



# 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 Ivy+ institutions; apply, when veterans decide an Ivy+ school is a potential place for them to complete their undergraduate degree; enroll, when students decide the best Ivy+ 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 ed. institutions, will help us identify who is incentivized to improve veterans' education experiences and how strategies that redesign and improve the veteran student journey can be executed.

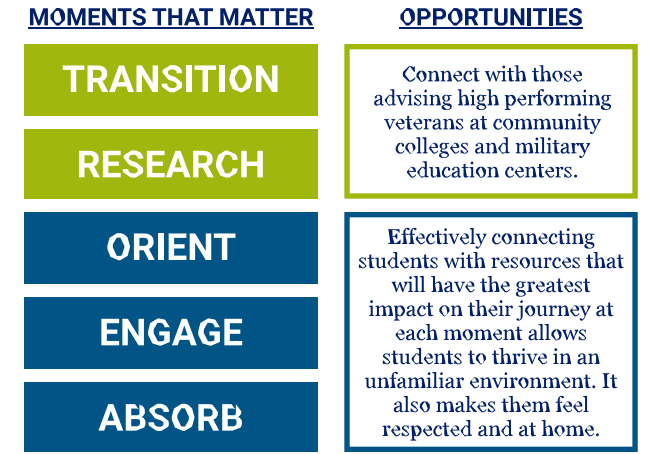
Creating a journey map allows us to highlight bright spots, pain points, moments that matter, and opportunities for improvement in the veteran experience, narrowing broader issues into smaller challenges.

## 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 Ivy+ 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.

### 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.

\* Ease measures how easily students navigate a certain stage from an experience standpoint. For example, while learning is "hard" we measured whether navigating learning resources was easy. Effectiveness relates to how useful resources are at a certain stage. Emotional resonance refers to the level of respect and care a user feels at a given stage of the journey.

## 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 users' 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.

\* Institute for Veterans and Military Families: Syracuse University. "Student Veterans: A Valuable Asset to Higher Education," Student Veterans of America. Accessed August 9, 2019.

\*\* Joint Report by the Institute For Veterans and Military Families and the Student Veterans of America, "Student Veterans: A Valuable Asset to Higher Education", June 2017.



# 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.

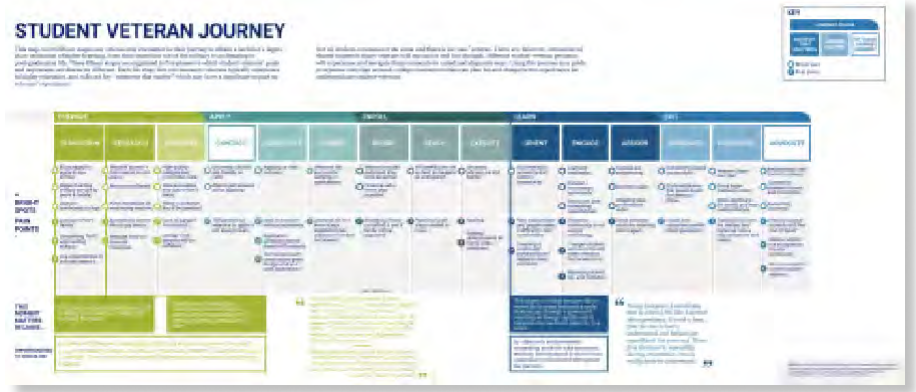
<b>21</b>	<b>VETERANS INTERVIEWED</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>COLLEGES &amp; UNIVERSITIES</b>
<b>45+</b>	<b>HOURS OF INTERVIEWS</b>		



**COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES**  
*Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Duke University, Georgetown University, Princeton University, Stanford University, University of Georgia, University of North Carolina, United States Military Academy (West Point), and Yale University.*

## 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 veterans 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. Some 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 other, more privileged persons can. The confidence their mentor or loved one instills them with 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 institution.

## 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 5 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.



## 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 Ivy+ 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.

\* Ease measures how easily students navigate a certain stage from an experience standpoint. For example, while learning is “hard” we measured whether navigating learning resources was easy. Effectiveness relates to how useful resources are at a certain stage. Emotional resonance refers to the level of respect and care a user feels at a given stage of the journey.

MOMENT THAT MATTERS

-  Bright spot
-  Pain point

# 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 acclimating to post-graduation life. These fifteen stages are organized in five phases during which student veterans' goals and aspirations are distinctly different. Each stage lists out moments veterans typically experience in higher education, and calls out key "moments that matter" which may have a significant impact on veterans' experiences.

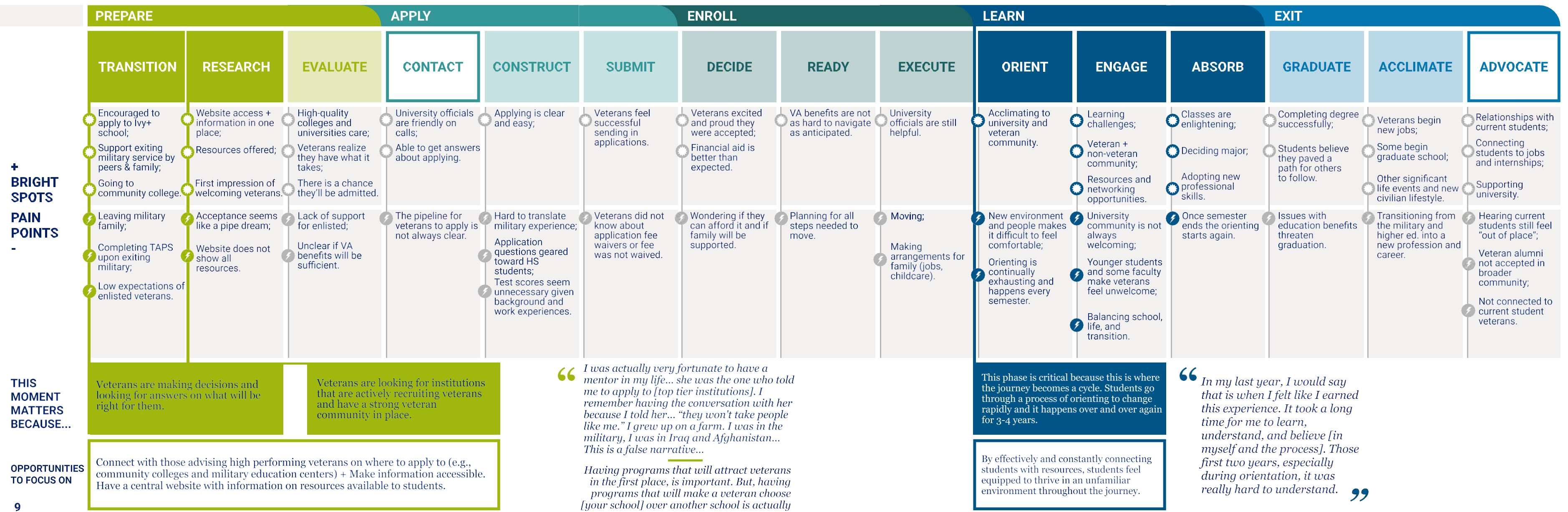
Not all student-veterans are the same and there is no "one" veteran. There are, however, a broad set of shared moments many veterans will encounter and live through. Different student-veteran personas will experience and navigate these moments in varied and disparate ways. Using this journey as a guide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

**KEY**

**JOURNEY PHASE**

**MOMENT THAT MATTERS**   **JOURNEY MOMENT**   **OPTIONAL JOURNEY MOMENT**

☀ Bright spot - Moment that Matters  
 ⚡ Pain point - Moment that Matters  
 ☀ Bright spot - Other Moments  
 ⚡ Pain point - Other Moments





## **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 out of the military to acclimating to post-graduation life. These fifteen stages are organized in five phases in which student-veterans' goals and aspirations are distinctly different. Each life stage on this map lists out moments university leaders and employees typically experience in association with the student-veterans' experiences, and calls out key "moments that matter" from the employee 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" collegiate experience. There are, however, a broad set of shared services and experiences institutions provide their students, impacting moments that their students will encounter and live through. Different student-veteran personas will experience and navigate these moments 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.

**KEY**

**JOURNEY PHASE**

**MOMENT THAT MATTERS** **JOURNEY MOMENT** **OPTIONAL JOURNEY MOMENT**

- Bright spot - Moment that Matters
- Pain point - Moment that Matters
- Bright spot - Other Moments
- Pain point - Other Moments

	PREPARE			APPLY			ENROLL			LEARN			EXIT		
	TRANSITION	RESEARCH	EVALUATE	CONTACT	CONSTRUCT	SUBMIT	DECIDE	READY	EXECUTE	ORIENT	ENGAGE	ABSORB	GRADUATE	ACCLIMATE	ADVOCATE
<b>+ BRIGHT SPOTS</b>	Strategizing ways to attract high caliber applicants;	Building a brand that attracts the best military-affiliated students;	Admissions team are confident in recruiting efforts.	Answering students' questions.	Working with students on applications;	Officials are excited to admit a diverse pool of applicants;	Sending out admissions decisions;	Connecting with students that accept offer;	Working with students to address needs;	Welcoming new students to campus;	Developing relationships with students;	Meeting with students to help understand their experience.	Witnessing students finish their journey successfully.	Helping veterans succeed post graduation;	Working with alumni to improve veteran experience;
<b>- PAIN POINTS</b>	Traveling is exhausting;	Communicating how the needs of veterans are met on campus is tough.	Don't know what students/families are hearing from others.	Unfamiliarity with the needs of military-affiliated students.	Can't help veterans explain their experiences on application.	Don't understand the terminology and/or experience of veterans.	Nontraditional students may not be admitted because they did not "fit the mold".	Limits in the ways they can help assist student veterans;	Unprepared to welcome students moving in off campus;	Inconsistent policies in IHLs burden frontline student support staff.	"Specialists" can't broadly help students;	Can't connect with students and understand their experience.	Occasionally, students don't succeed and don't obtain a degree.	Missing out on partnerships with businesses that hire military-affiliated students.	Fundraising can't begin until leaders explicitly give directions to begin this effort;
<b>THIS MOMENT MATTERS BECAUSE...</b>	Without a clear path for veterans to apply as an undergraduate student, the rest of the journey does not happen.		Recruiting veterans is key to making them feel welcome. Community colleges are directing students to top tier institutions they feel are "veteran friendly".			<p>“ These elite institutions aren't recruiting. I think that stems from a lack of desire to recruit vets. From a financial standpoint, their programs are lacking the support for transfer students. I think those are really the two kinds of issues on the college side. ”</p>			Employees must create an effective cycle to integrate students into the community.			<p>“ [If you're going to stay with the same model [saying], "I'm going to admit you and stick you in a little 200 square foot dorm." Really, all you're saying is, "I'm looking for a very specific kind of veteran, somebody who's probably only about 22, and they're single, and they look and act just like an 18-year-old... the military is teeming with people who are academically prepared and just have no idea of even applying to school. And they just need to be tapped. [If you do], you'll have an all star students in a heartbeat ”</p>			
<b>OPPORTUNITIES TO FOCUS ON</b>	By being a presence on military bases and community colleges, and actively looking for ways to recruit transitioning service members and veterans, this population will feel their presence is valued on campus and will look into applying.														

NOTE: VA certification may not necessarily happen at this stage.





## IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE VETERANS

# PREPARE

During the prepare phase, students start by transitioning out of the military and/or community college. Some students are in community college while on active duty. Others go to community college after serving. In other rare cases, military-affiliated students apply as first years. In all cases, the journey starts with a mentor encouraging the student to apply to a top tier institution. Users then research top tier institutions and evaluate to see which ones best fit their needs and the needs of their family, if applicable. Users focus on the community and resources available for their success. Employees should focus on recruiting and branding. This should not only be done online, but also through engaging students in person at community colleges, and military education centers.



## PREPARE

### TRANSITION

### RESEARCH

### EVALUATE

#### MOMENT THAT MATTERS

### 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 military-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.

#### Bright Spot Pain Point

 Encouraged to apply to highly competitive schools, like Ivy+ institutions;

 Support exiting military service by peers & family;

 Going to community college.

 Leaving military family;

 Completing TAPS upon exiting military;

 Low expectations of enlisted veterans.

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

“  
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].”

#### 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.”

#### 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 also send 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.

In-person recruiting at community colleges and military bases would be an opportunity to expand the presence of military-affiliated students in undergraduate programs. Not only will this leave an impression on students, but it could also lead to mentors seeing that a university is truly committed to creating an excellent experience for military-affiliated students. Thus, those mentors will more likely recommend that university.

##### 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.”

## PREPARE

## TRANSITION

## RESEARCH

## EVALUATE

### MOMENT THAT MATTERS

## 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.

Word-of-mouth 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.

### Bright Spot Pain Point

-  Website access + information in one place;
-  Resources offered;
-  First impression of welcoming veterans.

-  Acceptance seems like a pipe dream;
-  Website does not show all resources.

“  
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.

### 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 knew who I could contact for more information.”

“The information on the website was communicated in a way that was helpful in my academic research.”

### OPPORTUNITIES & 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 branding by using their Jesuit ideals and linking them to the power of serving those who have served in the armed forces (see Best Practices Report for more).

Universities need a centralized website for all military student resources. If users need to go to several university websites to gather information, it could make them feel scattered. Our team suggests establishing a student veterans website titled “veterans.institutionname.edu” or “military.institutionname.edu”.

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

#### 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 institution is honest and authentic when it recruits veterans and military-affiliated students.”








## PREPARE

TRANSITION

RESEARCH

EVALUATE

 Bright Spot  Pain Point

-  High-quality colleges and universities care;
-  Veterans realize they have what it takes;
-  There is a chance they'll be admitted.
-  Lack of support for enlisted from military, universities, and sometimes the general public;
-  Unclear if VA benefits will be sufficient to pay for college.

### 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

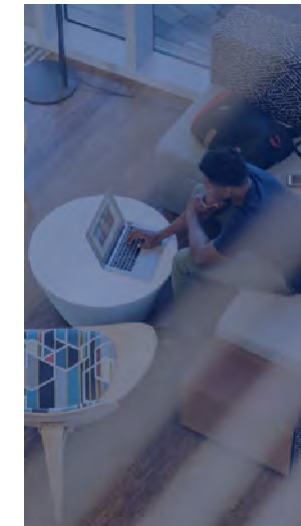
Veterans experience a change of heart, recognizing that they have everything it takes, if not more, to succeed at highly selective, traditional academic institutions.

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.”



# APPLY

Once a student decides to apply to a university, they are going to be taking steps that are unfamiliar to them. Some students went through this phase on their own, and others went through a nonprofit organization such as the Warrior-Scholar Project or Service to School (S2S). Most students said they considered contacting a university for help with the application, but did not feel welcome to do so.

While students found this phase easy to navigate, they also expressed issues with applications being set up for high school students and not nontraditional aged students. For military-affiliated students, their work experience is a big part of what prepared them to be at an Ivy League school. Most applications make it difficult to convey their military experiences. Instead, many are asked to offer test scores from high school, which is not viewed by users as an adequate assessment of their readiness. Still, military-affiliated students did not express major concerns with this phase. Once their mind was made up, they did not mind going the extra mile to complete applications with the excellence their military experience primes them for.



## APPLY

CONTACT

CONSTRUCT

SUBMIT

🟡 Bright Spot ⚡ Pain Point

- 🟡 University officials are friendly on calls;
- 🟡 Able to get answers about applying.
- ⚡ The pipeline for veterans to apply is not always clear.

- 🟡 Applying is clear and easy.
- ⚡ Hard to translate military experience;
- ⚡ Application questions geared toward HS students;
- ⚡ Test scores seem unnecessary given background and work experiences.

- 🟡 Veterans feel successful sending in applications.
- ⚡ Veterans did not know about application fee waivers or fee was not waived.

### 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 questions about application details, waivers, 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.

### SUBMIT

Upon submitting their application, military-affiliated students feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. They are fulfilling a dream that seemed impossible just by submitting an application. Given they are often transitioning from the military, community college, or both, it is always appreciated when schools waive application fees for military service members and veterans.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

## 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 excited by the prospect of attending a school with some of the nation’s best and brightest 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

“[I]t’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 charge \$10 to submit a financial aid package, which is the biggest oxymoron in the world.”

“

For veterans looking to come to an elite institution, we [veteran students] just [need to] apply. [T]he biggest hurdle is getting people to apply.

APPLY

CONTACT

CONSTRUCT

SUBMIT

### WHAT A GOOD APPLY LOOKS LIKE

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.

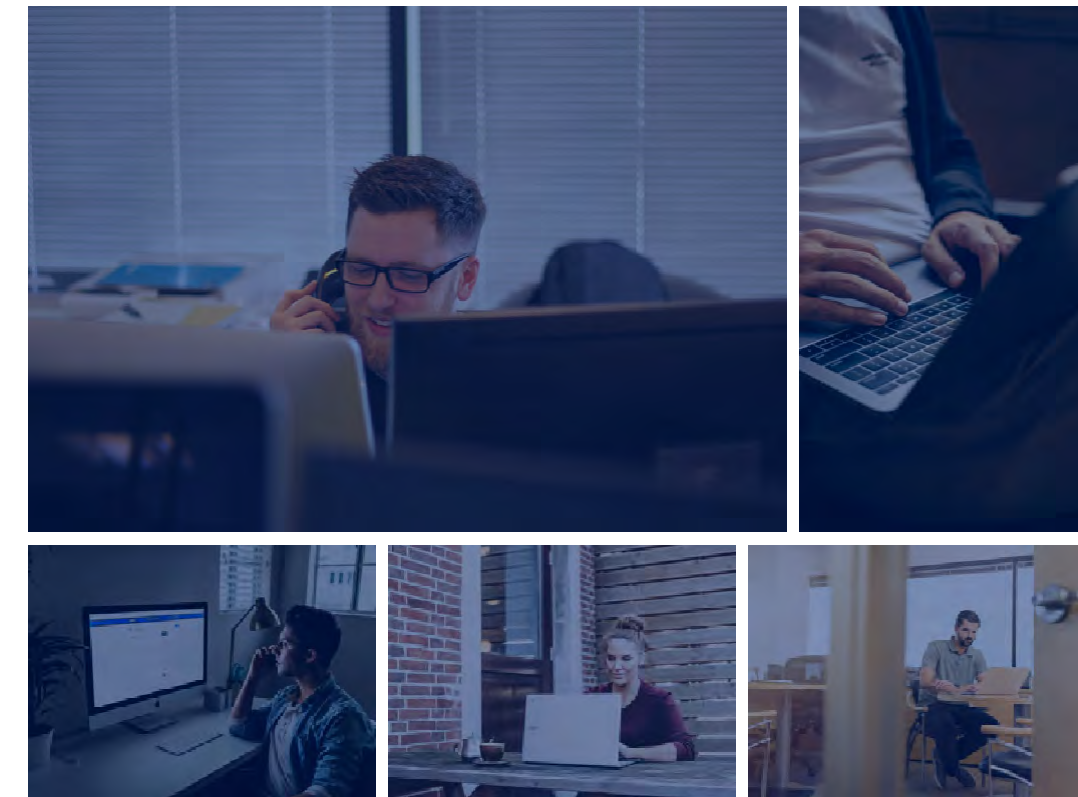
Veterans and military-affiliated applicants can substitute their professional military resume for aspects of an institution's application process that is more tailored for students coming from high school.

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

### OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS

The apply phase should be marked by an open door policy for military-affiliated students. Having resources and/or partnerships in place to help students navigate the application phase will allow students to submit the strongest application possible. Admissions officers should also make themselves familiar with the experiences military-affiliated students may face. A service member's or veteran's application is going to look significantly different than other traditional and nontraditional students' applications. That does not take away from the value of the experiences of military-affiliated applicants. Informed, empathetic employees and strategic partnerships are the 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, the POSSE Foundation, or Service to Schools (often partnered through VetLink), universities can give students a resource to help them through the application process.



### 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."

#### 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.



## ENROLL

DECIDE

READY

EXECUTE

🟢 Bright Spot 🚩 Pain Point

- 🟢 Veterans excited and proud they were accepted;
- 🟢 Financial aid is better than expected.
- 🚩 Wondering if they can afford it and if family will be supported.

- 🟢 VA benefits are not as hard to navigate as anticipated.
- 🚩 Planning for all steps needed to move.

- 🟢 University officials are still helpful.
- 🚩 Moving;
- 🚩 Finding and making arrangements for family (jobs, childcare, etc.).

### DECIDE

Students must weigh the desirability (where do I want to go?), feasibility (can I afford to go to?) and viability (should I go?) when deciding which school is best for them. If students truly desire to go to a certain school, help with affordability is key for making a decision. Private institutions should consider policies that do not cause the GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon program to negatively impact students' financial aid packages.

### READY

Once students decide which school they wish to attend, they begin to go through the process of getting ready to move, certifying GI Bill benefits, and making sure they have everything prepared when they arrive on campus, or at their off-campus housing.

### EXECUTE

Now, students actually move and submit their certification for VA benefits. They are excited, but the reality of transitioning to a prestigious institution can be daunting. Having the support of their university in any way is helpful. Reach out and ask students what they need help with.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

## 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 veteran students. 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 GI 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 ease 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 not even just if their partner's willing. Is it even a possibility 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."

“  
[Students are] asking things and wondering about costs, [moving], and stuff like that, because it is a daunting process. And unfortunately, you know, the schools themselves don't typically help out with that.”

ENROLL

DECIDE

READY

EXECUTE

WHAT A GOOD ENROLL PHASE LOOKS LIKE

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.

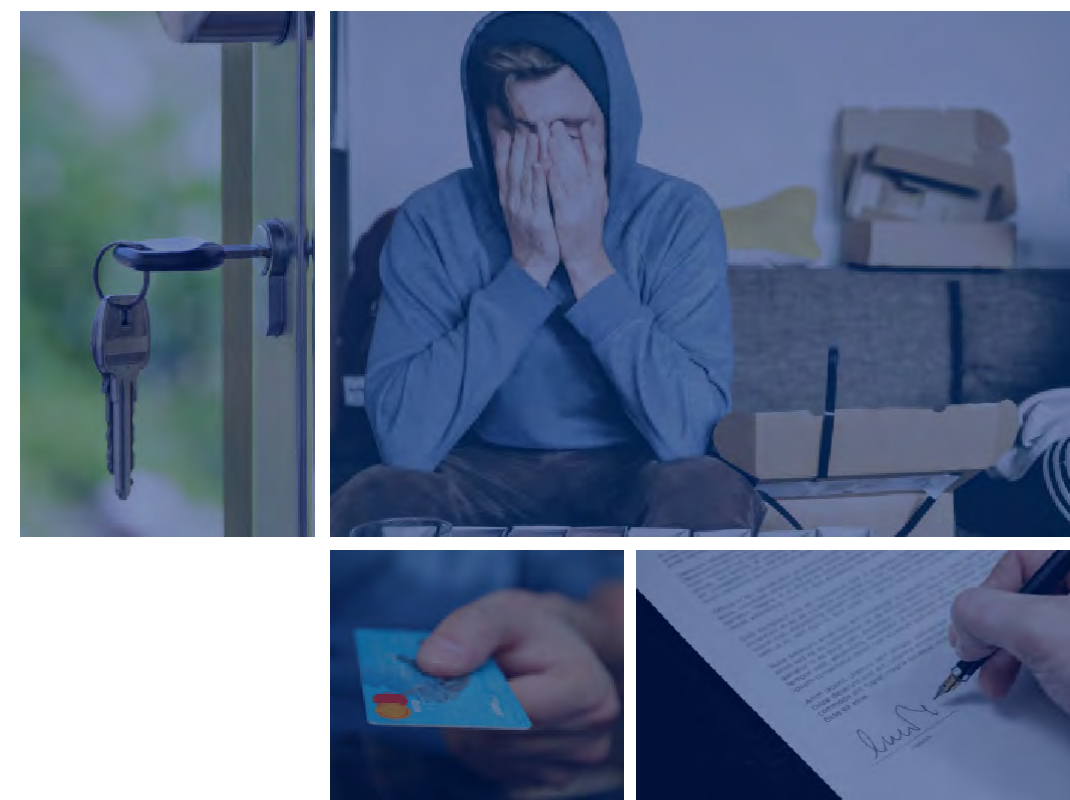
Veterans and their families receive tools and resources around campus and in the local community that can ease the moving process before school begins.

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

OPPORTUNITIES & CONSIDERATIONS

The less students have to stress at this point the better. A perfect enroll phase involves minimal frustration when it comes to certifying benefits, clear navigation for finding housing, and support from the university community in finding other resources required for moving across the country. Universities can attain this by offering a checklist to students of things to do before arriving. Also, for each checkpoint, students should be directed to the appropriate resource. This is especially crucial for housing. Having a resource to help military-affiliated students find housing off campus (if necessary) is essential, especially for students with families. Providing waivers for students to live off campus is also helpful.

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



HOW WE KNOW IF WE'RE SUCCEEDING

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.

## LEARN

ORIENT

ENGAGE

ABSORB

🔍 Bright Spot ⚡ Pain Point

- 🔍 Completing degree successfully;
- 🔍 Students believe they paved a path for others to follow.
- ⚡ Issues with education benefits threaten graduation.

- 🔍 Learning challenges;
- 🔍 Veteran + non-veteran community;
- 🔍 Resources and networking opportunities.
- ⚡ University community is not always welcoming;
- ⚡ Younger students and some faculty make veterans feel unwelcome;
- ⚡ Balancing school, life, and transition.

- 🔍 Classes are enlightening;
- 🔍 Deciding major;
- 🔍 Adopting new professional skills.
- ⚡ Once semester ends the orienting starts again.

### ORIENT

Students arrive on campus and are completely exposed to their new environment for the first time. This is an exciting and nerve-wrecking experience for all students, not just veterans. However, student veterans' time away from traditional learning environments make 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.

### MOMENT THAT MATTERS

## THE LEARN PHASE

For all students, especially veterans, learning is an exciting yet incredibly exhausting part of the journey. This phase is the longest part of a veteran's undergraduate student journey. Learning (at an IHL) typically lasts three years, with veterans continually orienting, 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 DISCOVERED

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 made 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]. [Participating 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].



LEARN

ORIENT

ENGAGE

ABSORB

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 like they are welcome and can easily be a part of the military and nonmilitary 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.

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 6 learning cycles depending on an institution's academic schedule. Institutions have ample 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 this population of students, gather feedback, and adopt programs and services that achieve their purpose and are well-liked 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 embraced by the university community. Doing this allows veterans and military-affiliated students to feel like they are valued and belong on campus, and so do their families.

HOW WE KNOW IF WE'RE SUCCEEDING

EASE

"It was easy for me to access resources when I needed to resolve a problem/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."



BETTER UNDERSTAND

THE CYCLE OF LEARNING







**ORIENT**

Students begin to get used to their new environment and are informed of important resources.

**ENGAGE**

Students begin to engage with their environment and resources to be as successful as possible.

**ABSORB**

Students absorb what they have learned to ready themselves for a new set of challenges.

# 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.





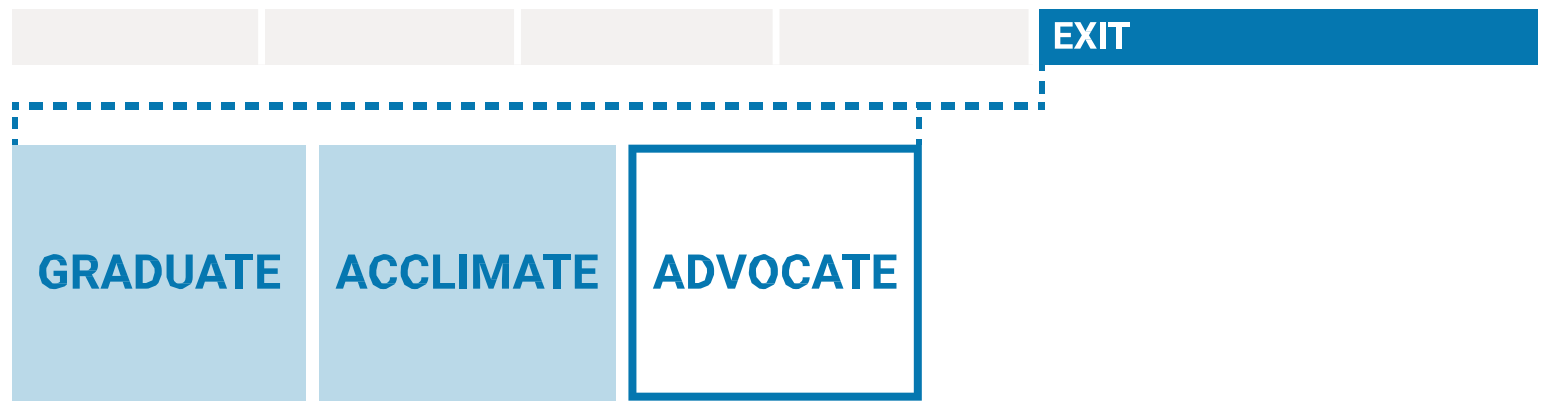


## IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE VETERANS

# 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.





☉ Bright Spot    ⚡ Pain Point

- ☉ Completing degree successfully;
- ☉ Students believe they paved a path for others to follow.
- ⚡ Issues with education benefits threaten graduation.

- ☉ Veterans begin new jobs;
- ☉ Some begin graduate school;
- ☉ Other significant life events and new civilian lifestyle.
- ⚡ Transitioning from the military and higher ed. into full civilian lifestyle.

- ☉ Relationships with current students;
- ☉ Connecting students to jobs and internships;
- ☉ Supporting university.
- ⚡ Hearing current students still feel "out of place";
- ⚡ Veteran alumni not accepted in broader community;
- ⚡ Not connected to current student veterans.

### GRADUATE

Students fulfill their requirements and complete their undergraduate journey. During this time they are also considering job prospects and/or graduate schools. 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 place students in jobs welcoming to 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".

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT? THE EXIT PHASE

This phase is important because it highlights how positive experiences during the previous phases of a veterans' undergraduate experience can turn them into an engaged alumnus 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 maters 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 each give you guidance on you know, 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.”



EXIT

GRADUATE

ACCLIMATE

ADVOCATE

### 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.

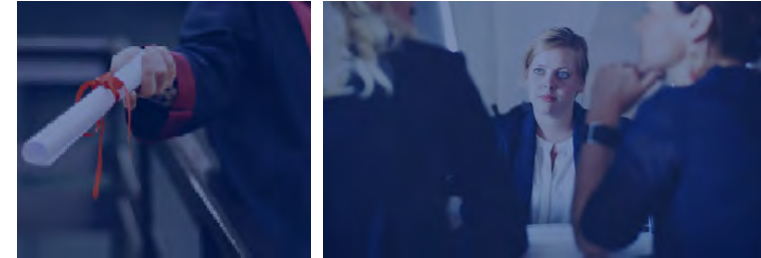
Veterans feel like a valued member of the alumni community.

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. Our 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 younger peers do not have. Many employers seek to hire veterans because of their maturity, discipline, and life-experience. Connecting with such employers is highly recommended.

Given the extensive life-experiences military-affiliated graduates have, universities 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 nonmilitary, 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

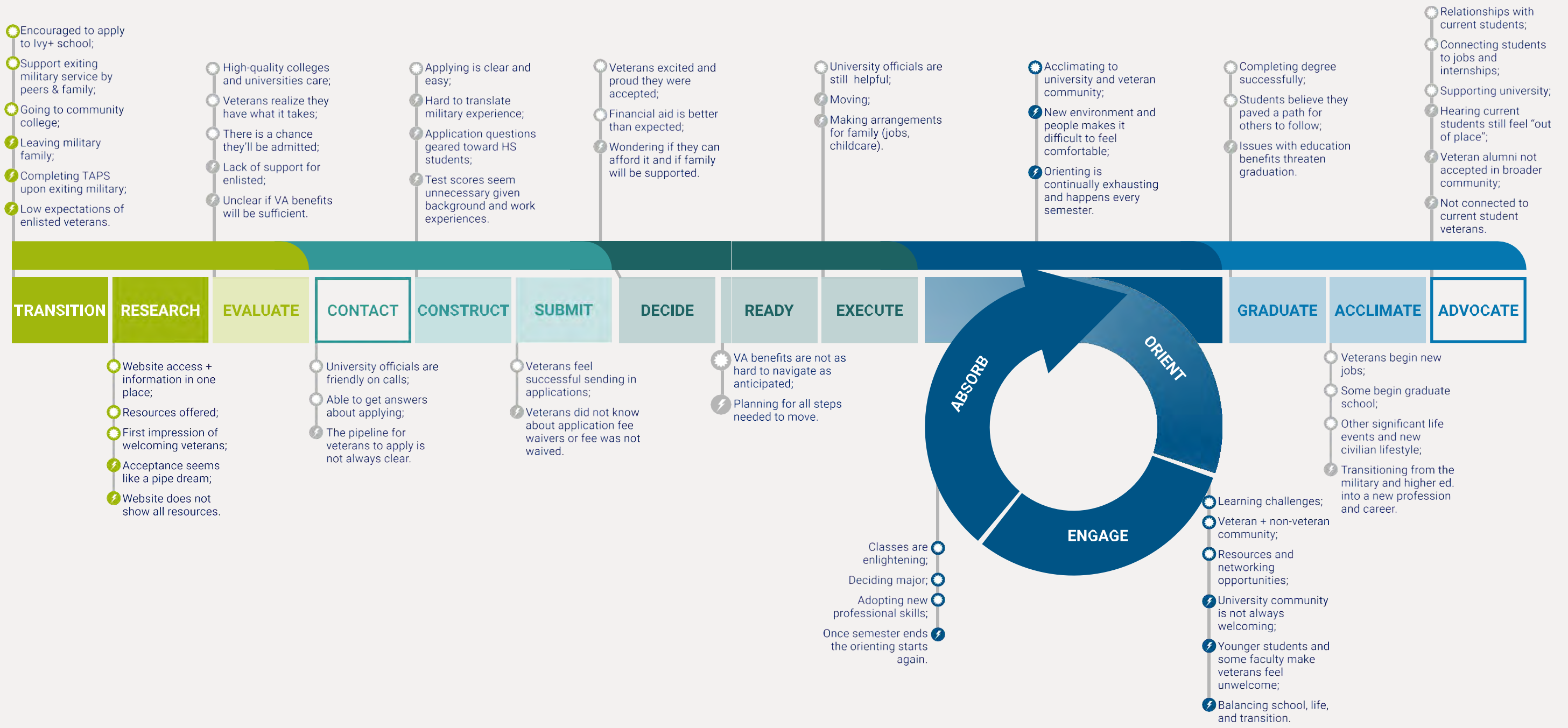
Now that the cyclical nature of the learn phase has been explained, we wanted to simplify the journey map to reflect this understanding. Below we have provided an adapted version of the in-depth journey map to focus on the 5 phases, 15 stages, the moments that matter, and the bright spots and pain points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

**KEY**

**JOURNEY PHASE**

**MOMENT THAT MATTERS**   **JOURNEY MOMENT**   **OPTIONAL JOURNEY MOMENT**

- Bright spot - Moment that Matters
- Pain point - Moment that Matters
- Bright spot - Other Moments
- Pain point - Other Moments







# 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 [redacted]. At each stage, pain points should become bright spots, and the opportunities outlined should be explored. 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 university 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.

### MOMENTS THAT MATTER

TRANSITION

RESEARCH

ORIENT

ENGAGE

ABSORB

### OPPORTUNITIES

Connect with those advising high performing veterans on where to apply (e.g., community colleges and military education centers) + Make information accessible. Have a central website with information on resources available to students.

The learn phase is a cycle during which students orient to their new environment, engage with people and resources, and then absorb what they have experienced. Effectively connecting students with resources that will have the greatest impact on their journey at each moment allows students to thrive in an unfamiliar environment. It also makes them feel respected and at home.





## **DISCLAIMER**

All terms, HCD 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 as taught by Professors Tom Allin and Blythe Meyer. Stories and quotes have been paraphrased and condensed at times to conceal the identity of interviewees and remove excess language such as "um", "like", 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 storybook 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.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Finally, thank you to the many Duke, Ivy League, and Ivy+ institutional leaders, student veteran office directors, students, and alumni that took the time to speak with us. Without your insights and stories, it would not be possible to map the journey and pinpoint the opportunities to help student veterans thrive.



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