August. About a quarter of the traffic to the site navigated directly to site which would indicate that many of those who are aware of IVMF actively use the site to access its information. Another 17% came from referrals from other websites. These include Whitman’s website, Syracuse University’s main website, and the Boots2Business site. This would seem to indicate the effectiveness of directing people to the site through the use of a strong partner network.

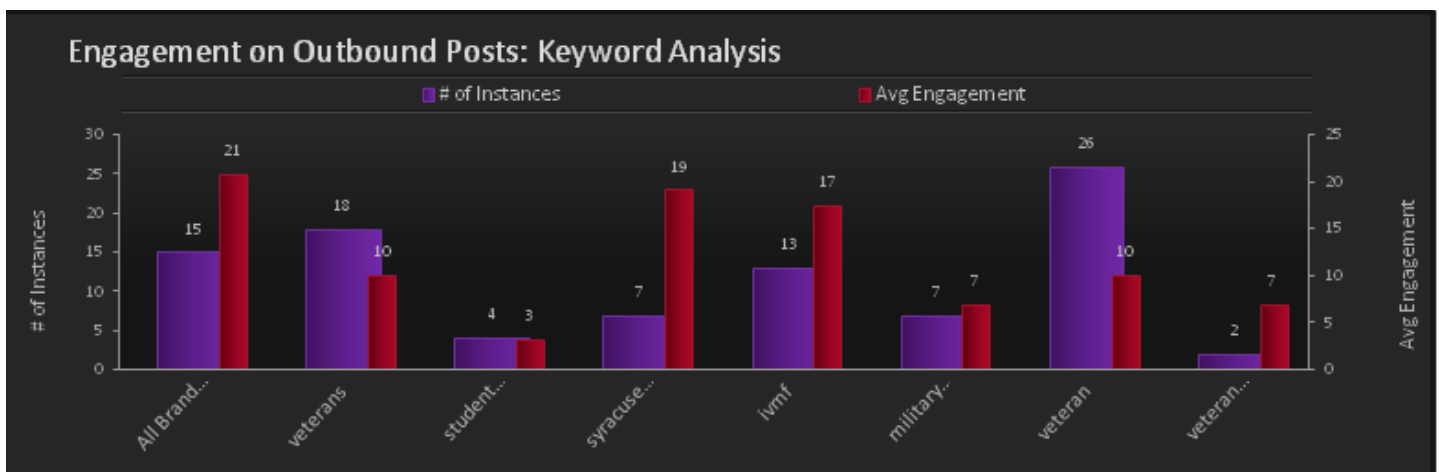
A little more than half the site traffic came from organic search, though a large portion of that traffic came from searching the term “IVMF.” This is a similar level of engagement to that of the people who access the site directly because they are people who are looking for the IVMF directly but have not saved the URL. The next most popular term was searching for Colonel James D. McDonough Jr., which leads to the IVMF page. Two other search terms were “why veterans are important” and “veterans and economic development,” but these were a lower proportion than the previous terms. These last two search terms show that IVMF has some search engine optimization in the realm of veterans’ issues but that there is potential to rank higher through deliberate effort.

The remaining 6.5% came from social media. Surprisingly Reddit was the social site that directed the most traffic to the site, ahead of, in order, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This shows that there is a lot of room to grow the influence of social media on IVMF’s ability to give information to its audiences. While owned social accounts like Facebook and Twitter are useful there may be an opportunity to explore the opportunities presented by social sharing sites like Reddit.

The IVMF website itself holds a lot of information about the organization, its partners, and its programs. However, it is not always clear where to find information and the most engaging parts of the website such as the blog. The website could benefit from some streamlining of its design and information architecture design to make it easier to navigate for a casual viewer. Overall the design itself is easy to like which makes staying on the site easy enough.

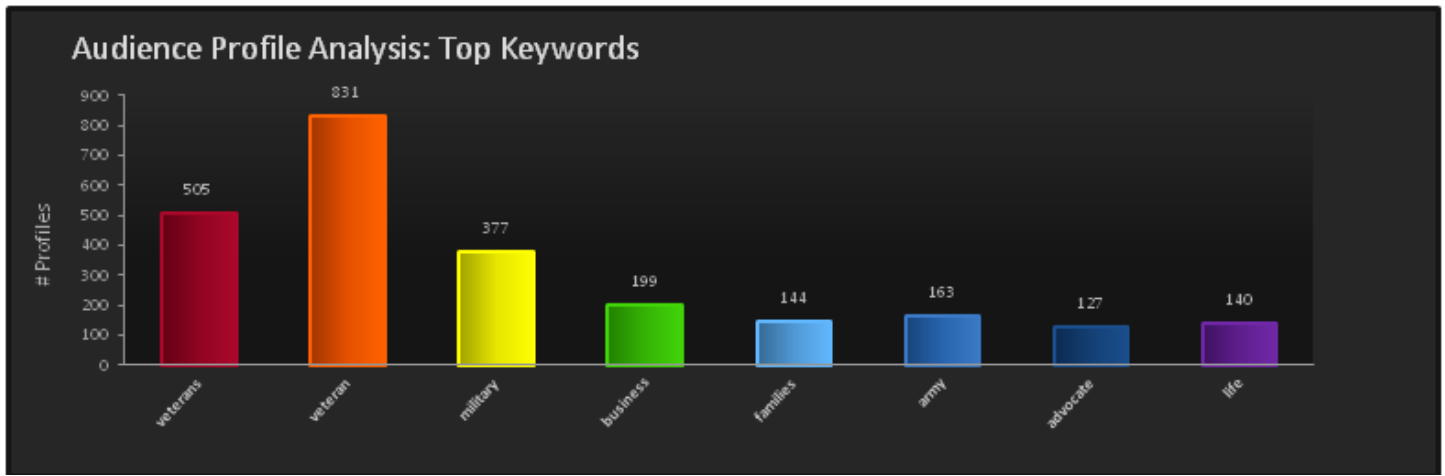
### Social Media

Both IVMF’s Twitter and Facebook accounts seem to have fairly large followings of people interested in veterans issues, but not a lot of community engagement. Of the two, Facebook is the more active with 86,474 likes on the page. That said, there is very little activity on each post. There is a range of 10 to 30 likes for each post, and there rarely seem to be comments. A majority of the posts are links.





Twitter on the other hand has 2,924 followers, of whom 831 have the keyword word “veterans” in their profile according to an analysis by SimplyMeasured. Other common keywords include “military”, business” and “families”. Like the Facebook page, engagement is fairly low, with rarely more than 3 retweets and rarely if ever a favorite on any tweet posted by IVMF. A majority of the Twitter subscribers to the IVMF account are active tweeters with almost 60% having tweet within the last week.



While both accounts post regularly, they seem to be oriented at pushing services offered by IVMF and there is very little focus on human interest or actually interacting with the relevant audiences to each account. For example tweets and posts by IVMF are sometimes repeated two or three times within a couple days. By writing posts that encourage engagement and highlight the more human interest IVMF’s social feeds may be able to better connect to their audience

### Media Placements

Searching for news about IVMF most of the news stories that show up are either about partners starting or renewing a commitment to assist the organization or about the awards and recognitions that IVMF has received in the last couple years. Many of these are press releases on sites like PR Newswire. Again a lot of these stories are focused on the organization or their partners. There is a an opportunity to start trying to pitch more human interest stories such as the success of students of IVMF programs. Also it may be possible to leverage the reputation of well known partners by creating stories that highlight how their efforts are allowing IVMF to help more people and perhaps even encouraging them to make more action beyond the financial.



## **ANALYSIS OF SIMILAR ORGANIZATIONS**

### **AMVETS**

AMVETS (American Veterans) is an organization dedicated to helping American armed forces past and present. Membership in AMVETS is open to anyone who is currently serving or has honorably served in the U.S. Armed Forces from World War II to the present, including the National Guard and Reserves. The organization's mission is "to enhance and safe-guard the entitlements for all American Veterans who have served honorably and to improve the quality of life for them, their families, and the communities where they live through leadership, advocacy and services".

AMVETS target publics are similar to the IVMF: they primarily aid soldiers currently serving in the military or who served previously (specifically elderly veterans), families of veterans and high school students. There are several programs dedicated to each public that the entirely volunteer staffs work on every day. These volunteers and 18,000 members devote as many as 250,000 hours of free time a year to brighten the lives of hospitalized veterans. This element of the organization is great for veterans and the community. To support certain events and programming costs, members pay \$30 per year.

AMVETS main service is to provide free claims assistance to veterans, their dependents and survivors. In addition the organization created various groups to further engage key publics including AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary and Sons of AMVETS, which focus on families and how they can help the war efforts. Other initiatives include annual scholarships totaling \$40,000 to deserving high school seniors, ROTC students and veterans pursuing higher education. They also offer Warrior Transition Workshops, providing veterans with a transitional program, putting skills to use and teaching veterans how they can integrate back into the community. For soldiers currently serving, the Taskforce DVD program provides service members with entertainment to distract them for an hour or two from the dangerous situations they face every day.

One of AMVETS most impressive programs is the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS). The largest volunteer program in the Federal government, there are more than 350 national and community organizations involved in supporting elderly veterans. Volunteers assist patients by placing staff in end-of-life care programs, foster care, community based volunteer programs, hospitals wards, nursing homes and veteran outreach centers.

AMVETS is particularly successful online, primarily using Facebook and their website to communicate with key publics and the general public. The Facebook page is very successful with over 31, 500 likes and frequent engagement (likes, shares, comments). Even though they only post every few days, their content engages followers every time, either with a video, photo or personal testaments from people the organization has helped. The website is also simple and easy to find specific information. The design is clean and the headings are clear and the viewer is not overwhelmed by information.

### **MFRI**

The Military Family Research Institute at Perdue University is an institution that works with collaborators to improve the lives of American veterans and their families through research and outreach. They primarily focus on veterans and families involved with the most recent war. They have collaborated with the government and other national and local institutions because of their extensive research and support for veterans and military families. Their mission statement outlines the following goals: 1) Support the military infrastructure that supports families; 2) Strengthen the motivation and capacity of civilian communities to support military families; 3) Generate important new knowledge about military families; 4) Influence policies, programs, and practices supporting military families; and 5) Create and sustain a vibrant learning organization.

The Military Family Research Institute, like the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, is closely associated with a university and promotes education for veterans and military families through many of their programs.

The IVMF focuses more on entrepreneurship, but both institutes have programs addressing the issue. The MFRI focuses more on research than the IVMF does, but it also has a number of highly utilized programs.

Both organizations have similar key publics, although they approach the issues facing these publics differently. They both strive to help veterans and their families in addition to the families of those currently serving in the military. The MFRI also identifies the government and lawmakers who have an impact on the lives of these people as a key public, demonstrating a dedication to ensuring veterans and their loved ones are benefiting from the government programs they are entitled to.

The MFRI separates its programs into four categories: research, outreach, education and employment, and grants. The research opportunities are mostly for university students who are interested in the lives of the families and wish to speak to the families about their experiences, both with the military and the government as a military family.

The MFRI has other various outreach programs that the IVMF can potentially develop and expand with their current programming. This includes mobilization outreach groups, which seek to foster relationships and collaboration between the government, businesses, communities and military families, ideally for the benefit of all groups. By collaborating with several other organizations, the MFRI has launched the Star Behavioral Health Providers, which is a registry that helps service members and their families locate civilian behavioral health professionals with special training to understand and deal with military issues.

The educational and employment program, formerly known as Operation Diploma, works with veteran groups and postsecondary educational institutions in Indiana to provide assistance and support to any veterans who are currently attending or planning to attend a postsecondary school. In addition to aiding with education, the MFRI has put together a resource for veterans seeking employment and created a publication that enables employers to better understand what military qualifications mean and what veterans can add to an employment community.

The MFRI also offers grants, including the Community Mobilization Grant Program, which donates up to \$2,500 to community organizations and family support groups that strive to improve the quality of life for military families. It also offers a business plan competition alongside the Student Veterans' Organization.

The MFRI also sends out bimonthly newsletters. These newsletters are sent out to anyone affiliated with the institution, the organization's postsecondary educational partners, anyone who has donated to the MFRI, relevant contacts from similar or associated organizations, media with a history of covering topics relevant to the MFRI and a number of government leaders. There are additional programs and events held regularly to keep the general public and key publics involved, and emails are consistently sent out to specific publics. They also keep close track of success rates and long-standing data to determine what programs and initiatives are the most effective or ineffective.

The website is designed in-house by a full-time web person and upkeep is done by the external relations staff. The website is straightforward and information is organized and displayed prominently. It is clear each section heading represents different aspects of the institution and where information can be found. Compared to the IVMF, it is a lot more organized, but it does have fewer graphics. It is also easier to find key facts and not be lost or overwhelmed by information.

## **WWP**

The Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) has a threefold purpose: "To raise awareness and enlist the public's aid for the needs of injured service members; To help injured service members aid and assist each other; and To provide unique, direct programs and services to meet the needs of injured service members." The organization's mission

is to honor and empower veterans, which the organization refers to as Warriors. The organization was formed in 2003 in Roanoke, VA and is charity currently Warriors with 12 offices across the country.

The WWP has five key publics and several overlap: wounded post-9/11 veterans, the general public, Warrior family members, the federal government and Warrior “alumni” (veterans who have received assistance from the program). The awareness section of their purpose addresses each public, specifically the federal government and Warrior alumni. The helping section is covered by the Warriors, family members, the public at large and the alumni. The programs section is covered by the Warriors and the alumni. These programs are aimed explicitly at Warriors and several of them could be implemented or partially implemented.

Programming is split into four key areas: mind, body, economic empowerment and engagement. Under mind programming, key projects include the Project Odyssey and Restore Warriors. Project Odyssey is an outdoor retreat designed to rehabilitate Warriors through community sports and activities. Restore Warriors is a website/awareness campaign designed to illuminate the problem of PTSD. Under body programming there are Inclusive Sports, Fitness, Nutrition and Wellness which are informative programs, and active body programming includes the Soldier Ride, a four-day bicycling event. The WWP economic empowerment program has three programs that could be useful for the IVMF to implement: TRACK, Transition Training Academy and Warriors to Work. TRACK is a 12-month program located in the first education center for veterans meant to prepare them for the workforce. Transition Training Academy is meant for veterans interested in the IT field. It’s one-on-one instruction that is more hands-on than classroom-oriented. The Warriors to Work program has a way for employers to network with Warriors. Under the TRACK and Warriors to Work sections on the WWP website there are two testimonial/PSA videos. The Warriors to Work video is particularly effective; viewers can see how well the program matched veterans with careers that fit them.

WWP operates a Facebook page, Twitter account, YouTube account, Pinterest and LinkedIn. Each page is fairly active with the Twitter, Facebook and YouTube supporting the most content. Almost all posts include various types of non-text media, and most posts are shorter than 50 words. The YouTube account is particularly interesting – they treat it like a video version of Twitter. Most videos are only one or two minutes long (although there are a number of 20 minute videos), so they stick to a concise, focused message. The LinkedIn isn’t very active, but is a useful tool for the organization to endorse program alumni. The website is clean, divided into four color coded columns and each section is designed as a link. The colors tend to be muted, but red stands out as a highlight color. The site uses a fair amount of infographics, but can be text-heavy at times.

## **StP**

Swords to Plowshares is a nonprofit that focuses on poverty and economic issues for veterans. The group formed in 1974 but didn’t begin to gain traction until the late 70s and early 80s. Public opinion shifted in favor of Vietnam veterans and StP’s involvement in a number of key court cases brought it recognition within the general public. They have existed continuously since their inception and are based in the San Francisco area. Their mission is “to heal the wounds, to restore dignity, hope, and self-sufficiency to all veterans in need, and to prevent and end homelessness and poverty among veterans.” They also have a vision statement, which the IVMF does not. “All veterans will have access to the care and services they need to rebuild their lives.”

StP has a simple organizational setup depending heavily on volunteers. Consequently, most of their information is aimed at the public to encourage volunteering. They work transparently, releasing financial statements and IRS statements each year. This doesn’t mean they neglect veterans, though; there’s plenty of information to help veterans on their website. Unlike the IVMF, StP has expanded their audience beyond post-9/11 veterans. StP currently has seven programming areas for veterans: Employment & Training, Legal Services, Supportive Housing, Health & Social Services, Women Veterans, Advocacy & Policy and Combat to Community. Five of these are relevant the IVMF and can be used as a basis to create or change programming. Employment and Training consists of veterans working one-on-one with job counselors and Career Pathways, a vocational

training model designed for high-wage industries. Legal Services is free legal representation for low income or homeless veterans. The IVMF has no such program and partnering with the Syracuse College of Law could provide some great opportunities for both organizations.

Supportive Housing is divided into Permanent Housing, Transitional Housing, Housing Initiatives and Family Housing. These programs are aimed mainly at Vietnam veterans, a group with an alarmingly high percentage of homelessness. Transitional Housing is directed more at post-9/11 veterans. This program allows veterans to transition back into civilian life. Women Veterans is a general program that advocates for the complete and adequate care of women veterans using treatments specialized to their gender. StP has a few grant programs for women, something that the IVMF may want to consider implementing alongside their already-existing women's programs. Combat to Community is the most integral program for IVMF purposes. The program is designed solely to transition combat veterans back into civilian life. The IMVF has similar programs like VetNet, but having a program to solely transition veterans back to normalcy may help expand the IVMF's future audience by creating a bigger pool of viable candidates.

In terms of online presence, StP operates a Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channel and Google+ account. The Facebook account posts sparingly, generally once every two or three days. Posts are anything related to helping veterans and not just self-advertisement. The account truly functions as a disseminator of related media. The Twitter account has a similar amount of followers (around 4,000), but follows the same media strategy as the Facebook account. It does tweet multiple times a day, though, and this leads to a more consistent presence. On the organizational website StP uses an earthy color scheme of light browns, yellows and purples. It's very reminiscent of the colors in the song "God Bless America," and it works to great effect. There are event and social media tickers placed permanently on the right side, a great potential addition to the IVMF's site.

## **TAPS**

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is a nonprofit organization primarily focused on helping military families deal with losing their loved one in battle. Since it was established in 1994, the program has served over 50,000 surviving family members, casualty officers and caregivers. TAPS welcomes anyone grieving for someone who died while serving in the military, regardless of where or how they died. Although their mission is slightly different from the IVMF, TAPS has strategies and programs that IVMF can learn from.

TAPS has several programs for their military families, their primary key public. TAPS offers a network of trained professionals and volunteers who are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, creating a network and support system for people struggling through similar situations. The peer network allows people to share their stories and experiences, which help families express their grief in a safe environment. Members can be matched with another survivor who has been through the situation before and can provide hope and assurance that everything will be alright, no matter what the circumstances are. Mentors are trained by TAPS and can deal with difficult situations.

The organization also shares success stories for families new to the organization, which gives them hope for the future. These programs and resources seem simple but for a family or individual that lost someone special it is comforting knowing there are other people who understand their situation and want to help. TAPS also has programs for men and women who served in the army and are dealing with loss. There are seminars and retreats for veterans coping with the death of a friend or an attempted suicide. For these veterans there are also webinars and continuing education programs for counselors, social workers, chaplains, nurses, and mental health professionals.

In terms of online interactions, TAPS uses Facebook and Twitter effectively and also utilize Instagram and YouTube to engage key publics. Facebook page is very successful and has over 56,000 likes and post several times a day. The organization uses photos and links in addition to written content and frequently has over 200 likes on



a single post. Frequently when followers comment the organization often responds, creating a great connection with people engaging with the page. They offer a “get involved” section of the website for volunteers and different options to help the cause: this can be as large as hosting an event or donating a few dollars. In addition they provide resources for the media directly on their website including tips for talking to survivors and potential story topics. This allows them to tailor messages in their favor by providing the media with a starting point for their stories.

### **Volunteers of America**

The Volunteers of America is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping those in need rebuild their lives and reach their full potential. Through hundreds of human service programs, Volunteers of America touches the millions of American’s lives. They support and empower the most vulnerable Americans including veterans, at-risk youth, the elderly, patrolled or released former prisoners, addicts, and those with mental illnesses and disabilities.

The Volunteers of America identify several key publics: individual donors (people over the age of 35 with incomes exceeding \$75,000), foundations that fund the types of programs Volunteers of America offer, government agencies (HUD, HHS, VA, etc.), elected officials and potential clients. Many of these publics (donors, grant providers, government agencies and elected officials) are similar to those the IVMF targets. Since these groups of publics remain very similar, the IVMF could utilize similar methods of outreach.

The Volunteers of America use a number of tactics to target key publics. According to a company spokesperson, they recently began paying for national advertisements, which has been one of the most effective methods of outreach and has increased awareness of the organization among all of its publics. This increases the effectiveness of all other communication tactics and outreach. They use very specific websites and social media including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google + and Pinterest to target each of their key publics and encourage people to utilize the programs available to them.

The Volunteers of America earn media attention through both in-house communications staff and an outside PR agency to maintain their regular methods of communication. In releasing information to their publics they utilize paid ads, press releases, direct media outreach/pitching, videos produced by in-house video staff, electronic newsletters, fundraising solicitations/direct mail, occasional events (at the national level, this includes hosting an annual panel discussion at the National Press Club for high-level donors and government officials on various human services topics).

In order to cut costs without diminishing the quality of communication, the Volunteers of America has recently eliminated their printed publications. Most notably they have replaced a magazine that was mailed to donors and a few other key publics with an e-newsletter. Overall, the Volunteers of America has been attempting to transfer most of their communication materials to online content.

The Volunteers of America have found that several methods of communications were generally ineffective to the publics they wanted to reach. The first of these methods were large events, which tended to be cost-heavy and not worth the overall outcome of the event, except perhaps in smaller scales. Also, press conferences did not seem to obtain the type of media the Volunteers of America was interested in pursuing. Since many of the media outlets would also cover the IVMF, it may not be the most effective way for the organization to reach the targeted publics.

The Volunteers of America have a very simple and straightforward website. As long as a visitor knows that they are looking for it should be easy to find; there are no hidden links and searching for something specific is easy. The website is easy to follow and there doesn’t seem to be any unnecessary graphics or useless information. The designer of the Volunteers of America website is a company called Viget. The website upkeep is done by a

two-person in-house web staff, part of the larger communications staff assisted by Convio, a website assistance program for nonprofits. One problem with the IVMF is the organizations website, and they could consider hiring Viget, and/or using Convio or other similar organizations to streamline their online content.

## **OTHER RESEARCH**

My team spent an hour to an hour and a half on Wednesdays for three weeks (10/8/14 – 10/22/14) to create a survey that would be representative of the veteran, veteran family, alum of IVMF program communities. To create the questions, we looked at all of the services that IVMF provides to their publics and created questions accordingly to address the three publics that could be easily identified and reached through the community. No questions infringed on personal privacy, and the participants can choose to quit the survey or not answer specific questions if they feel they do not apply.

We used the survey creation program Qualtrics to create the survey and provide a platform for dissemination. The website is: [syracuseuniversity.qualtrics.com](http://syracuseuniversity.qualtrics.com), and can be accessed with a Syracuse Net ID and password. Through Qualtrics, we are able to gather the data from every completed survey, such as the mean, median and mode of all answers, percentage of yes versus no answers, and so forth. The questions range from simple yes/no questions, questions with varying levels of awareness, choose all that apply questions, pick a top three, to basic demographic questions.

There is skip logic applied to certain questions, so not every participant answers all 40 questions. Some of the questions in the survey are specific to a certain public or answer to a previous question. Most of the skip logic questions apply to the answers with yes/no options, such as “if yes, please specify.”

The survey is currently active and locked, so no changes may be made. However, the survey may be changed and updated as needed, simply by unlocking it. In order to gain access to edit and release the survey, please contact Courtney Inbody at [ckinbody@syr.edu](mailto:ckinbody@syr.edu). From there, you will receive an email invitation to access the survey with a permission code.

1. Please select your gender.
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other (please specify)
2. Please select your age.
  - a. Under 18
  - b. 18-25
  - c. 26-35
  - d. 36-45
  - e. 46+
3. What public do you best fall under?
  - a. Active Duty
  - b. Veteran
  - c. Veteran Family Member
  - d. Graduate of IVMF program
  - e. Other
4. Which branch of the military are you/your family member affiliated with?
  - a. Army
  - b. Marine Corps
  - c. Navy
  - d. Air Force
  - e. Coast Guard
5. Are you currently in school?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
6. Within what time frame were you last employed?
  - a. Currently employed
  - b. 0-5 months
  - c. 6-12 months
  - d. 1-2 years
  - e. 2+ years
7. Which industries would you be most interested pursuing a career in? (check all that apply)
  - a. Entrepreneurship
  - b. Aerospace and Defense
  - c. Automotive
  - d. Communications
  - e. Construction
  - f. Consumer Goods and Services
  - g. Education/Teaching
  - h. Energy
  - i. Finance
  - j. Food and Beverage
  - k. Health Care
  - l. Nonprofit
  - m. Real Estate
  - n. Technology
  - o. Other (please specify)
8. What tools would best help you reach employment? (check all that apply)
  - a. Career services
  - b. More education
  - c. Clearer understandings of individual fields/industries
  - d. Database of "Success Stories"
  - e. Personal Mentor
  - f. Other (please specify)
9. Have you ever considered utilizing IVMF's resources?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unaware of resources
10. What is your highest level of education?
  - a. Have not graduated high school
  - b. GED
  - c. High school graduate
  - d. Community College
  - e. Associate's Degree (two years)
  - f. Bachelor's Degree (four years)
  - g. Master's Degree
  - h. Doctorate
11. What was/is your field of study?
  - a. Accounting
  - b. Architecture
  - c. Arts & Sciences/Humanities
  - d. Business
  - e. Communications
  - f. Engineering
  - g. Information Technology
  - h. Law
  - i. Nursing
  - j. Social Sciences
  - k. Social Work
  - l. Teaching/Education
  - m. Other (please specify)
12. If you are a veteran, did you feel like you needed more education about your field of study to be employed after service?



- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not a veteran

13. To what extent are you aware of IVMF's educational programs?

- a. Not aware
- b. Somewhat aware
- c. Very aware
- d. Participated in the program

14. If you have heard about IVMF's programs, how did you hear about them? (check all that apply)

- a. Friends and family
- b. Colleagues
- c. Military branch resource centers
- d. Program alumnus
- e. Website
- f. IVMF partner
- g. Social media
- h. Other (please specify)

15. Which of the following programs (if any) are you interested in? (Please pick three)

- a. Entrepreneurship for Veterans with Disabilities
- b. Entrepreneurship for Veteran Families
- c. Entrepreneurship for Veteran Women
- d. Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment
- e. Veteran Career Transitional Program
- f. Boots to Business: Starting Your Own Business After Service
- g. Defense Comptrollership
- h. Military Photojournalism and Military Motion Media
- i. National Security Studies

16. How accessible do you believe on-campus educational programs are to you?

- a. Not accessible at all
- b. Somewhat accessible
- c. Very accessible

17. Would you be interested in these programs if they were offered online?

- a. Yes
- b. No

18. In your experience, what factors deter veterans/veteran family members from participating in educational programs such as those offered by IVMF? (choose all that apply)

- a. Lack of knowledge
- b. Lack of funds
- c. Fear of not succeeding
- d. Not in proximity to Syracuse University
- e. Other (please specify)

19. Have you participated in IVMF's Syracuse University educational programs before?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Currently enlisted in the military

20. Which IVMF education program did you participate in?

- a. Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities
- b. Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans' Families
- c. Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship
- d. Veteran Career Transition Program
- e. Operation Boots to Business: From Service to Startup
- f. Defense Comptrollership Program
- g. Military Photojournalism Program
- h. Military Motion Media Program
- i. National Security Studies

21. What did you like about the program?

22. What didn't you like about the program?

23. Did IVMF's educational programs help you get a job?

- a. Yes
- b. No

24. To what extent are you aware of IVMF's community engagement programs?

- a. Not aware
- b. Somewhat aware
- c. Very aware

25. Do you feel the veteran community is closely connected with the rest of the Syracuse University

community? Please elaborate.

26. Do you feel the veteran community is closely connected with the rest of the Central New York community? Please elaborate.

27. How important do you think community engagement initiatives are in helping veterans and their families?

- a. Not important
- b. Somewhat important
- c. Very important

28. If very important, please list the engagement initiatives you are aware of:

29. If somewhat important, please list the engagement initiatives you are aware of:

30. What nonprofits are you aware of that help homeless veterans?

- a. Services for the Undeserved
- b. Unite US
- c. National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
- d. Van Keuren Square in Syracuse
- e. Other (please specify)

31. What role have you known IVMF to have in the community?

32. Does research on veterans benefit them and their families?

- a. Yes
- b. No

33. How aware are you of the research briefs put in circulation by the IVMF?

- a. Education: Aware, Somewhat Aware, Not Aware
- b. Employment: Aware, Somewhat Aware, Not Aware
- c. Families: Aware, Somewhat Aware, Not Aware
- d. Wellness: Aware, Somewhat Aware, Not Aware

34. If you are aware, how valuable did you find the information provided?

- a. Not valuable

- b. Somewhat valuable
- c. Very valuable

35. Which of these research programs would you be interested in learning more about? (Check all that apply)

- a. IVMF Fellows
- b. Research Briefs
- c. A National Veterans Strategy
- d. Veteran Homelessness Report

36. Is there an area of research the IVMF is not investigating that you think deserves attention?

- a. Yes
- b. No

37. If yes, what areas do you think should be researched?

38. In what way would you prefer to receive research briefs and reports? (check all that apply)

- a. Email
- b. Mail
- c. Newsletter
- d. Bulletin Board
- e. Poster

39. In what way would you prefer to receive information about the IVMF? (check all that apply)

- a. Email
- b. Direct Mail
- c. Newsletters
- d. Bulletin Boards/Posters
- e. Newspaper Articles
- f. Blogs

40. If you would like more information about the IVMF, please leave your email address below.

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

# MESSAGING STRATEGY

Based on this team's research, the next communications effort should focus on IVMF's programs and community engagement in order to help establish the organization as one of the thought leaders in veterans' issues and assistance. The overall goal for communicating about IVMF programs should be to become recognized as the organization that helps veterans get on their feet and in jobs the most effectively. More specific objectives under this goal should be to increase the awareness among veterans and exiting soldiers about IVMF programs and to build a community network of continuing assistance and advice beyond the IVMF program for veterans. The overall goal communicating about community engagement should be to build a better network of partners and like-minded organizations in order provide the most comprehensive support and advocacy for veterans' issues. A more specific objective under this goal should be to increase the number and involvement of partner for-profit and non-profit organizations.

In working towards these two main goals, there are two main messages that the IVMF should be adopting in all of their communications. The first message is "We are the place that gives veterans the tools they need to succeed after leaving active duty." This message is strong and supportive without being patronizing. The last thing that veterans need is to be seen as helpless, so empowering communications that remind them that they can build their own futures are more likely to be well received. The story of someone succeeding by their own power rather than being dragged there is also a more compelling story that can be picked up by local and social media. The other message is "We don't just help veterans; we understand them." This message capitalizes on IVMF's unique competency of conducting research as well as providing programs to support veterans. By reminding its audiences of its deeper understanding of the complex and shifting situations that face veterans, IVMF can set itself up as a more credible expert. In all communications, IVMF should be focusing on clarifying and illuminating intricate problems but not trying to simplify or reduce them.

# EXECUTION PLAN

In the media landscape there are four kinds of media: shared (social), owned (websites, blogs, reports), earned (newspapers, news broadcasts) and paid (advertising). Of these IVMF should focus mainly on shared and owned media in order to build awareness and community engagement. There are also some steps that IVMF can take with earned media that will build awareness. In all of these forms of communication, the organization should focus more on human interest stories which will give its audiences a more concrete way of understanding how IVMF has helped people. Two examples of these kinds of stories are telling about the success of a student after completing one of IVMF's programs or giving advice for veterans on how to succeed. While it is good to report on the success and recognition of IVMF itself, the emotional pull of stories about a veteran overcoming hardship to start his or her own business is more likely to capture greater attention.

## SHARED MEDIA

Organizations similar to the IVMF have successfully utilized Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media channels to engage with their key publics. Social media is a great way to get a company's name out to the public.

The IVMF has over 84,000 likes on the organization's Facebook page but generally has very few likes, comments or shares on their posts. TAPS routinely highlights members of the organization, their accomplishments and posts a photo of the person doing work related to the organization. These posts, as well as heartwarming stories about military officers or veterans often receive more than 100 likes on a single post and several comments. If someone comments, the IVMF should also consider responding to the comment if appropriate. AMVETS also uses personal testimonials from people they have served either with a video, photo or story about the person's experience. The Volunteers of America has a very active Twitter page, where, where they share stories about the people that they have helped and are constantly tweeting back at anyone who tweets at or about them.

The Wounded Warrior Project operates a Facebook page, Twitter account, YouTube account, Pinterest and LinkedIn. Almost all posts include some non-text media, and most posts are shorter than 50 words. The YouTube account is particularly interesting – they treat it like a video version of Twitter. Most videos are only one or two minutes long (although there are a number of 20 minute videos), so they stick to a concise, focused message. If the IVMF could implement short videos like that on a consistent basis, they could greatly expand their web presence. Swords to Plowshares is less successful at social media, but they share all content they can find that is related to helping veterans. That earnestness has created a reserve of goodwill for them, and the IVMF should consider endorsing other groups implicitly on social media.

There are several specific tactics that IVMF can use to help enhance the use of social media in communicating with its audiences and establishing itself as a leading expert on veterans' issues. The main part of improving a social presence is to approach all communications as attempting to facilitate the growth of a community of veterans and supporters and foster conversation amongst themselves. By becoming an open forum where people can come to talk and share advice, IVMF will be able to increase its engagement and its reputation. It can host hashtags and twitter chats about important issues, provide, provide insights on the things they need help with from obtaining healthcare to understanding the range and depth of options they have to get help from the government or non-profit organizations, and share quick tips and ideas such as how to talk about experience in

the military when interviewing for jobs. One group that may deserve particular attention due to the difficulties its members face is female veterans. By providing a space and time for them to enter the conversation, IVMF can help provide them the assistance they need. One way to do this would be to dedicate a day to sharing posts that are relevant to them under a hashtag such as “#femVetFriday.” One final way to help increase engagement and reach is to strengthen partnerships with other like-minded organizations. Since all of these organizations have a similar goal of supporting veterans and raising awareness about relevant issues, much of their social media of each will share similar messages. Sharing these posts would allow IVMF to diversify their social feeds and perhaps entice those audiences to share IVMF’s posts to reach a slightly wider, but still interested audience.

## **OWNED MEDIA**

IVMF has two main sources of owned media that it can enhance to better communicate with its key audiences. These are the website and its blog.

The IVMF has a lot packed into their website and should consider condensing information onto an easier to read platform. There is a lot on the website that will potentially overwhelm a casual viewer. For example there are a lot of statistics and graphics on the static site that might be more effectively used in dynamic content like the blog and social feeds. It is also not very clear what page visitors should go to for specific information that they may be looking for. To make the design more straightforward, the IVMF could consider redoing their website with the assistance of companies like Viqet, who designs websites and Convio, a program that offers aid to nonprofits. It would also be useful to hire one or two in-house staff members or interns to keep the website up-to-date and respond to any activity and questions on the webpage.

There are, however, some things that could also be emphasized on the main page of the website. For example, a “get involved” section with different options to help the cause: this can be as large-scale as hosting an event or donating a few dollars. It may also be useful to provide resources for media directly on the website. This can allow IVMF to tailor messages in their favor by providing the media with a starting point for their stories. The WWP website is clean and divided into four columns. The columns are color coded and each section is designed as a link. The colors tend to be muted, but red (blood) stands out as a highlight color. A similar layout could benefit the IVMF. The current website has a lot of columns and makes it seem more cluttered than it is. Using muted colors and a highlight color could help with readability. Making the columns interactive is a must to retain the attention of site viewers. Swords to Plowshares have a great color scheme of earthy yellows, browns and purples. It’s similar to the color scheme in “God Bless America,” and a themed color layout would help unify the IVMF’s message. StP also has social media tickers on their site, and the IVMF could put these to great use.

The blog is also an effective way to help spread IVMF’s message, increase its credibility and provide support and advice to its target audiences. By posting regularly with interesting and insightful content, IVMF can help establish itself as a thought leader in the field of veterans’ issues. The first thing that will help increase the impact of the blog is to make it easy to find at a casual glance at the website. It is currently hard to find under its current title as “Voices” and relabeling the header tag to “Blog” is an easy fix to make it more accessible. The second way to improve the blog is to alter the theme of the content along the same lines as the social media feeds. Sharing some key posts over IVMF’s social channels can expand its potential readership. One way to generate content ideas and to enhance the message of understanding veterans is to write posts that pull out a single point from IVMF’s research into veterans’ issues. Other topics can include “How to” segments of interest to veterans trying to find a job or start a business like : “How to deal with disabilities in the work place” and “How to use your experience can prepare you for the workplace.” Feature Q&A interviews with successful students can serve as inspiration for other veterans and as concrete examples of how IVMF is making a difference.

Since our research shows that a large portion of active duty personnel prefer to receive information about the benefits offered to them by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs face-to-face, it may be an effective form of communication to form partnerships with civilian transition offices at military bases. With these partnerships,

military staff will be able to inform exiting military personnel of the opportunities that IVMF offers and provide them with the brochures and pamphlets that IVMF has already created.

## **EARNED MEDIA**

Earned media is useful tool in spreading a message because the outside publication provides a kind of affirmation that the story is worth reading. However they are also more difficult to obtain. There are two main ways that IVMF can leverage earned media to communicate with its publics.

The first is to tap into corporate partnerships and use the activities of more prominent companies take in enacting their veteran-focused corporate social responsibility efforts to boost the interest of your own stories. One of the factors that makes a story more likely to be picked up is name recognition and relevance to a publication's audience, so the more important the name of the company or person taking an action, the more weight it carries. While setting up these partnerships, it may be a good communications strategy to ask for actions more than just money because it creates a more interesting story for the journalist report.

The other strategy to gain positive media impression is to target local media with local stories, even if the publications local is not Syracuse. For example, if a student from a small town in Ohio is able to successfully start a restaurant after going through IVMF's programs, write press release features to the news papers and talk shows from the area. These kinds of media outlets are more likely to be looking for easy stories and publish them. To do this, it will be necessary to stay in contact with students and keep track of their successes.