



VFP 2025–2026

# Zero Gravity Program: An ROTC-like, debt-free, apprenticeship-based model for higher education

Zero Gravity is a national network modeled after ROTC connecting employers and colleges to build debt-free, apprenticeship-based degree programs where employers invest in students, students work while they learn, and graduates cross the stage with a diploma and a job.



**Dan Futrell**  
 CAPTAIN | US ARMY

## Challenges

**\$1.7T+**

total US student loan debt.

**\$30K–\$40K**

average debt for a bachelor's degree.

**\$28B**

annually spent by employers on educational support misaligned with talent needs.

**13M**

students attend financially fragile institutions facing declining enrollment.

## Achievements



Designed and began launch of **Zero Gravity program**.



Recruited **NewU University in Washington, DC, and Greenway Institute** in Vermont as two **founding institutional members**.



Engaged **M&T Bank** as a **first employer member of Zero Gravity**, building the employer side of the network.

## Activities

1. **Designed and peer-tested** the **Zero Gravity program** concept as a veteran fellow at the Hoover Institution.
2. Built **network of academic institutions and employers** through direct outreach and relationship building.
3. **Synthesizing evidence from education economics, workforce development, and employer ROI research** for an academic white paper with a Stanford education economics professor and the cofounder of Apprenticeships for America.
4. Developing **network standards and a playbook** to help other institutions adopt the **debt-free, apprenticeship-based model**.



Learn More  
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