

FARMY

Final Project Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

We, Team FARMY, have been working with the Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) on finding ways to better connect veterans to farmer mentors. Starting fall 2015, we have worked with the Farmer Veteran Coalition Outreach Coordinator, Emma Koefoed, and Executive Director, Michael O’Gorman to assess the feasibility of creating a nationwide mentorship program. After determining feasibility through investigative methods, we formulated a recommendation that materializes as a database of major existing farmer veteran programs across the fifty states. We believe that this list will enable the Farmer Veteran Coalition to more efficiently connect veterans with the resources and networks they need to start a career in agriculture.

Methods

Our plan was to research the need for mentorship programs for veterans, the qualities of a successful mentorship program, and if the Farmer Veteran Coalition has the capabilities to address that and feasibly create their own successful mentorships. From this we could decide how necessary veteran-specific mentorship programs are and get an idea of what a program run by FVC would entail.

Farmer Veteran Coalition National Stakeholder Conference

Our team was given a booth by FVC at the National Stakeholder in November 2015. Using a human-centered-design approach, we posed three open-ended questions on large sheets

of paper to collect genuine personal responses to questions that addressed the relationship between veterans and farming. The questions were, “*What makes veteran farmers stand out?*”, “*What challenges do veterans starting careers in agriculture face?*” and “*What would stop you from participating in a mentorship program?*” Answers to these would allow us to begin understanding the beliefs, values, and opinions of the demographics we would be working to help. We also used our time to ask farmer mentors and veteran mentees about what they thought regarding the necessity of a veteran specific program. Furthermore, members of our team attended the breakout sessions that were applicable to our project.

Outcomes: We came away with two realizations: veteran-specific mentorship programs are absolutely necessary and there are far more of these programs already in existence than previously thought. These programs are scattered across the country and lack a national-scale leading organization connecting them and integrating all their resources. At this point we made the decision that FVC would better serve as a link between the mentorship programs, rather than try to create their own program, given the complexity and needs of a successful program. Instead, The FVC would direct resources to areas in the country that are lacking mentorship programs.

Creating a Database

It followed that we needed to know exactly where in the United States these programs were, and where they were not. With this in mind, we divided the country into seven regions (West, Northwest, Southwest, Midwest, Northeast, South, and Pacific) with each member taking on a region. Extensive online research yielded the start of this database, and to add to it, we

enlisted the help of Michael O’Gorman, Executive Director of FVC. Over the course of three meeting sessions with him we went state by state, adding and updating based on his personal contacts around the nation.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Farmer Veteran Coalition not create their own veteran specific mentorship program but instead serve as a national link between existing organizations, foster the creation of new organizations in areas where there is a need, and transform their existing program from a specific and case-by-case approach to a more tangible, replicable, and formal process that can be accessed by a greater number of veterans interested in agriculture. We have named this concept the Mentorship Hub.

Components of a Mentorship Hub:

- Upkeeping an accessible database of all known existing veteran specific agricultural mentorship and incubator programs nationwide
- Designating a staff member to handle all mentorship related activities, and to direct queries about mentorship to regional connections
- Strengthening the connections and channels of communications between the Farmer Veteran Coalition and other organizations, as well as between smaller and more localized organizations

- Utilizing the Farmer Veteran Coalition's vast funding potential to sponsor the formation of veteran specific agricultural mentorship programs in regions that are currently lacking and in need of them

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Introduction

Throughout history conflicts have arisen and broken out in war. For those that fight, this quickly becomes a way of life and when the battles are over, peacetime means adjusting back to a different struggle of staying alive. In the United States, past wars have ended with the country in a relatively prosperous state. The job booms created by past wars meant returning veterans had easy employment. However, as time went on, conflicts became more political, victories became less clear, industry began to leave the U.S., and making a living after war became harder and harder. Today, finding enjoyable employment is difficult for anybody. Add in the trials and horrors brought on by battle, and everyday life becomes even more complex. This is the struggle faced by today's veterans and to help alleviate this, organizations have formed in the hopes of securing a gratifying, stable way of making a living for veterans. One such organization is the Farmer Veteran Coalition(FVC).

The Veteran and Farmer Problem

Due to the end of the war in Iraq and withdrawal of troops from the war in Afghanistan, the number of returning veterans is increasing. Some of these men and women have quickly adjusted to becoming civilians again but others have a more difficult time. A range of challenges such as reintegrating, mental health issues, or feeling a loss of purpose after leaving the armed forces can hinder a successful transition to life after the military. One of the key challenges these veterans face is finding employment. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have an unemployment rate of 9.9 percent--compared to

about 7.9 percent for the general U.S. population.² Today over a half-million U.S. veterans are unemployed and looking for jobs.²

Concurrently, farmers in the U.S. are aging, and there is a shortage of farmers willing fill their boots when they retire. In the coming decade, it is estimated that one-hundred-thousand new farmers will be needed to take the place of retiring farmers in the United States.² Currently, the average age of a farmer is 57 years old, which is nearly 17 years older than the average worker age.¹ There is an opportunity to provide a way to employ returning veterans to fill the gap left by retiring and aging farmers. This is the problem that the Farmer Veteran Coalition strives to address.

Solving the Problem

Veterans would logically seem to be a perfect fit to fill the boots of retiring American farmers. The U.S. Army states that “A U.S. Army soldier is the embodiment of physical and mental strength.” The Marines Corps. includes in its mission that a marine embodies “boldness, creativity, intelligence and the warrior spirit.” The Air Force declares that its core values are “integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.” All of these qualities imply that veterans leave the military equipped to become excellent farmers. As the Farmer Veteran Coalition mentions in their guiding principles, “We believe in the meritocracy of American agriculture, where personal responsibility for one’s actions and individual initiative in pursuit of one’s goals can create personal success. We believe in the fundamental dignity of physical work.” Furthermore, farming is a good fit for veterans because it can promote good health for those who are faced with mental or physical barriers when searching for other careers. Studies

have also shown that working on a farm “contributes to self-esteem, social skills, rehabilitation, inclusion, responsibility, physical health, and sense of purpose”³. Research suggests that farming can reduce or prevent feelings of isolation and improve health through physical labor and access to fresh food⁵. With the assistance of the Farmer Veteran Coalition, veterans have an opportunity to exercise skills gained in the military while experiencing a wide range of mental and physical health benefits.

The Farmer Veteran Coalition is a non-profit organization that strives to cultivate a new generation of farmers and food leaders, and has various programs and resources to help veterans excel in agriculture. Some of the resources they offer include a fellowship fund and an agriculture resource library, as well as a wide range of retreats, workshops, conferences, internships, apprenticeships, and job placement. The FVC connects veterans to farmers and apprenticeships in agriculture on a personalized, case-by-case basis. These connections provide veterans with a source of knowledge, advice, support, and camaraderie through various modes of communication such as virtual correspondence, on-site training and farm visits, or, at the very least, a conversation over coffee. Ultimately, the goal of these connections is to give veterans a comprehensive agricultural education that will prepare them for successful careers.

Current Issues

There is a greater number of veterans in need of mentorship connections than the FVC can currently provide with their personalized and individualistic approach. As a result, available mentors are often located across the country, physically inaccessible from potential mentees, which complicates communication. Even if these cross-country connections are made,

geographic differences pose the risk that mentees would face varying social, political, economical, and environmental climates than their mentors. Furthermore, legal restrictions regarding on-farm apprenticeships and privacy concerns has made potential mentors wary about accepting veterans onto their farms. These factors make establishing mentor relationships, a tedious process which the FCV currently doesn't have the resources to adequately address, giving us an opportunity to help.

Our team of seven formed out of mutual interest in helping the Farmer Veteran Coalition. At the time we did not know what the project would entail, but either from existing knowledge of the organization or mere intrigue at the sound of it, we all gravitated toward it. Soon after formation we met with our client, Emma Koefoed, and learned how we could help the organization.

Objectives

We created our objectives going into the project to be flexible and adaptable. We felt this would keep us open to discovering possibilities we would not have envisioned at the start. This proved to be a beneficial approach because as time progressed, our vision and our understanding changed. We focused on three basic concepts:

1. Understand Farmer Veteran Coalition needs, mission, and vision for the future.
2. Explore the feasibility of creating a mentorship program for the Farmer Veteran Coalition.

3. Create a resource for the Farmer Veteran Coalition that would aid them in achieving their goal of facilitating mentor and mentee relationships for their members, whatever form this may take.

Our first objective was to understand the Farmer Veteran Coalition's purpose--their origins, current state, and direction for the future. This objective was crucial throughout the entire project and deepened our understanding of our work. Although the initial steps of the project were heavily focused on a needs assessment, every interaction with our client, staff and members of the organization expanded our knowledge and understanding of the organization. Everything revolved around the central goal to connect veterans to resources, and to start and support careers in agriculture. It was clear that having the resources to facilitate mentorship relations would be an invaluable resource for the farmer and veteran members of FVC, but simply understanding the value and need for a program is not enough to get it started.

Moving on to our second objective, feasibility was a big question for FARMY throughout the entire process. We defined feasibility as whether or not the FVC has the staff power to create or facilitate mentorship relations. This objective was a fundamental question for us to consider every step of the way. Throughout the investigation and data collection there was always the possibility that we would discover that it would not be probable for FVC to generate mentorship relationships. Even if we concluded that it was not feasible for the FVC to create these relationships themselves, we decided from the beginning that we would create a resource for the FVC explaining why and how they could move forward.

Group meetings

Arguably the most challenging part of the entire process was finding a time when all seven of us could meet. We had limited availability in our individual schedules in fall, and even less in winter. Nonetheless, we found a way to get together nearly every week. In the beginning, we appointed a coordinator for each meeting whose job it was to make a schedule and keep us on track. As time progressed the leadership of one member was replaced by pure necessity to finish parts of the project. We went into each meeting all knowing what we needed to get done, so we all took on the responsibility and stepped into leadership roles when we saw necessary. We were very fortunate that we figured out this worked with our group dynamic.

From the beginning, technology played a significant role in the success of our project. The ability to work as a group virtually made it possible to meet up when we physically could not. We created Google Docs or slideshows during our sit-down meetings and assigned everyone a section and a deadline to have it completed by. This allowed us to work on the project on our own time and come to our next meeting prepared to ask questions and discuss our progress.

Fall 2015 Process

We met with our client Emma for the first time in fall 2015, who presented four main areas that the organization was struggling to succeed in. First was the mentorship program, which was discussed in *Current Issues*. Second was the problem that new farmers face with trying to sell their crops. Most have small quantities to sell which makes it difficult to interest produce buyers or grocery stores. In order to get farm credit loans they need a proven track

record of sales success going back at least three years. Third, along these same lines, many new farmers want to plant a little bit of everything on their farm, and while this is exciting and creates diversity, it also creates quantities too small to sell and harvest and cultivation requirements that are very work intensive. Finally was the issue with legislation in certain states making internships and mentorships difficult or cost prohibitive for farmers to legally set up. Our team took a vote and decided to work on two of these issues; designing a successful mentorship program and establishing a list of buyers that would be willing to work with new farmers. Then we set about accomplishing these, with no way of knowing the changes that would come to pass.

A Google Doc was then created and we brainstormed and explored our options. We all wrote and shared our individual ideas of what the problem/opportunity statement could be. We knew that we had an opportunity to bridge the gap between the problem of aging farmers and unemployed veterans. We believed that bridging the gap between these two problems could be accomplished by securing education and both technical and marketing experience for veterans so they can pursue successful farming careers. We know that there are many different farm academies and successful veteran farmers that hold vast amounts of information. Our team then considered strategies such as restructuring the mentorship program and determining what scale veteran farms would need to operate on in order to be considered by institutional buyers. We also considered reaching out to experienced farmers to understand the needs of future mentors. This concern stemmed from California's strict internship laws that may deter farmers from taking on a veteran mentee. Poorly formed farmer mentor and veteran mentee relationships have also resulted in issues such as distrust, exploitation, and lack of time for teaching and building partnerships.

Eventually we narrowed down our criteria and created our first problem statement, which we presented to the class:

We have an opportunity to improve an instructive mentor/mentee program to prepare veterans for a career in agriculture through hands on experience in both the technical and marketing aspects of farming. To achieve this, we will work with the Farmer Veteran Coalition to expand their operating scale with buyers and enhance mentor and mentee relationships by researching the possibility and feasibility of developing these markets and farmer partnerships.

The feedback from the class suggested two options: split up into two groups with each one taking on a project, or drop one idea or the other. If we split up our first focus was going to be the creation of a formal template that would be used to structure the mentorship program and the second, a compiled list of institutional buyers that would likely do business with veteran farmers. After much thought, we decided to go with our first focus and drop the latter and consequently we revised and came up with our second proposal:

We have an opportunity to explore the possibility of creating a veteran specific educational mentor/mentee program to prepare veterans for a career in agriculture through hands on experience in both the technical and marketing aspects of farming. To achieve this, we will work with the Farmer Veteran Coalition to research the needs of potential stakeholders and assess the possibilities for creating a successful and feasible veteran mentor/mentee program.

The following quarter we would plan to create two sets of interview questions: one for farmers and one for veterans, attending a FVC Stakeholders conference in November of 2015, and analyzing the feedback from the conference. We planned to collect information through

research and interviews that the Coalition needed to provide the best experience and learning opportunities for everyone involved.

Our team was given a booth by FVC at the National Stakeholder in November 2015. Using a human-centered-design approach, we posed three open-ended questions on large sheets of paper to collect genuine personal responses to questions that addressed the relationship between veterans and farming. The questions were, “*What makes veteran farmers stand out?*”, “*What challenges do veterans starting careers in agriculture face?*” and “*What would stop you from participating in a mentorship program?*” Answers to these would allow us to begin understanding the beliefs, values, and opinions of the demographics we would be working to help. We also used our time to ask farmer mentors and veteran mentees about what they thought regarding the necessity of a veteran specific program. Furthermore, members of our team attended the breakout sessions that were applicable to our project.

After finding out about this amazing opportunity, our team spent many meetings discussing how we should set up our table and how to get the most out of this opportunity. We originally decided on creating a survey and approaching people at the conference, asking them to respond to our questions. We had our computers at the conference, ready to have people fill out the surveys and contact information, but quickly decided to ditch the whole idea. Once we started talking to the stakeholders, it became clear that we had richer conversations without the survey interrupting and taking away from the conversations.

We came away with two realizations: veteran-specific mentorship programs are absolutely necessary and there are far more of these programs already in existence than previously thought. These programs are scattered across the country and lack a national-scale

leading organization connecting them and integrating all their resources. At this point we made the decision that FVC would better serve as a link between the mentorship programs, rather than try to create their own program, given the complexity and needs of a successful program. Instead, the FVC would direct resources to areas in the country that are lacking mentorship programs. This change in direction prompted us to write our third and final proposal in December 2015:

We have an opportunity to explore the possibility of creating a veteran specific educational mentorship program to prepare veterans for a career in agriculture through hands on experience in both the technical and marketing aspects of farming. To achieve this, we will work with the Farmer Veteran Coalition to research the needs of potentially involved farmers and veterans, and assess the possibilities for creating a successful and viable veteran mentorship program.

Fall 2015 Changes

After attending the Stakeholders Conference and going over our feedback, we confirmed that there is a strong demand for veteran specific mentorship programs. After this finding, we decided to explore farmer veteran mentorship programs already in existence that are currently active in the United States. We planned to reach out to those organizations, look at what makes them work and identify areas that they could use support. We proposed that by the end of the twenty weeks we would provide the FVC with the requirements of a veteran specific agricultural mentorship program, given that our research concluded that this kind of program was necessary. Our final proposal would be a model of how the organization should go about connecting

beginner veteran farmers with experienced farmers. We would establish educational parameters to ensure both farmer and veterans knew their roles and the model would provide a list of prerequisites and previous knowledge preferred by the mentor before the start of the mentorship. We also explored the possibility of creating a guidebook establishing ground rules and contracts between farmers and veterans that we hoped to would streamline the effectiveness of the existing Farmer Veteran Coalition program.

Winter 2016 Process

After a two week break, we came back to continue our work where we left off at the end of the previous quarter. We started back up with with the schedule we had made in our final project proposal in Fall Quarter. Our next action was to visit the FVC staff and share our new ideas and direction we gained from the stakeholder conference. We needed to run our ideas by our client and decided to bring the organization's director into the loop to make sure they supported our recommendation. We began doing online research of existing mentorship programs and farm schools, etc., after being assigned specific regions. With seven members, we divided the U.S into seven regions which are west, northwest, southwest, midwest, south, northeast, and pacific states. Then we scheduled the first meeting with Michael O'Gorman, Executive Director of the FVC.

We recorded the first meeting for group members that could not make it, in order to keep everyone on the same page. This meeting revealed that Michael already had a holistic map of programs around the country. The only caveat was it was all in his mind. We also found out that there were hundreds of veterans already in contact with FVC just so far this year that have interest in either participating in a mentor and mentee program or seeking help to receive grants.

Another two meetings were scheduled to go through the hardcopy of connections and resources in Michael's head. We set up the list so that FVC staff members can add to and revise it in the future as they make connections with other veteran related groups. We further polished the list we compiled with Michael. We cut out all the programs that are not veteran-specific, and based on the data, a map was made to visualize the information. The idea of a map did not materialize until during our dry run final presentation when a classmate suggested more visuals to go along with the list and a way to make it easy to see where these programs are. We feel this was an invaluable addition and condensed our entire final product into something viewable at a glance.

Winter 2016 Changes

After meeting with Michael, we realized that we did not need to determine the feasibility for FVC to build a network connecting mentorship program across the country. The reason is that FVC had already held several national scale stakeholder meetings, which have drawn attention from everyone in the issue, scaling from the individual person to the USDA. In that case, FVC has both the power and the resources to explore the next step to solve the issue of retiring veterans and aging farmers. The problem we found through the meetings with Michael was that the way FVC functions was not replicable. Michael acts with charisma and every connection with stakeholders is set up because of him. In order to make the model replicable, we materialized the information in Michael's mind making the information more accessible to the FVC staff. We believe this tangible database, which can be continually updated, revised, and expanded, will greatly assist the staff in finding mentorship programs for aspiring new farmers.

Alternative Options

Throughout our evolving process in the second phase of the project, there were several alternative routes of action that we either formally or informally dismissed in order for the ideas that would eventually shape our final recommendation to rise to the top of the proverbial heap. The most obvious of these options was the suggestion that the FVC form their own veteran-specific mentorship program. This would require one or several staff fully devoted to this project, and the allocation of necessary funding in order to keep the program functioning. The designated staff members would also have to create a formal process for matching new farmers with potential mentors based upon geographic location, agricultural interests and specializations, as well as compatibility and a willingness to exchange ideas, knowledge, and even markets and resources. Upon evaluating the scope of already existing programs, coupled with the amount of regional knowledge and connections required for a successful program, the amount of time that one or several staff members would have to commit to designing and implementing such a program, and the challenges that would accompany scaling up the organization's current methods by such an extreme degree, we decided that the FVC is not the organization best suited to meet this existing need.

We also examined the format through which the FVC currently matches new farmers with established ones and began to see this as another alternative. FVC staff members, and Michael overwhelmingly so, have extensive connections in many sectors of agriculture across the nation which they can call upon in order to secure apprenticeships for some of the young veteran farmers who have reached out to them. These rich personal connections that the organization is able to foster between both the farmers and the veterans creates mutually

beneficial relationships that set these young farmers up for successful careers. However, the very personalized nature of these relationships make them difficult to replicate on a larger scale than the program is currently operating on, meaning that due to lack of available resources or timing certain veterans or farms that reach out or would like to reach out to the FVC can easily fall through the cracks. For this reason we hope to build upon the strengths of the FVC's current approach and apply them to a more replicable and accessible model.

We would like to present an alternative that bridges the gap between these two approaches, which we have entitled a Mentorship Hub. This concept would incorporate and expand upon the numerous relationships that the FVC maintains, while fostering the creation of new programs, and serving as a national resource accessible to as many people in need as possible.

Successes and Challenges

We believe that many of our challenges in this project have actually led to our success of creating the model for a mentorship hub and program database. As evident in the changes of our problem statement and proposal, we have been adaptable and willing to reevaluate our goals throughout our journey. After the first meeting with our client in October 2015, we originally thought that we wanted to create a mentorship program and envisioned mentor and mentee applications, compatibility tests and the creation of a general template for mentorships. In brainstorming these ideas, we looked forward to a useful final product. However, after attending the National Stakeholders Conference in November and meeting with Emma Koefoed again, we soon realized that the original plan we had enthusiastically conceptualized was not the best

direction for our project. Rethinking our objectives took a considerable amount of time and many hours of brainstorming and group discussion. Although this challenging obstacle in our project meant we would no longer attempt to create a FVC mentorship program, it resulted in looking at feasibility and the creation of the mentorship hub.

Adapting to change marks our overall challenge and success, but the smaller triumphs and difficulties are really what made this project come together at the end of the 20 weeks. One dispute we faced was our ability to conduct meetings that did not conflict with our team members' schedules and with clients. As a group of seven students, many of us with part time jobs, internships, and various commitments, we often found it difficult to find times where we could meet together or with our clients and instructor. In terms of successes, we celebrated in small achievements, anything from having a good conversation with a veteran or networking with a professional at the National Stakeholders Conference to meeting FVC executive director, Michael O'Gorman. These instances strengthen us as a team and ultimately these small victories we were able to produce a comprehensive database of veteran specific farming programs and our proposal of the mentorship hub.

Client Involvement

We have made an effort to involve our clients in our progress as much as possible. We met Emma Koefoed in very early fall to gain an understanding of FVC's needs and to make a decision on what we could do to assist them. We continued correspondence via email and phone calls throughout the process, and met face to face both at the Stakeholder Conference and during our client presentation. We also met with Director Michael O'Gorman on three separate

occasions, once to update him on our progress and to hear his thoughts on our ideas, and twice for assistance in developing our list of currently existing farmer veteran specific mentorship programs around the country

We feel that there is more room for outside help in developing this program further and if a second capstone group picked up where we left off, they could work with our clients to embellish the list and look further into creating programs around the nation where there are none but some are needed.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the current scope of connections and relationships managed by the Farmer Veteran Coalition, the limitations on capacity due to available manpower, and the incredible variability in agriculture by locality, we have chosen to recommend that the Farmer Veteran Coalition does not create their own veteran specific mentorship program. Instead we suggest that the organization serve as a national link between existing organizations, foster the creation of new organizations in areas where there is a need, and transform their existing program from a personal, specific, and case-by-case approach to a more tangible, replicable, and formal process that can be accessed by a greater number of veterans interested in agriculture. For the purposes of this assessment we have named this concept a Mentorship Hub. This transformation would require a shift in focus within the organization from looking to help specific veterans in need to aiming to support and create more specific organizations which can help meet the needs of veterans.

A key component of this Mentorship Hub is strengthening and expanding upon the connections and channels of communications between the Farmer Veteran Coalition and other organizations, as well as between smaller organizations who could benefit from one another. We have created a spreadsheet of all known existing veteran farmer mentorship and incubator programs from both our own research and the compilation of Michael O’Gorman’s connections in an attempt to make this information more accessible to staff members. We recommend that a singular staff member take responsibility for the upkeep of this database, maintaining communications and networking with existing groups nationwide, and connecting individuals who reach out to the Farmer Veteran Coalition to the organizations that can best meet their needs. As we understand it, the Farmer Veteran Coalition has access to funding resources due to their notable national reputation which could be of use to smaller, less established or connected organizations who have a greater understanding of regional needs, policy, regulations than a national organization ever could. Furthermore, we recommend that the organization use its funding capacity to help foster the creation of veteran specific mentorship programs in regions where there are needs that are not currently being met.

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