

Incorporating Co-Design Thinking to Understand Current and Future Experiences of Veterans in a University Environment

Joshua B. Morrow, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio,
morrow.129@buckeyemail.osu.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to utilize co-design thinking to investigate and understand the experiences of veteran students entering into college at The Ohio State University (OSU) after military service, and to assist the university in improving those transition experiences. The research significance is that an increasing number of post-9/11 era veterans are utilizing the educational benefits earned through their service. Many of these service members have spent years inside a military culture, which has inadequately prepared them for a transition to the civilian and academic environments.

It has been found that veteran students often self-segregate due to age differences, and their experiences gained through military service. Additionally, while OSU's Office of Military and Veteran Services (OMVS) has been doing incredible things to help veteran students transition away from the military and into OSU, many of their practices tend to promote self-segregation rather than integration.

Although it is not true across the entire population of veteran students, the research conducted showed that many sought opportunities for improved social integration programs. Opportunities lie in finding a balance between the culture that veteran students share, and integration into the civilian culture they are now part of. Additionally, veteran students could benefit from additional support in regards to academics and logistics when navigating through OSU.

The study conducted was comprised of preliminary interviews with a director of the OMVS, an initial survey, four co-design sessions with volunteer veteran students, and an evaluative survey to gain deeper insight into the possible new service concepts generated during the co-design sessions. Based on the research results, proposed new services and improvements to existing ones were presented to OSU's OMVS.

Keywords: Co-Design Thinking, Veteran Students, Experience, Self-segregation, Integration,

Introduction

“Today's veterans often come home to find that, although they're willing to die for their country, they're not sure how to live for it.” (Junger, 2016)

Today, veteran students make up roughly 4% of all college students in the U.S., and OSU has a veteran student population of around 2.19% of its roughly 66,046 students. It is amongst the smallest identified demographic at the university, but those numbers are only expected to increase as more and more service members return home from serving overseas and begin to

leave or retire from the military (Lackaye, 2011). Service members that have spent years deeply integrated into a culture that is very different from the day-to-day life of a student or a civilian, will be attempting to transition away from a military mindset and integrate into a larger, seemingly foreign, sociocultural environment. To be successful in the new culture that veteran students have willingly served and now chosen to be a part of, they will need help in adjusting to it. Studies have shown the ineffectiveness of the military to properly prepare and transition service members into civilian life (De Groat and Crowley, 2013), and since many of the veterans serving in this country's most recent conflicts will be leaving service to attend higher education, the collegiate environment is the perfect opportunity to assist those veterans with their integration and future success in the civilian world.

The research that I have conducted has focused on understanding the experiences of veteran students entering into higher education at The Ohio State University for the first time after having served in the military, or, those that are returning to OSU after leaving the collegiate environment to serve in military operations. As part of the research methodology developed, Co-Design Thinking has been utilized in the engagement of current veteran students in order to let them guide the identification of new services, or improvements that can be applied to existing ones, with the goal of improving the transition and integration experiences of current and future veteran students.

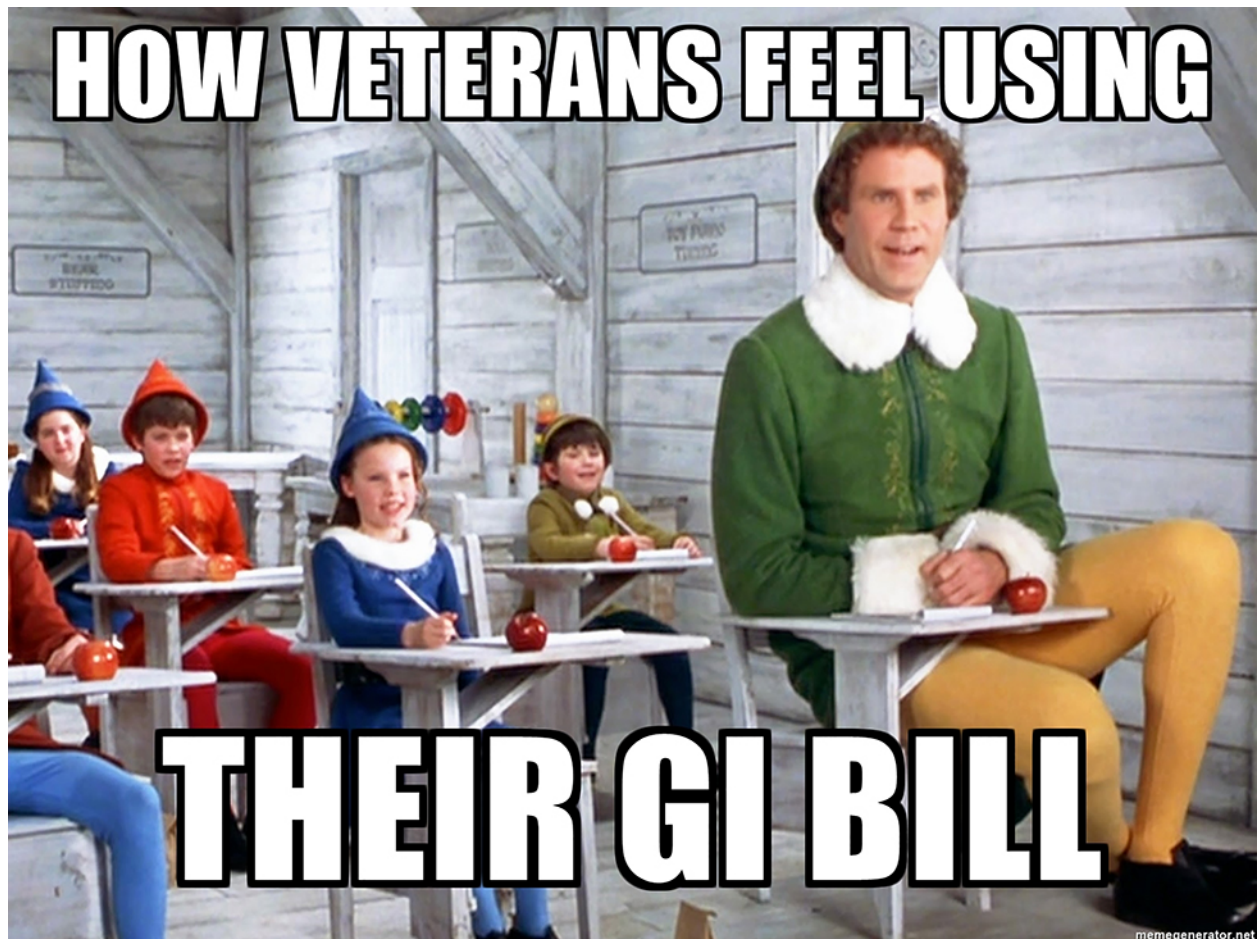


Figure 1. An Internet meme depicting the experience many veterans feel when attending college after years of service. (source: <https://cdn.meme.am/instances/76671592/how-veterans-feel-using-their-gi-bill.jpg>)

Background and Literature Review

Through my own personal experience with the Army Reserves of having to leave twice during my design undergraduate degree, as well as observations and conversations with other veteran students, I observed that many veterans tended to self-segregate away from their civilian counterparts in the collegiate environment. I hypothesized, then, that this self-segregation of the veteran student community hindered the cultural integration of veteran students into the greater civilian populace, and therefore had a potentially negative impact on their success in pursuing civilian careers after college.

Although this hypothesis of veteran self-segregation was anecdotal, two academic papers validated my observations; the Doctoral Thesis of Brian Lackaye (2011) titled “In Country, On Campus: A Study of Combat Veteran Integration into Higher Education” and “Looking Critically at Reintegration of Post 9-11 Era Military Veterans” a white paper by Arthur S. De Groat and Richard P. Crowley (2013). These two studies point out both “that the tacit skills needed in civilian life tend to be under-developed in [veterans] as a result of their being institutionalized into the military sociocultural world” (De Groat and Crowley, 2013), as well as “[veteran student] identification with other veteran students was also a bi-product of their inability to identify with the greater student population.” (Lackaye, 2011)

Since many of the veterans serving in this country’s most recent conflicts have left or will be leaving service to attend higher education and take advantage of the benefits that they have earned, the collegiate environment is the perfect opportunity to assist those veterans with their integration and future success in the civilian world. However, veterans clearly face unique challenges that come with their separation from military service, challenges that are very foreign to collegiate faculty, staff, and policy makers, therefore, Co-design Thinking has been utilized, engaging veteran students in the collaborative design process as “experts of their own experience[s].” (Sanders and Stappers, 2016)

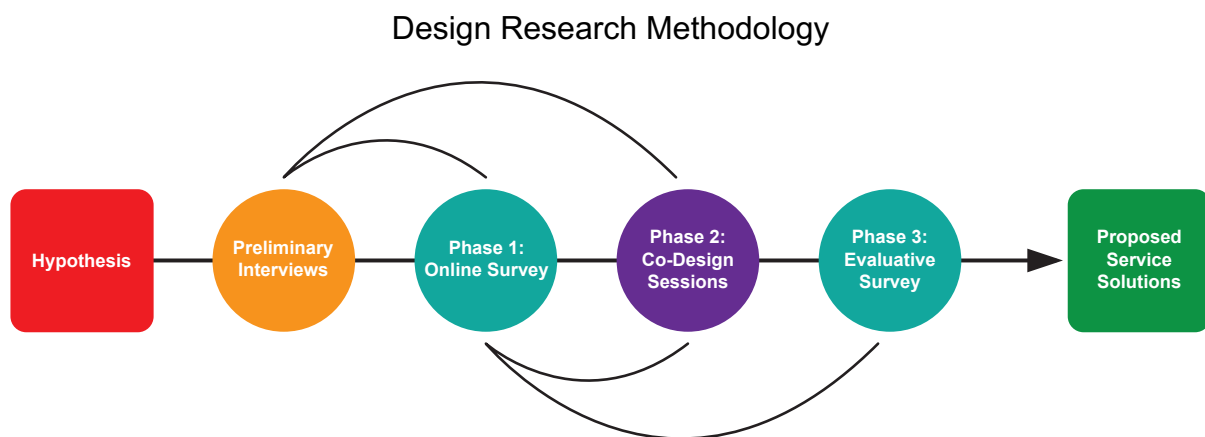


Figure 2. Process map depicting the design research methodology

Based on the hypothesis of veteran student self-segregation at OSU, an iterative research plan was developed to dive deeper into their experiences and to better understand what veteran students thought and felt about transitioning into and through the collegiate environment. This plan consisted of four stages, each designed to build on the accumulated information gained by the stages that preceded it. The four stages of the methodology are described below.

Phase 0: Preliminary Interviews

Mike Forrest, a director of OSU's Office of Military and Veteran Services (OMVS), was interviewed to develop a knowledge base of the offerings and operations of the OMVS. Additionally, any insights that he had in regards to the experiences of veteran students at OSU, and trends that he could identify in regard to areas of need for veteran students, were gathered. This information, along with insights from the literature review, was then used in order to inform the first phase of participant research.

Phase 1: Initial Online Survey

Phase 1 consisted of an online survey that was developed to gain a broad understanding of the thoughts of veteran students at OSU, including, for example, if and how they interacted with other students that were not veterans themselves, whether they belonged to any organizations or clubs, what did they think about the OMVS, and did they utilize any of the additional services that the OMVS offered. This survey was distributed via email to all undergraduate veteran students at OSU through the OMVS.

Phase 2: Group Co-Design Sessions

Phase 2 consisted of four co-design sessions that were designed based on the data collected from the first survey. In the co-design sessions, participants were first asked to reflect on how they perceived themselves in relation to no longer being in the military and then to create a timeline with a prepared toolkit of their experience thus far at OSU. After sharing their individual experience timelines, the participants were asked to collectively develop an "ideal" timeline for veteran students, transitioning into and through college at OSU after service, and then share what they had developed. The aggregate data from all of the co-design groups were then analyzed for key insights and opportunities that could be further developed. These insights were then utilized to prototype possible service solutions, in written format, that then created the basis for the third and final research phase.

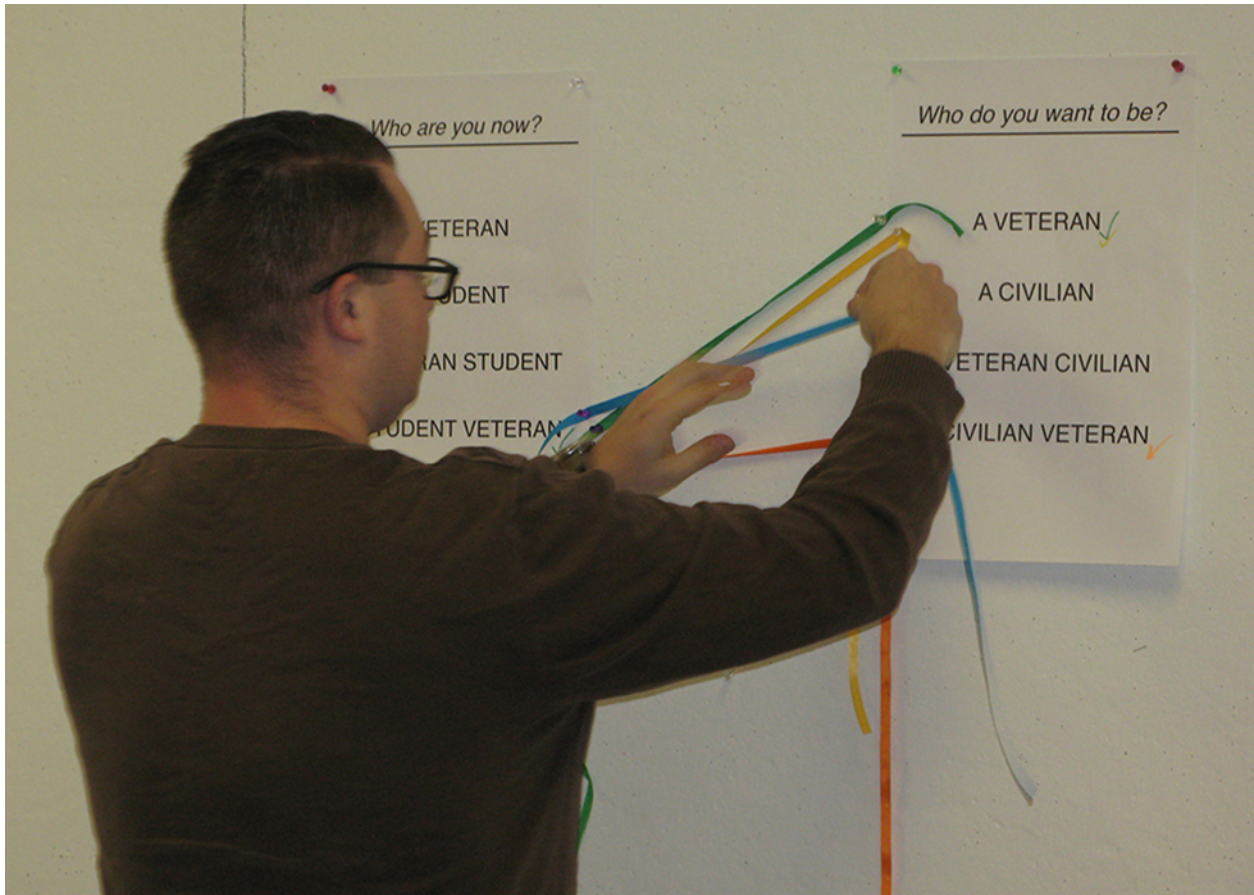


Figure 3. Exercise 1. The first exercise of the co-design sessions asked the veteran student participants to reflect on how they consider themselves today: a veteran, a student, a veteran student, or a student veteran? They were then asked to link colored ribbon to “Who do you want to be?” a veteran, a civilian, a veteran civilian, or a civilian veteran? After all of the participants had completed this exercise, they were asked to share their individual thoughts, feelings and why they made the choices that they did.



Figure 4. Exercise 2. Participants worked with pre-designed and assembled exploratory tool kits to develop individual, current experience timelines of their transition into and through college after military service.



Figure 5. Exercise 2. A participant in the process of creating an experience map of their current college transition and integration experience.

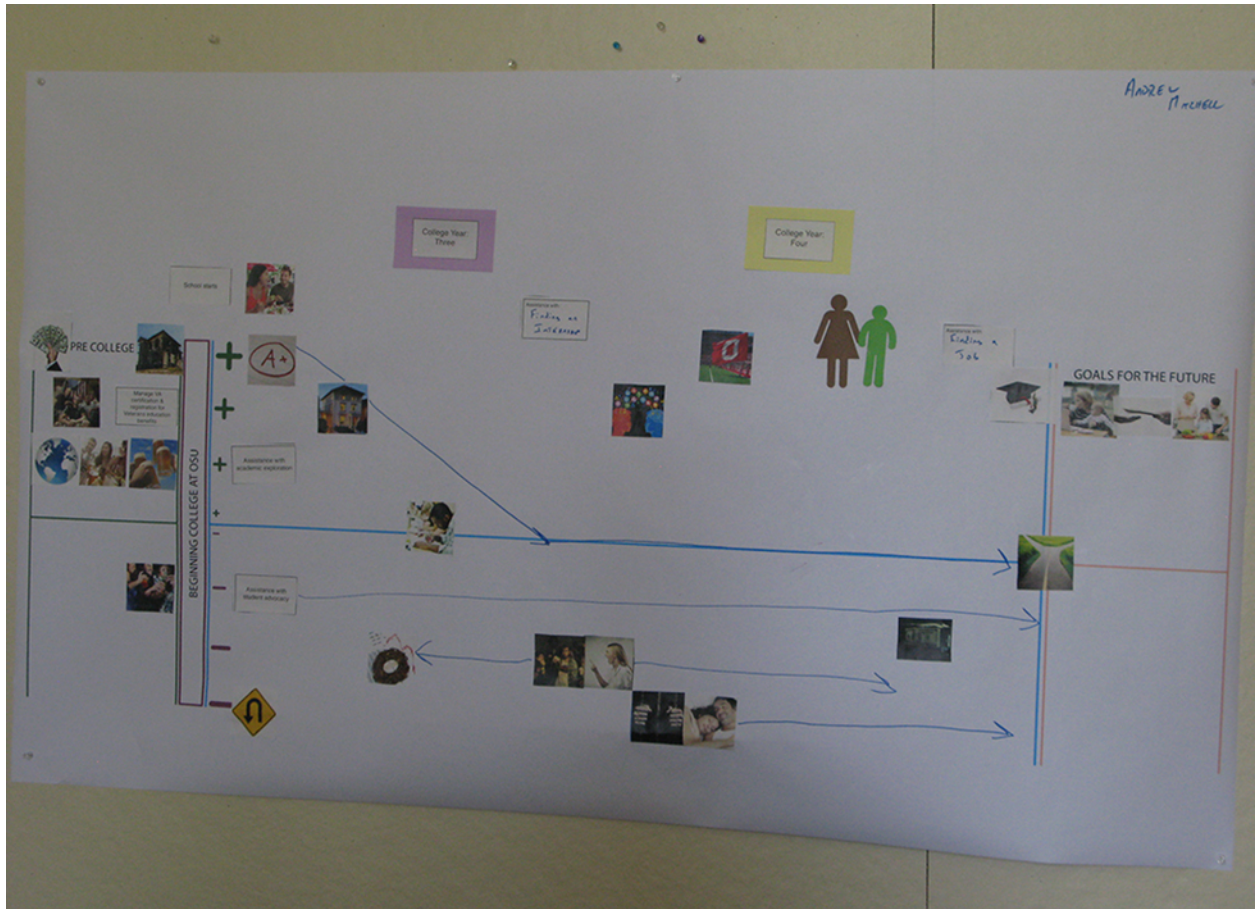


Figure 6. Exercise 2. A participant's current college transition and integration experience map.



Figure 7. Exercise 2. Participants sharing their individual, experience timelines with the rest of the group.



Figure 8. Exercise 3. Co-design participants working to map out an “ideal” experience for veteran students transitioning into and through the collegiate environment at OSU.



Figure 9. Exercise 3. Another group of participants working to co-design an “Ideal” experience map for future veteran students.

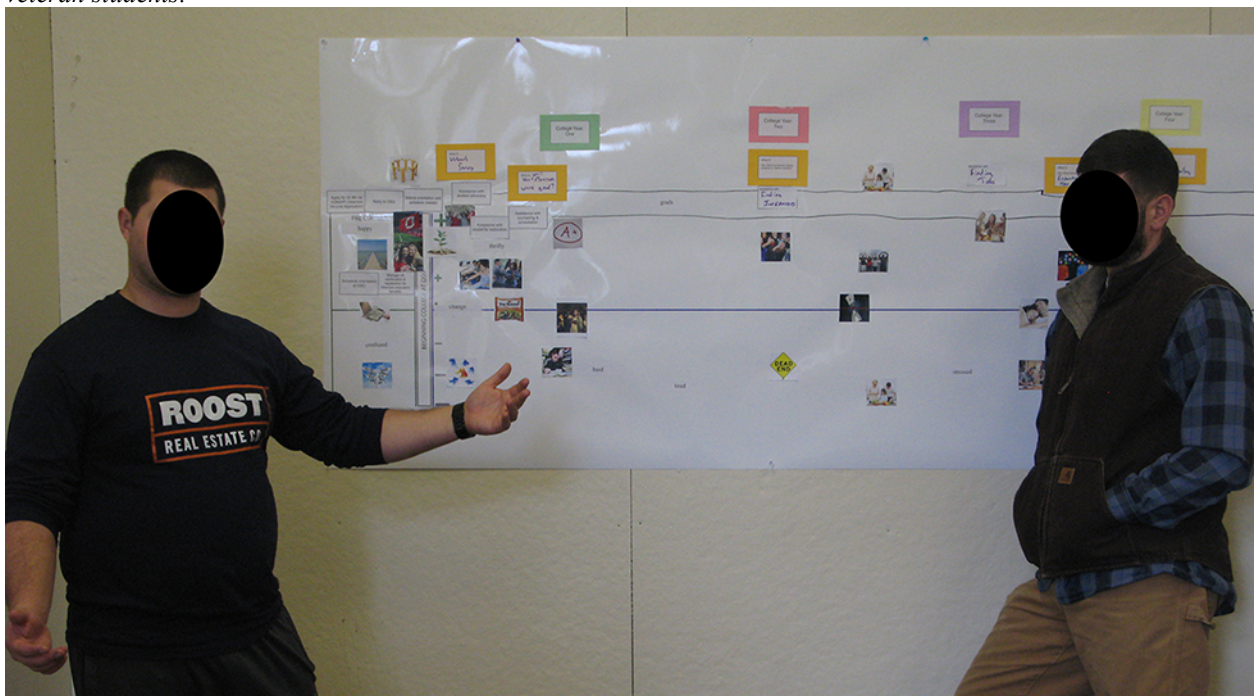


Figure 10. Exercise 3. Participants explain the “ideal” experience map for future veteran students that they co-designed.

Phase 3: Evaluative Online Survey

The final phase of the research plan consisted of an online survey that was sent to OSU’s veteran student population and asked them to evaluate the desirability and validity of the prototype solutions. Based on the feedback generated through this phase, the prototype solutions were refined and developed into recommendations to be considered by the OMVS for implementation. This survey was distributed via email to all undergraduate veteran students at OSU through the OMVS just as the Phase 1 Survey was.

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Listed below are a number of services, events, and offerings that Veteran students have indicated that they would be interested in if they were offered at OSU. Please indicate any that you would be interested in.

	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Neutral	Somewhat uninterested	Very uninterested
- A "How to get started" packet for new Veteran students, i.e., campus maps, list of resources and where to find them, how to handle parking, where to go for books and supplies, how to access and use Carmen/Canvas and Buckeye Link, etc.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
- Improved "Re-entry" support for Guard and Reserve students returning being called to service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
- Classes (for credit) to help with academic skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
- Classes for Veteran students that focused on degree and career exploration	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 11. A screen capture of a portion of the evaluative survey that was emailed to OSU veteran student undergraduates.

Q56 - Listed below are a number of services, events, and offerings that Veteran students have indicated that they would be interested in if they were offered at OSU. Please indicate any that you would be interested in.

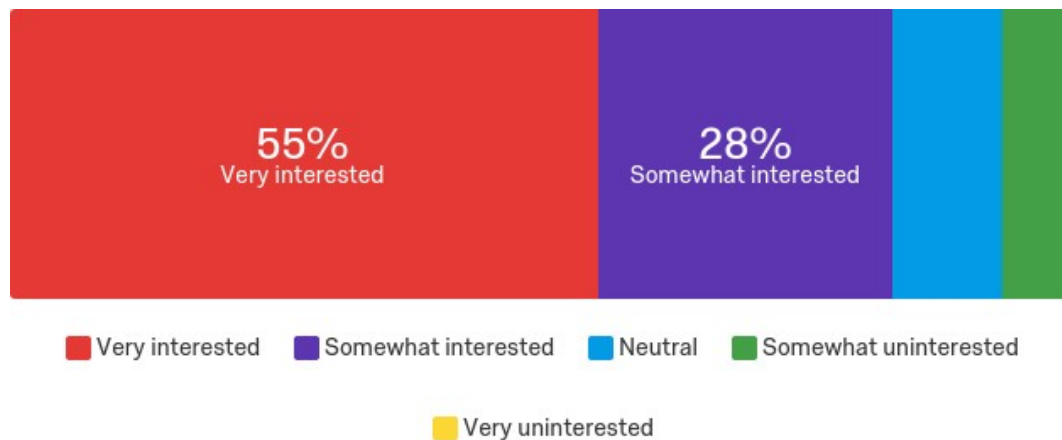


Figure 12. A screen capture depicting responses to a question of the evaluative survey.

Discussion

I chose to conduct my research at OSU partially because it is a city in and of itself. It has its own distinct culture and has a rich diversity that has been created with students from around the country and around the world. It is also a place that someone can easily be lost in, can easily feel like just another name on a roster, another face in the crowd. It is a perfect analogy for a society, and therefore represents a relevant environment for looking into the transition and integration of veterans. OSU has tremendous support systems for all of its students, and in 2011 it made those support systems even greater when it opened its Office of Military and Veteran Services. This office is solely dedicated to helping veterans in their transition, and is in place to assist with their specific needs. Whether it be in helping veteran students to file the right paperwork in order to receive their VA benefits, or as a conduit for help in other areas that they may be having trouble with, the office is of tremendous service to the veteran student community.

As described in the first stage of my research methodology, Mike Forrest of OSU's OMVS was interviewed to gain a better understanding of the office's role, and the services that it offers to veteran students in its efforts to aid and facilitate their transition into and through college. Through these interviews with Mike, and with his help, I identified and mapped out the major touch points that nearly every veteran student experiences through the OMVS.

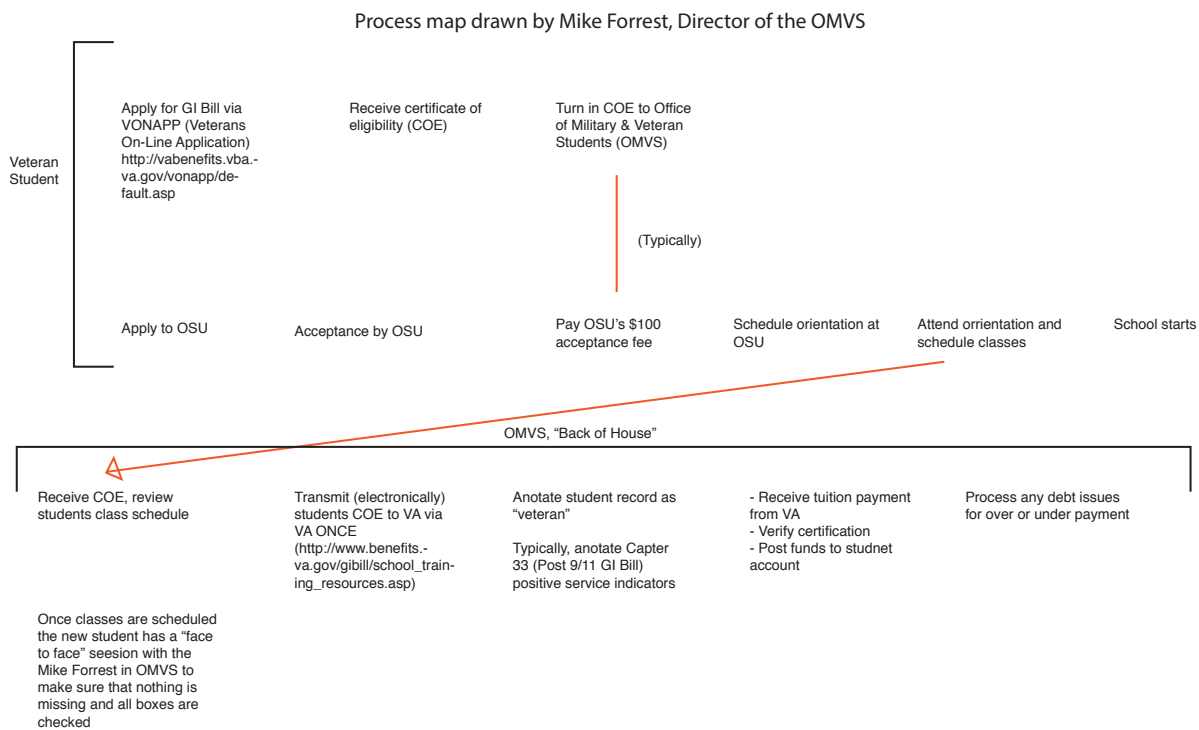


Figure 13. A map of the OMVS's most commonly used touchpoints by veteran students.

What I have come to call “the human element”, the individual *experience* and “overhaul of identity changes during transition” (De Groat and Crowley, 2013) began to emerge in the co-design sessions as an area worthy of further exploration in order to assist in the success of veteran students moving away from the military and into the civilian world. The loss of cultural identity that veterans feel when they leave service is well documented in Sebastian Junger’s *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging* and by Lackaye in his doctoral thesis, and to transition to an institution as large as OSU can be daunting. And while the OMVS does a tremendous job of helping veteran students enter into and traverse through OSU, it does so in an expected fashion for an institution of its size, that is to say, mechanically.

Inarguably, every resource and opportunity for success is available to all students at OSU, and the OMVS stands at the front of the pack for the resources and support that it offers veterans as compared to many other colleges and universities that I have studied. But as mentioned previously, my research indicated that *the human element*, the sociocultural integration of veteran students, was not being thoroughly addressed. Yes, the OMVS does organize events for veteran students, but most of those are for veteran students with other veteran students, or, often for veterans to be recognized for their service at venues such as sporting events. And although Mike Forrest said that veteran students were encouraged to move outside of veteran sociocultural circles and get involved in extracurricular activities, no services or programs seemed to be in place to assist in this facet of transition and integration. In fact, a look at the planned calendar of events for the 2016/2017 academic year only shows veteran only, or veteran focused, events. Periodically, tickets or available spaces to OSU and non-OSU events will be given out to veteran

students on a first come first serve basis through the OMVS, but these events are not something that the OMVS has specifically organized for veteran students.

The screenshot displays a web-based calendar interface for the OMVS. On the left is a dark sidebar with navigation icons for Account, Dashboard, Courses, Calendar, Inbox (with a '13' notification badge), Commons, Account, Dashboard, Courses, Calendar, Inbox (with a '13' notification badge), Commons, Help, Account, Dashboard, Courses, and Calendar. The main content area shows a calendar view for 'TODAY' from 'Mar 1, 2017 – Nov 22, 2017'. At the top right of the calendar are tabs for 'WEEK', 'MONTH', 'AGENDA' (which is selected), 'SCHEDULER', and a '+' icon. The events are listed as follows:

Date	Time	Event Name
Fri, Mar 3	12:00pm	Journaling Session with Veterans
Wed, Mar 8	9:00am	Career Counseling & Support Services Vet Lounge Hours
Fri, Mar 10	10:00am	Jackie Hillis (CCS)- Let's Talk
Fri, Mar 10	12:00pm	Women Veterans Panel Held March 10th
Tue, Mar 21	11:00am	Spring Picnic
Fri, Mar 24	10:00am	Jackie Hillis (CCS)-- Let's Talk
Wed, Mar 29	11:00am	Franklin County Recorder's Office
Thu, Mar 30	5:30pm	Student Legal Services Concealed Carry Information Event
Wed, Apr 5	11:00am	Josh Ricketts, Vet Center Coordinator
Fri, Apr 7	10:00am	Jackie Hillis (CCS)-- Let's Talk
Sat, Apr 8	8:00am	1 Day for the K.I.A.
Wed, Apr 12	9:00am	Career Counseling & Support Services Vet Lounge Hours
Wed, Apr 12	12:00pm	Veterans Journaling Workshop
Tue, Apr 25		

Figure 14. A screen capture of the OMVS events calendar through the spring of 2017.

The data collected from the Phase 1 survey helped to develop the co-design process and materials that were used by the veteran student participants during the Phase 2 workshops. During all four of the co-design workshops, many of the participants expressed similar high and low points in regards to their current experiences at OSU, and additionally, each group identified possible solutions to similar areas of unmet needs that were addressed in their collaboratively developed “ideal” college timelines.

After analyzing the aggregate of data from the co-design workshops, a list of 22 possible services were identified for evaluation through the Phase 3 survey. And while some of these services did focus on more “technical” solutions that the participants would like to see implemented by the OMVS, such as “Classes (for credit) to help with developing academic skills,” “Assistance with academic and career goal setting,” or “An ‘exit program’ to assist with transitioning out of college,” many of the service solutions identified by the participants addressed the sociocultural disconnect that veteran students often feel in regards to their experience at college. The list of identified solutions that addressed veteran student sociocultural integration that was developed by the co-design participants is as follows:

- Improved “Re-entry” support for Guard and Reserve students returning from being called to service
- Veteran study groups
- Upper level veteran mentors “buddies” for new veteran students
- Being paired with an upperclassman in their degree field (veteran or civilian)
- Mentoring (through a TA position) new veteran students
- Increased access to, and availability of, counseling services
- Purposefully organized veteran & civilian social events
- OMVS organized events to become involved with groups or organizations outside of OSU
- An organized support group for family members of veteran students
- More daytime social events
- Increased outreach from veteran students/veteran student groups (Vets 4 Vets, etc.) to new veteran students

Figure 15. A list of solutions identified by the co-design participants addressing veteran student sociocultural integration.

In Phase 3, an evaluative survey was sent out to OSU’s veteran student population giving them the opportunity to evaluate the 22 possible service solutions. The service solutions listed above were responded to positively, with most participants indicating that they were “somewhat interested” to “very interested” in the proposed solutions. These service solutions indicate a strong desire for an improved sociocultural transition and integration experience by veteran

students at OSU that has yet to be fulfilled by any current services, or isn't known about by the participants, indicating a need for greater publicity of any said services. Conversely, some of the desired service solutions seem to perpetuate veteran student self-segregation, such as veteran mentors for new veteran students. But this is not the only interpretation. Lackaye developed a theoretical framework of veteran student integration where because of "the notion of a 'shared experience' amongst veterans... the need for these individuals to connect with others they can relate to is an essential first step" (Lackeye, 2011) in their transition and integration before moving into an experience of greater sociocultural involvement in the collegiate environment as a whole.

Conclusion

Through the use of Co-Design Thinking, a detailed and thorough investigation of the current experiences of veteran students at The Ohio State University, in addition to an exploration of what they feel may be an ideal experience over the course of a collegiate career for future veteran students, has been carried out. The use of co-design as a research approach, and the iterative research methodology that was developed, has allowed for an authentic investigation into the thoughts and feelings that veteran students experience, revealing the human and interpersonal issues that matter as they transition out of the culture and mindset of a service member, into that of a student, and then through their collegiate career. The utilization of the co-design process helped the participants to identify, define and express the positive and negative experiences with transitioning into and through OSU, indicating successful services that OSU and the OMVS has in place for them to utilize, as well as drawing attention to areas of unmet needs. Additionally, the research participants were able to collectively generate suggestions for possible solutions to the pain points and areas of unmet needs that they had identified.

Additionally, I'd like to comment on two aspects of the co-design sessions that, although they are not radically surprising, were unexpected. The first aspect was the sense of catharsis that all of the participants, and myself, seemed to experience by participating in such a collaborative manner with people with which we had a commonality. As I have mentioned, the loss of cultural identity for veterans is well documented and can be an extremely distressing experience. However, working collaboratively and sharing both positive and negative experiences as veteran students before working together to address those issues served as an expressive outlet, with nearly all of the participants commenting spontaneously on how much they enjoyed the co-design sessions and how, through the exercises, they were provided an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. It also became clear that the use of co-design sessions could provide a valuable tool for veteran students to explore and exercise introspection in regards to their current experiences, their goals while in college, and their desires for the future. With this being said, the use of co-design sessions, or a variant thereof, is suggested for development and implementation by OSU's OMVS as a service to help new veteran students in their transition into the collegiate environment, for academic exploration, and to assist in creating a "roadmap" toward the completion of their degree.

The difficulty that veterans often experience when separating from military service, or, returning home from service overseas, as is the case of the National Guard and Reserves, is one that is extremely complex with no easily identifiable solution. Many of the sources of this difficulty are

systemic to the nature and culture of military service, and, in being so, would require research, service development and implementation on a scale and scope much larger than I was able to carry out through this project. Additionally, solutions to the transitional difficulty that veterans face would seemingly be best developed and implemented at a stage prior to their separation from the military, and in this case, transition into a college environment. However, as indicated through the literary research, interviews, co-design sessions, and evaluative surveys, services at OSU can be implemented or improved upon which would help to ease the transition and integration experience for veteran students through new sociocultural integration initiatives, as well as ones that address the more “logistical” experiences of veteran students.

References and Citations

Lackaye, B. (2011) *In Country, on Campus: A Study of Combat Veteran Integration into Higher Education*. Educational Doctoral Thesis. Paper 32. Retrieved September 3, 2017, from <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20002688>

De Groat, A. S., & Crowley, R. P. (2013). *Looking Critically at Reintegration of Post 9/11 Era Military Veterans* [White Paper]. Retrieved September 3, 2017, from <http://www.k-state.edu/militaryaffairs/docs/Reintegration-Post-9-11-Military-Veterans.pdf>

Junger, S. (2016). *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing.

Sanders, E. B., & Stappers, P. J. (2016). *Convivial toolbox: generative research for the front end of design*. Amsterdam: BIS .

The Ohio State University - Statistical Summary (Autumn 2016)(Rep.). (n.d.). Retrieved September 3, 2017, from The Ohio State University website: <https://www.osu.edu/osutoday/stuinfo.php#enroll>

Author Biography

Joshua B. Morrow

Josh Morrow served in the U.S. Army Reserves from 2000 until 2011, with one stateside support deployment in 2002 and a deployment to Iraq in 2004-2005, both of which required him to pause his pursuit of a BSD in Industrial Design from The Ohio State University. In 2008 he received his baccalaureate degree from OSU, but was soon deployed to Afghanistan in 2009-2010. In 2011, Josh chose to leave the military to focus on his career in design research, working as a researcher at Karten Design before returning to Columbus, OH in 2012 to work in a freelance capacity.

Now completing his MFA in Design Research and Development at OSU, Josh's combined experiences of design research and military service have allowed him to develop a deep passion for working with people across the globe and to develop innovative solutions, services, and strategies through insight, empathy and creativity. Looking toward the future, Josh hopes to work in a capacity of service to others through the application of Co-Design Thinking at home and abroad.