DEFINING + MEASURING THE UNDERGRADUATE VETERAN JOURNEY

Improving the Higher Education Experience for Undergraduate Veterans
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In order to better understand the issues that veterans are facing in higher education, it is important to understand students’ educational journey. The veteran’s journey consists of 5 phases: prepare, when veterans learn about byv institutions; apply, when veterans decide on byv+ school is a potential place for them to complete their undergraduate degree; enroll, when students decide the best byv option for them; learn, when veterans obtain their degree; and, exit.

We recognize that many academic leaders and administrators will want to focus on helping students overcome the challenges they face in learning and obtaining their degrees. However, we believe that examining the whole journey, including how veterans are recruited and admitted to higher education institutions, will help us identify who is interested in increasing veterans’ education experiences and how strategies that redesign and improve the veteran student journey can be executed.

Creating a journey map allows us to highlight bright spots, pain points, moments that matter, and opportunities for improvement in the veteran experience, narrowing broader issues into smaller challenges.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT VETERAN JOURNEY MAP

The Undergraduate Student Veteran Journey Map shows a common set of moments that veterans experience before, during, and after they obtain a bachelor’s degree at a traditional, highly selective college or university. While this map is not representative of every aspect of veterans’ experiences with higher education, it is a starting point to define the ideal student veteran experience at the nation’s traditional and highly selective institutions and identify improvement opportunities.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Throughout the student veteran journey, veterans identified five key moments that matter. These are moments during which colleges and universities can build trust with this population of students or lose them completely. These moments have downstream impacts on other steps and the overall journey. Colleges and universities can and should make sure these moments are done right before addressing other aspects of the student veteran experience.

EXPERIENCE MEASURES

To measure the journey, our team utilized methods employed by the VA’s veteran experience division. The three tenants of an impactful phase are that it is easy, effective, and emotionally resonant. Moment measurements are hypothesized based on interviews with customers/users at multiple-byv universities. For example, a pain point in the generalization journey could be a bright spot at a specific university in some cases, such as navigating a website.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the journey map should be used as a guide to improve the experience for users and for working with other departments to create an easy, effective, and emotionally resonant experience for undergraduate student veterans.
ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

PURPOSE
The Journey Map Report provides an in-depth overview of the experience of users and employees. While each student veteran and university employee are different, the phases of the journey are the same. The differences arise in how the journey is experienced. Outside of the map itself, this report offers qualitative insights from users, ways to measure each stage of the journey, and identifies opportunities for universities to target user needs.

APPLICATION
The Journey Map is best paired with the personas. By looking at the journey, universities can take the personas and place them in each part of the journey to identify ways to address the needs of a diverse demographic of student veterans.

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IMPROVING THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNEY FOR STUDENT VETERANS

Since President Bush signed the Post-9/11 GI Bill into law, colleges and universities nationwide are experiencing an influx of student veterans at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Veterans now earn higher GPAs than their non-military peers, bring unique experiences and knowledge that contribute to diversity on campus, and earn more than their peers after they graduate.* Student veterans’ military training, character traits, and work ethic also set them up for success at institutions of higher learning (IHLs).** Still, IHLs have struggled to make veterans feel a part of the broader university community, especially at the undergraduate level.

UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

During the discovery process, our team sought to explore the undergraduate student veteran experience at highly selective academic institutions, interviewing veterans across varying colleges and universities, differing genders, races, life stages, military branches and ranks, and educational goals. After reviewing and parsing the qualitative data we gathered, we identified patterns and insights. The result is the Undergraduate Student Veteran Journey Map and this in-depth report documenting the veteran experience in undergraduate degree programs.

MAPPING THE VETERAN EXPERIENCE

Our research generated the qualitative data and veteran centered insights that we needed to map the current end-to-end student veteran experience in highly-selective colleges and universities across the United States. The research allowed us to identify the baseline expectations student veterans generally have for their degree-seeking experiences. The Undergraduate Student Veteran Journey Map represents the common set of moments veteran experience before, during, and after receiving a Bachelor’s degree at a traditional, highly-selective college or university. This map is a good start toward defining the ideal undergraduate student veteran experience in higher education.

DEFINING THE VETERAN EXPERIENCE

Using the Undergraduate Student Veteran Journey Map and this document to visualize student veterans’ end-to-end journeys, institutions of higher education have the opportunity to identify and enact high impact student experience improvement strategies and efforts for their specific institutional needs.
DIVING INTO THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNEY OF STUDENT VETERANS

Each phase and stage presented along the journey has its own challenges, emotions, and opportunities. While it is good to start by looking at the journey from a bird’s eye view, focusing on moments that matter to students will allow universities to create a user experience that is tailored to the specific needs of undergraduate student veterans, addressing their most pressing concerns during each stage.
MENTORS INSPIRE STUDENT VETERANS TO APPLY TO HIGHLY SELECTIVE SCHOOLS

Through our research, we discovered that veterans and military-affiliated students at highly-selective academic institutions often arrive there with motivation and support from a community college or military mentor or loved one. Many of these students are naturally driven to apply to undergraduate programs at the nation’s best schools because they want the challenge and know they can handle the rigor.

Often, veterans have internalized the notion that enlisted military members cannot have the same accomplishments as others, more privileged persons can. The confidence their mentor or loved one instills in them sets them onto a new educational path they otherwise would not have taken after exiting the military.

Academic institutions must consider this experience from the veteran perspective when identifying influential veteran-centric services that help to recruit, admit, teach, and graduate veterans to and from the institutions.

UNDERSTANDING THE END-TO-END JOURNEY

The Undergraduate Student Veteran Journey Map reflects veterans’ experiences before, during, and after they obtain a bachelor’s degree from a highly-selective, traditional academic institution. The map is organized into five phases: preparing for next education steps, applying to institutions, enrolling at a school, learning, and exiting as newly trained graduates. By categorizing the journey into phases, academic institutions will have a bird’s eye view of the journey allowing them to better understand the veteran experience.

PREPARE  APPLY  ENROLL  LEARN  EXIT

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Our research highlights specific encounters and touchpoints which matter most to veterans along their undergraduate journeys. These are moments during which colleges and universities can build stronger relationships with their student veterans or lose them completely. These interactions have impact on other stages and the overall veteran journey. Academic institutions can and should make sure these moments sufficiently meet veterans’ expectations and needs.

BRIGHT SPOTS AND PAIN POINTS

At each point of the journey, users experience highs and lows, or “bright spots” and “pain points”. Looking into the specifics of these aspects allows us to measure each experience to see what is working well and what is not.

OPPORTUNITIES

To measure the journey, our team utilized methods employed by the VA’s veteran experience division. The three tenants of an impactful phase are that it is easy, effective, and emotionally resonant. Moment measurements are hypothesized based on interviews with customers/users at multiple top universities. For example, a pain point in the generalized journey could be a bright spot at a specific university in some cases, such as navigating a website.

*Emphasis on how user experiences inspire a qualitative range from experienced stakeholders, for example, while learning is high, we measured whether targeting learning resources among. Efforts towards realizing in-depth feedback/measurements at a certain stage. Additional moments phrasing to the heart of respect and gain a better view of the experience.
STUDENT VETERAN JOURNEY

This map covers fifteen stages—any veteran may encounter in their journey to obtain a bachelor’s degree at an institution of higher learning, from their transition out of the military to post-graduation life. These fifteen stages are organized in five phases during which student veteran’s goals and aspirations are distinctly different. Each stage lists key moments veterans typically experience in higher education, and calls out key “moments that matter” which can have a significant impact on veterans’ experiences.

Not all student-veterans are the same and there is no “one” veteran. There are, however, a broad set of shared moments many veterans will encounter and live through. Different student-veterans/personas will experience and navigate these moments in varied and disparate ways. Using this journey as a guide to organize and align around, colleges and universities can plan for and design better experiences for undergrad student veterans.

"In my last year, I would say that when I felt like I learned this experience. It took a long time for me to learn, understand, and believe (in myself and the process). Those first two years, especially during orientation, it was really hard to understand."

"I actually very fortunate to have a mentor in college. She is a fellow veteran and she reaches out to veterans, and she helped me through this process. She was always there for me. I have two sons, and I want them to know that we can do this. We can get through it."

"I think it’s a huge opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds and perspectives. It’s also a way for me to take a break from my academic work and just enjoy the experience."

"I think it’s really important to connect with those advising high performing veterans so where to apply to (e.g. community colleges and military education centers). Make information accessible. Have a central website with information on resources available to students.”
HIGHER ED. EMPLOYEES ARE INTEGRAL IN SHAPING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

To align the student veterans’ undergraduate journey with their touchpoints at academic institutions across the nation, we developed a University and Staff Journey Map. This journey map illustrates the insights we gathered from student and employee interviews. Recognizing the university and staff journey is necessary for academic institutions to understand because it can help pinpoint moments where student and employee experiences differ or remain the same. This journey map also spotlights opportunities for educational institutions to reflect on the services they are currently providing and identify ways to design, implement, and execute strategies for improvement.
UNIVERSITY + STAFF JOURNEY

This map covers fifteen stages: any veteran may encounter in their journey to obtain a bachelor’s degree at an institution of higher learning, from their transition to college and onward to post-graduation life. These fifteen stages are organized in five phases in which student-veterans’ goals and aspirations are distinctively different. Each life stage in the map reflects moments university leaders and veterans typically experience in association with the student-veterans’ experiences, and calls out key “touchpoints that matter” from the employer perspective, which may have a significant impact on student veterans’ experiences.

Employees at colleges and universities across the nation are not the same and there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. There are, however, a broad set of shared services and transition initiatives that can provide support to their students, including moments that their students will encounter and live through. Different student-veteran profiles will experience and navigate these stages in varied and disparate ways. Using this journey as a guide to organize and align around, college and university leaders and employees can plan for and design better experiences for their student veterans.

PREPARE

TRAVELING TO FIND THE AIRPORT

RESEARCH

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

APPLY

GETTING YOUR TRAVEL VISA

ENROLL

CARRYING YOUR DOCUMENTS

LEARN

ENROLLING IN YOUR COURSES

EXIT

CONSIDERING YOUR PROGRAMS

These vital institutions aren’t waiting; they think of veterans from a very different perspective. From a financial standpoint, their programs are lacking the support for transfer students. I think these are really some of the key issues on the college side.

Employees must create an effective site to integrate students into the community.

If you’re going to stay with the same model (meaning), “I’m going to admit you and stick you in a little nook and square that up,” then you’re not going to do it. I’m looking for a very specific kind of veteran, somebody who’s probably only about 20, and they’re single, and they look like just any 20-year-old... the military is bringing people with who are academically prepared and just have an idea of ever applying to school, and yet just need to be logged. If you do, I then think these are all our students in a heartbeat.

Employees at colleges and universities across the nation are not the same and there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach. There are, however, a broad set of shared services and transition initiatives that can provide support to their students, including moments that their students will encounter and live through. Different student-veteran profiles will experience and navigate these stages in varied and disparate ways. Using this journey as a guide to organize and align around, college and university leaders and employees can plan for and design better experiences for their student veterans.
IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE VETERANS

PREPARE

From students to adults, learners at all ages benefit from meaningful, relevant, and personalized learning experiences. This can be achieved by providing greater access to educational opportunities, enhancing the quality of the learning experience, and increasing student engagement. By doing so, we can ensure that learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in their personal and professional lives. This approach to education places learners at the center of the learning experience, fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environment.
TRANSITION

The transition stage is the first touchpoint students experience with top-tier institutions of higher learning. Contact is almost never direct. It happens through community college professors and advisors or military leaders and education centers. Students value the opinion of mentors that tell them they can go to Ivy+ institutions. Students’ top choice is usually the university recommended by their mentor. It is critical that universities are connected to those mentors.

THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED

Veterans and their affiliated students are encouraged to apply to traditional, highly selective colleges and universities by trusted mentors and loved ones. Most veterans planned on attending local or state institutions near their families. Before being encouraged to research and apply to highly-selective institutions, veterans are typically unaware of their existence.

Veterans shared that they were very happy with their community college experiences and the faculty and staff knew how to adapt to their military-specific needs.

WHAT A GOOD TRANSITION STAGE LOOKS LIKE

Colleges and universities are actively recruiting veterans and military-affiliated students on military bases, in military education centers, and at community colleges serving large populations of service members. Colleges and universities are regularly attending job and career fairs on military bases and at military-serving community colleges. Recruitment materials and marketing outreach are continually being sent to community colleges and military bases, increasing familiarity with the institution amongst the military population.

Mentors and loved ones can provide veterans and military-affiliated individuals with recruitment materials when they are telling them about veteran-friendly academic institutions.

HOW WE KNOW IF WE’RE SUCCEEDING

EASE

“It was easy for my mentor to give me recruitment brochures from the school they were telling me about. It was easy to find academic institutions at in-person, military career fairs.”

EFFECTIVENESS

“I knew how much the institution supported the military.”

“I knew what I needed to accomplish before thinking about applying to an academic institution.”

“Collegiate marketing materials had a clear and concise message.”

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

“My mentor and/or loved one sees a lot of potential in me.”

“I trust the information that my mentor/loved one has provided me.”

“I feel valued by schools I’ve never even heard of before my mentor told me about them.”

“Moments of support from mentors or loved ones are emotional resonances.”

OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS

During the transition stage, universities need to connect with community colleges and military education centers to recruit top students. Being in the ear of students’ mentors is the key to getting those students to apply. Universities should be sending outreach materials and ask community colleges and military education centers to place them in the lobby or hallways where they can be made visible to military-affiliated students.

Ivy League was not in my vocabulary, like at all. So it was definitely that support system that helped [get to my current school].

I was actually very fortunate to have a mentor in my life. She was the one who told me to apply to [top tier institutions] because I [was] summa cum laude [at my community college].

My first semester at community college, I had a lot of great teachers that were very, very supportive.
**RESEARCH**

The research stage is simple. Students go online and look up a university. Searches would include “[your university name here] veterans”, “military friendly universities/schools”, “best schools for veterans”, etc. Making sure a website sends the right message is the key to success at this stage.

**THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED**

Veterans generally start their research by using a search engine and entering queries related to veterans issues at the schools they are interested in learning more about.

Some colleges and universities have websites that are easy to navigate and locate useful information, whereas others lack this tool and veterans struggle to find the information they need.

- U.S. News and World Report and The Military Times “Best Colleges for Veterans” are third-party resources veterans often use to guide their search.
- Week-of-month advice from peers that have previously separated from the military and entered college guides most veterans during the research phase.
- Nonprofits help veterans identify and research reputable institutions that suit their educational goals.

“I did research [and] found that [the Ivy League school I attend] had a very large veteran population. And so that really intrigued me.”

Yeah, you know, Google [institution name] veterans, and that took me to the [institution’s] veterans page. And from there, I’m just clicking and reading and finding [information]. That’s where all that information came from.

**WHAT A GOOD RESEARCH STAGE LOOKS LIKE**

Institutions have a powerful, military-friendly brand with a narrative detailing their relationship with the armed forces and future plans to strengthen that bond.

Search engine results for “veterans at [institution]”, or similar queries, direct prospective students to an institution’s military-specific website and positive news coverage about the veteran experience.

A modern, user-friendly website provides prospective veteran and military-affiliated students with a centralized location to access resources and learn about the military experience at a specific institution.

Third parties commonly refer to an academic institution as veteran-friendly.

Academic institutions have full-time staff helping prospective students learn how their military and non-military needs will be met at the institution.

**OCCASIONS & CONSIDERATIONS**

Creating a brand that students can be proud of will be important for framing what a university seeks to be and do for military-affiliated students.

Georgetown, in particular, has set the standard for building by using their logo, brand colors, and linking them to the vet center of serving those who have served in the armed forces (see First Principles Report for more).

Universities most centralize websites for all military student resources. If new vets need to go to several separate websites to gather information, it will make their lives harder.

One thing suggests establishing a student referral website like “veterans@institution.edu” or “military@institution.edu”.

Universities should also have full-time staff dedicated to military-affiliated students. This ensures a main point of contact for their needs and those inquires for a single employee to start will be completely dedicated to the military-affiliated population.

**HOW WE KNOW IF WE’RE SUCCEEDING**

- **EASE**
  - “It was easy for me to find the institution’s website.”
  - “The institution’s website was easy for me to navigate and had all the information I needed in one place.”
  - “It was easy to understand the military-friendly narrative the institution has.”

- **EFFECTIVENESS**
  - “The institution’s military-centered brand and narrative is very compelling.”
  - “I know who I could contact for more information.”
  - “The information on the website was communicated in a way that was helpful in my academic research.”

- **EMOTIONAL RESONANCE**
  - “I feel like I would be cared about at that institution.”
  - “I feel like the life stories about the veterans on campus remind me of my own personal life story.”
  - “I feel like the presentation is honest and authentic when it recruits veterans and military-affiliated students.”
EVALUATE

At this final stage of the prepare phase, students have already been informed of potential institutions where they can obtain a degree. They now evaluate which schools will be best for them to apply to. Students do this by speaking with family members, friends, mentors, and possibly university officials.

THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED

Veterans experience a change of heart, recognizing that they have everything it takes, if not more, to succeed at highly selective, traditional academic institutions.

While a factor, distance from close and extended family played a smaller factor when choosing to apply to an institution as compared with deciding to enroll in an institution.

Veterans felt lingering concerns and thoughts will be answered through the application and enrollment processes.

STUDENT VETERAN STORY

“I wanted West Coast and East Coast options. Using the resource office on base, I went online, I used those quizzes like from middle school - “what’s my crush” - but for college. I just trusted my gut and the research I did. I didn’t have the luxury of visiting schools so I just had to go for it.”
IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE VETERANS

APPLY

Dear students and faculty:

We are excited to present you with the opportunity to apply for the University of Arizona’s Higher Education for Undergraduate Veterans (HEV) program. This program is designed to support and empower undergraduate veterans as they pursue their academic goals.

Who is eligible to apply?

The HEV program is open to undergraduate students who are veterans or have served in the military. You can apply if you are currently enrolled or plan to enroll in the University of Arizona. Preference will be given to veterans who have not previously attended the University of Arizona.

Why apply?

The HEV program offers a range of benefits to its participants, including academic and personal support services, financial assistance, and networking opportunities. By applying, you can access these resources and take advantage of the opportunities available to you.

How to apply?

To apply, please visit our website at [www.hev.arizona.edu](http://www.hev.arizona.edu) and complete the application form. You will need to provide basic information about yourself and your military service. The application deadline is [June 1, 2023](https://www.hev.arizona.edu/application-deadline).

We encourage you to apply early to ensure that you have time to prepare your application and take advantage of any available support services. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at [hev@arizona.edu](mailto:hev@arizona.edu).

Thank you for considering the HEV program. We look forward to supporting you in your academic journey.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

University of Arizona Higher Education for Undergraduate Veterans
OPTIONAL: CONTACT

This is one of the “optional” stages of the journey because not every student experiences contacting universities during the apply phase. Many did not feel welcome to ask questions regarding an application, or did not need to. At this point, students still may contact a university to ask about application details, advisors, and helpful resources. Officials should be ready to extend a helping hand or guide students to the proper resources to help them submit a strong application.

Beyond the application itself, students also expressed that the proper pipeline to apply was not always clear. They often did not know if they should apply as a first-year, transfer student, or through some other special program. The pipeline for applying should be clear. If there are multiple options, employees should be ready to help students navigate the best option for them.

CONSTRUCT

The construct stage may overlap with the contact stage. However, this stage presents additional challenges for students. They need to find out whether they can get an application waiver, if their test scores are still valid, and how to translate their military experience to an application. Students are very excited at this stage to actually take the plunge to fill out an application for Ivy schools. This is a step in their life they never thought they would take.

THE APPLY PHASE

The apply phase is important because prospective student veterans have identified institutions that they can see themselves (and their families) attending. They are curb by the prospect of attending a school with some of the nation’s best and brighttest young minds.

Veterans seek to prove themselves during the application phase and want to make sure they are communicating their military, professional, educational, and personal experiences in a way that makes institutions want to admit them. Institutions cannot increase their veteran and military-affiliated populations without getting these prospective students to apply.

THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED

Some academic institutions have targeted channels and programs veterans can apply into, leaving veterans with mixed thoughts and feelings.

Overwhelmingly, veterans felt that it was hard for them to translate their military and professional experience in a way admissions teams could comprehend.

Institutions had varying levels of outreach and communication with veteran applicants during this phase.

STUDENT VETERAN STORY

“If it’s a lot of work to apply to the schools. And, I was lucky I took a whole semester off. I was taking one class a semester, and I just took a semester off and thought of that as my class. But it’s a lot of work. It’s also expensive. I applied to seven schools. It probably cost me close to $1,000. Application fees are 70 to 100 bucks and then you have schools that change $10 to submit a financial aid package, which is the biggest enmournus in the world.”
WHAT A GOOD APPLY LOOKS LIKE

CONTACT

APPLY

CONSTRUCT

SUBMIT

Contacting an institution for help is easy for service members to do, especially for those stationed abroad. Employees share information with peers so potential students don’t waste time repeating themselves.

An institution’s Office of Student Veterans and/or Military-affiliated students easily connects prospective students to campus departments and resources. Academic institutions partner with nonprofits to funnel highly-qualified cohorts of veterans and military-affiliated students to the program.

Veterans and military-affiliated applicants can substitute their professional military resume for aspects of an institution’s application process that is more tailored for students coming from high school.

Application fees are automatically waived when veterans provide an institution a copy of their military records (DD-214).

HOW WE KNOW IF WE’RE SUCCEEDING

EASE

It was easy to understand which pathway I should use to apply to an academic institution.

It was easy to schedule a phone call with an admissions officer.

Effectiveness

I knew how to communicate my military and professional experiences in my application.

I knew I could submit my transcripts at a later time due to my active-duty status while I apply.

I knew when I should contact the Admissions office versus the Office of Student Veterans for help.

Opportunities & Considerations

The apply phase should be marked by an open-door policy for military-affiliated students. Having resources and partnerships in place to help students navigate the application phase will allow students to submit the strongest application possible. Admission officers should also make themselves familiar with the experiences military-affiliated students may face. A service member’s veteran application is going to look significantly different than other traditional and non-traditional students’ applications. That does not take away from the value of the experience of military-affiliated applicants. Informal, empathetic employees and strategic partnerships are key to success during this phase.

Connect with a nonprofit by partnering with a trusted military-affiliated education resource provider such as the Warrior Scholar Project or the POSSE Foundation, or Service to Schools, either partnered through VetInK12, universities can give students a resource to help them through the application process.

Emotional Resonance

I feel like the institution values me as a person and not just a statistic.

I feel like my different life experiences are welcomed by others.

I feel like institutions understand how I have changed since graduating high school.
ENROLL

During the enroll phase, students are astounded that they have been admitted to a top-tier undergraduate program. They are then quickly faced with a tough decision: where should they go? This decision is made with families, finances, opportunities to learn a certain subject, and the veteran community on campus in mind. Once they know where they want to go, they have to prepare to move, navigate other personal responsibilities, and certify their VA benefits.
**THE ENROLL PHASE**

This phase is important because students are choosing which institution they will attend. Many veterans apply to more than one school, especially since a mentor or loved one encourages them to apply to highly selective institutions. Institutions must stand out during the enroll phase with their financial aid packages and communication to win over veterans. A school’s “veteran friendly” reputation does not automatically mean a veteran will choose to attend that institution. Schools can also set themselves apart by explaining how they will help the veteran (and their family) ready and execute their moves.

**THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED**

Veterans do not understand why they must submit their parents’ financial information because they are independent.

Colleges and universities frequently assume veterans plan to use their G.I. Bill benefits, without asking, leading these benefits to negatively impact a veteran’s total aid package.

The majority of veterans we spoke with reported that the colleges and universities did little to nothing to help them outline their relocation plans and efforts.

**STUDENT VETERAN STORY**

“I had no idea what the likelihood [was] of me getting accepted. And at the same time, I was investing a lot of energy into it. And before I even did that I had talked to my wife and said, “You know, if I get accepted...” — and now we have a daughter — “Are you okay with going to one of these schools?” And more or less, she said, “Yeah, I’m okay with it. I’ll go wherever you want to go.” And I was very lucky in that. And that is not the case for a lot of people. And it’s a little bit just if their partner’s willing. Is it even possible to be able to just up and move wherever that school accepts you? I was lucky because I was trying to time it perfectly for when I got out of the military. And that’s difficult in itself.”
Feedback received by students when they accept their admissions decision shows that the admissions team is proactive in recruiting and helpful when assisting veteran applicants.

Financial aid applications do not ask veterans to submit parent/guardian information nor is this information included in constructing awards. GI Bill benefits do not count against a veteran and/or military-affiliated student’s financial aid award.

Colleges and universities welcome admitted veterans and their loved ones to the university community.

Veterans and their families receive tools and resources around campus and in the local community that can ease the moving process before school begins.

Universities provide housing assistance during the summer to help veterans and families find housing in the local area.

**WHAT A GOOD ENROLL PHASE LOOKS LIKE**

**OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS**

The best students here to stress at this point the better. A perfect social move means minimal frustration when it comes to certifying benefits, depression in college housing, and support from the university community in finding other resources required for moving across the country. Universities can start this by offering a checklist to students to do before arriving. Also, for each developing student, at least one student should be directed to the appropriate resource. This is especially crucial for housing. Having a resource to help military-affiliated students and housing off campus (if necessary) is an even more important task for students with families. Providing guidance for students to live off campus is also helpful.

While a checklist is helpful, a key opportunity for universities to consider is the relationship developed with the VA, and the state certifying officers. By having a positive relationship with these offices, schools can be prepared to help students with unique situations quickly, avoiding unnecessary roadblocks.

**EASE**

*It was easy to understand what I needed to do to successfully enroll.*

*It was easy for me to plan my move to college from abroad.*

*It was easy to apply for financial aid without my parents financial information.*

**EFFECTIVENESS**

*I knew who to talk to about certifying my GI Bill benefits.*

*I knew what neighborhoods were best for my family to move to.*

*I knew how to enroll in my classes.*

*The emails I received helped me complete necessary tasks.*

**EMOTIONAL RESONANCE**

*I felt like I had help at every point in the enrollment process.*

*I felt like the institution was excited that I was admitted and wanted to help me begin my academic journey.*
LEARN

Once a student is in classes a cycle begins where students have to orient to a new environment such as a new class, engage that environment using the appropriate resources such as tutors, and absorb what they learned along the way, which can happen as reflecting on a certain class or deciding on a major. This can be daunting when it happens again and again each semester and students expressed their troubles finding a flow when navigating the cycle.
ORIENT

Students arrive on campus and are completely exposed to their new environment for the first time. This is an exciting and nerve-wracking experience for all students, not just veterans. However, student veterans’ time away from traditional learning environments makes this transition more extreme. During this time they become oriented to this new environment and people. These students hope they are welcomed on campus and by the community. Students want resources and tools that can help them succeed academically and socially in this new environment.

ENGAGE

Veterans begin integrating themselves into the campus community, both academically and socially. They establish new friendships with military peers on campus and other students in their classes. Students vary in their willingness to participate in class and meet with their professors. Though, all veterans see these actions as an integral step towards successfully obtaining their degree. Veterans need tools and support to help them overcome challenges they experience. Bridging the divide between the civilian and military worlds is one of the biggest issues veterans grapple with.

ABSORB

Every interaction and experience veterans have, in and out of the classroom, instills them with newfound knowledge. Most of the time, veterans expect this new information to positively contribute to their personal and professional growth. However, sometimes the new knowledge veterans obtain can be bad, due to the negative outcomes of interactions and experiences they encounter. In these instances, veterans require varying levels of support and assistance to transform negative experiences into positive ones.

THE LEARN PHASE

For all students, especially veterans, learning is an exciting yet incredibly exhausting part of the journey. This phase is the largest part of a veteran’s undergraduate student journey. Learning at an HU typically lasts three years, with veterans continually exhausting, engaging, and absorbing.

While the stages of orienting, engaging, and absorbing are distinct from one another, they are not mutually exclusive. An individual’s experience with one stage tends to directly impact how they experience another stage.

THemes that were DISCOuVERED

Veterans said that they did not feel like they were acclimated to the learning process at their school until their final year of study. On top of their academic and personal responsibilities, veterans wish that they didn’t have to be their own advocates on campus. It should be something an employee does. Feeling like they are alone in the learning process is isolating for veterans. They rely on their military peers for support.

STUDENT VETERAN STORY

“Nontraditional students and veterans [have trouble getting into a workflow, and] you’re missing out on opportunities. I make it a point to try and be active on campus and, you know, participate in different student groups, blogs, and things like that. But most nontraditional students have trouble doing that. I partipated in [student clubs] was very difficult for the first semester. After the first semester you kind of figure it out... I had also just gotten married... In a classroom where most everyone around you is 18-years-old is very different. It’s a weird transition.”

That question of “what can we do for you?” needs to be asked more, especially in the academic community because it is so different from what we did in the military.

A lot of times administrators do what they think will help students instead of asking what students need [directly].
WHAT A GOOD LEARN PHASE LOOKS LIKE

Veterans and Military-affiliated students (and their loved ones) are welcomed to campus by the university.

Orientation is an empowering event that provides students with the tools they can use to navigate and resolve challenges that arise during their educational journey.

Students feel they are welcome and can easily be a part of the military and non-military community on- and off-campus.

Employees at academic institutions have a basic grasp of students’ experiences in the military and are actively supporting and advocating for these students.

Students have blended their personal and professional lives as they did when they were in the military.

Veterans or Military-affiliated Students Office helps students resolve issues and is proactively preventing future problems from developing on campus.

HOW WE KNOW IF WE’RE SUCCEEDING

**EASE**
- “It was easy for me to access services when I needed to resolve a problem or overcome a challenge.”
- “It was easy to get help from the Office of Student Veterans.”
- “I can easily balance my professional and personal responsibilities.”

**EFFECTIVENESS**
- “I was helped by the right person when I needed it the most.”
- “My problem was immediately resolved.”
- “I knew where I could go for extra tutoring and academic assistance.”

**EMOTIONAL RESONANCE**
- “I feel like I am a part of the community on campus.”
- “I feel like my voice and perspective is valued in and out of the classroom.”
- “I feel like people understand and respect my lived experiences.”

**OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS**

Despite differing experiences at specific colleges and universities, it is typical for veterans and military-affiliated students to spend 3-4 years at their academic institution, which means that students may undergo a minimum of learning cycles depending on an institution’s academic schedule. Institutions have major opportunities to serve their veteran and military and enhance their educational journey during the learning phase. Colleges and universities can and should continually design and test programs and services for their population of students, gather feedback and adopt programs and services that achieve their purpose and are self-funded by students.

An institution’s Office of Parent and Family Relations or similar office can leverage their expertise and existing services and programs to help military spouses and families be anchored by the university community. Doing this allows veterans and military-affiliated students to feel like they are valued and belong on campus, and to do their families.

**THE CYCLE OF LEARNING**

**WHAT IF A LEARN PHASE GOES BADLY**

- **LEARN**
  - “It was easy for me to access services when I needed to resolve a problem or overcome a challenge.”
  - “I feel like I am a part of the community on campus.”
  - “I feel like people understand and respect my lived experiences.”

- **EASE**
  - “It was easy for me to access services when I needed to resolve a problem or overcome a challenge.”
  - “I feel like I am a part of the community on campus.”
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- **EFFECTIVENESS**
  - “I was helped by the right person when I needed it the most.”
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- **EMOTIONAL RESONANCE**
  - “I feel like I am a part of the community on campus.”
  - “I feel like my voice and perspective is valued in and out of the classroom.”
  - “I feel like people understand and respect my lived experiences.”
INTERACTIONS AND EXPERIENCES BUILD ON EACH OTHER

Orienting to new circumstances, engaging with people and the environment, and absorbing information, knowledge, and skills happen continually. It occurs daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. For the undergraduate student veteran journey, we are choosing to focus on the process that occurs on a quarter or semester (academic term) basis. During this timeframe, veterans have positive and negative interactions and experiences that shape their student experience. This process begins at the beginning of every academic term and generally ends with finals. However, interactions and experiences are not confined to the classroom. Student involvement in extracurriculars, social groups, and with the local community also follows this cycle. Having an awareness and understanding of this cycle is essential because it provides academic institutions with opportunities to support their military-affiliated populations throughout a student’s journey.
EXIT

As the military-affiliated student’s journey comes to an end there is a heightened sense of accomplishment. They never expected their life to take them this far, but it has. However, there is also a dose of reality. While their educational journey was one step into the civilian world, it is much more controlled than being on their own in the workplace. Universities are great places for the transition into the civilian world to begin, but helping students find the right career is another way to make the transition smooth. Many companies have programs in place to help military-affiliated students transition and find lucrative positions. Furthermore, students want to help other enlisted veterans experience the challenge of going to an Ivy+ institution and are committed to advocating for the expansion of the military presence on campus.
GRADUATE
Students fulfill their requirements and complete their undergraduate journey. During this time they are also considering job prospects and/or graduate school. Many students that are considering graduate school did not have to use all of their GI Bill benefits during their undergraduate journey. In either case, military-affiliated students graduate with a strong educational background and 5+ years of work experience to take with them.

ACCLIMATE
Military-affiliated alumni now acclimate to a new lifestyle. The transition to the workplace can be just as difficult, if not more, than the transition into higher education. Universities should help ease students in jobs welcoming them with transitional resources. Other students will go to graduate school. Universities should similarly guide students to the best graduate schools. Most top tier graduate schools have well-established programs for military-affiliated students, especially MBA programs.

OPTIONAL: ADVOCATE
A high percentage of veterans become vocal advocates and financial supporters for the university after graduating, yet many also choose not to as it is not an essential part of their journey. In either case, military-affiliated alumni are dedicated to creating a better experience for future students and “paying it forward”.

THE EXIT PHASE
This phase is important because it highlights how positive experiences during the previous phases of a veteran’s undergraduate experience can turn them into an engaged alumni and strong advocate for their academic institution. There are numerous ways veteran alumni want to and can give back to their academic institution, colleges and universities just need to call this population to action. By doing this, undergraduate student veterans and other military-affiliated students on campus will reap many benefits and alumni will feel fulfilled by “paying it forward.”

THEMES THAT WERE DISCOVERED
Veterans want to give back to their alma mater and the current population of student veterans on campus.
Veterans hope that their alma mater honors and continues the work they accomplished to improve the educational experience for veterans and other military-affiliated students.

STUDENT VETERAN STORY
When asked about staying connected as an alumni, “My alma mater connects you with a mentor who’s there to give you career guidance, they’re older, and a lot of them are married or have kids and they can give you guidance on your career, I like, navigating school as a nontraditional student. And then they have a network they’ve built up that they connect you with. They help you... career-wise, which is awesome. And so, I will be participating in that probably in like another year, as a mentor for students. So, I can help... other student veterans coming through [my alma mater] who are going through the same thing that I went through. So I plan to stay pretty connected.”

At some point, there won’t be a war. At some point, it’s not this thing that you do, because you give a [explicit] about the troops and you’re, like, caring about people who are wounded or whatever. At some point that narrative will go away. But the value of service [and] the value of being a veteran in my mind doesn’t change.
WHAT A GOOD EXIT PHASE LOOKS LIKE

The campus community has fully welcomed and embraced student veterans by the time veterans arrive. Veterans are graduating and getting employed at rates comparable (or better) than their peers. Veterans have the tools they need to fully transition to professional and civilian life. New business partnerships and opportunities emerge as student veterans begin working after graduation. Veterans feel like a valued member of the alumni community. Strong alumni engagement with veteran affinity groups, providing opportunities for veteran alumni to connect with current students.

OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS

At this point in the journey, students have become a part of the campus community in one way or another. The team found the exit phase looks very similar to traditional students in all ways aside from one: military students graduate with a wealth of work and life experience their peers do not have. Many employers seek to hire veterans because of their maturity, discipline, and the experience. Connecting with such employers is highly recommended.

Given the extensive life experiences, military-affiliated graduates have advantages should seek strategic partnerships specifically for this demographic as it could be a stepping stone to connecting with high-level corporations seeking to hire veteran college graduates with work experience in the military and through internships.

HOW WE KNOW IF WE'RE SUCCEEDING

EASE

“It was easy for me to connect with current undergraduate veterans at my alma mater.”

“It was easy to attend a veteran alumni event.”

Undergraduate mentoring expectations were easy to understand.”

EFFECTIVENESS

“My donation to increase the size of the Yellow Ribbon Fund is helping undergraduate veterans.”

“My degree prepared me for my job and the transition to the non-military, professional world.”

Alumni communications make me want to do everything I can to help my alma mater and veterans.”

EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

“I feel like I am an integral part of the institution’s alumni network.”

“I feel like veterans and military service members are still valued at my alma mater.”

“I feel like the work I did to improve the veteran experience on campus has been valued.”
THE SIMPLIFIED STUDENT VETERAN JOURNEY

Now that the cyclical nature of the learn phase has been explained, we wanted to simplify the journey map to reflect this understanding. Below we have provided an adapted version of the in-depth journey map to focus on the 5 phases, 15 stages, the moments that matter, and the bright spots and pain points that a student experiences along the way.
PREPARING FOR STUDENT VETERANS AT EVERY PHASE OF THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNEY

Each phase of the journey is an opportunity to create a positive, impactful experience for the military-affiliated undergraduate community. Some of the most powerful stories from users were when they described their encounters with people that told them they had the potential to further their education at a top tier university. When asked what being at an Ivy League institution means to them one student stated,

“Anything is possible... (Y)ou don’t have to follow a traditional path in life. To me, it means that the military gave me everything to have come out on this end of life. Without the Marine Corps, I wouldn’t have the life skills to survive life at an Ivy League school. It’s the Marine Corps that...allowed me to keep going when things have been hard.”

While each student veteran’s journey is unique, there are many resources in place to allow this population to continue to unlock their potential and be a powerful asset to the Duke community.

IMPROVING THE JOURNEY AT EACH PHASE

To improve each phase of the journey, design solutions must be implemented. At each stage, pain points should become bright spots, and the opportunities outlined should be exploited. It is best to start with the moments that matter as users find these stages to be the most critical to the journey. Each Duke experience should align with “what good looks like” as seen in the journey overview sections above.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Our team found the moments that matter to be during the prepare phase and the learn phase. Student veterans expressed that diversity recruitment efforts were important during the prepare phase and the resources available to them while at a higher ed institution were important during the learn phase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOMENTS THAT MATTER</th>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRANSITION</td>
<td>Connect with those who are helping resources where to apply (e.g., comments, college and university education centers). Make information accessible. Have a central website with information on resources available to students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH</td>
<td>Use resources that are helpful in research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIENT</td>
<td>Offer opportunities to help students engage with people and resources, and the stories that have experienced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGAGE</td>
<td>Encourage connecting students with resources that are helpful in their journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSORB</td>
<td>Make students feel respected and valued.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The learn phase is a period during which students are expected to engage with people and resources, and the stories that have been experienced. Efforts are connecting students with resources that are helpful in their journey. The primary opportunity is to make students feel respected and valued.
DISCLAIMER
All terms, CIT descriptions, and methodologies were quoted or paraphrased from what we learned in the Using Human-Centered Design To Improve The Citizen Experience course at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy, taught by Professors Tom Allen and Bythe Meyer. Stories and quotes have been paraphrased and condensed at times to conceal the identity of interviewees and remove excessive language such as “term”, “Bic”, explicit language, etc.

This student document was prepared in 2019 in partial completion of a summer internship. The research, analysis, and policy alternatives contained in this storyboard are the work of the student team that authored the document. They do not represent the official or unofficial views of the Sanford School of Public Policy or of Duke University.

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