Education benefits

Matt Self & Kevin M. Hoffman, October 2019

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STEP 1

Situation

STEP 2

Opportunity

STEP 3

Solution

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Research

Education benefits

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Research goals

Education benefits customer journey

How do Veterans and service members plan their education?

This is a wide look across how Veterans & active duty service members learn about education benefits, decide to go to school, and orient themselves to necessary information along the way.

Between transition programs, VA materials, non-official materials, and personal networks what do they use and who do they trust? What works well for them in their process? Why or why not?

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Building on prior efforts

Education benefits customer journey

This research was built upon a foundation of previous work performed by the Veteran Experience Office (VEO) and the Digital Service Veteran's Affairs (DSVA) team.

The work assumes the customer journey as defined by previous VEO research is a foundation for further refinement, and focuses on the "Get Benefits" portion of the information architecture of VA.gov.

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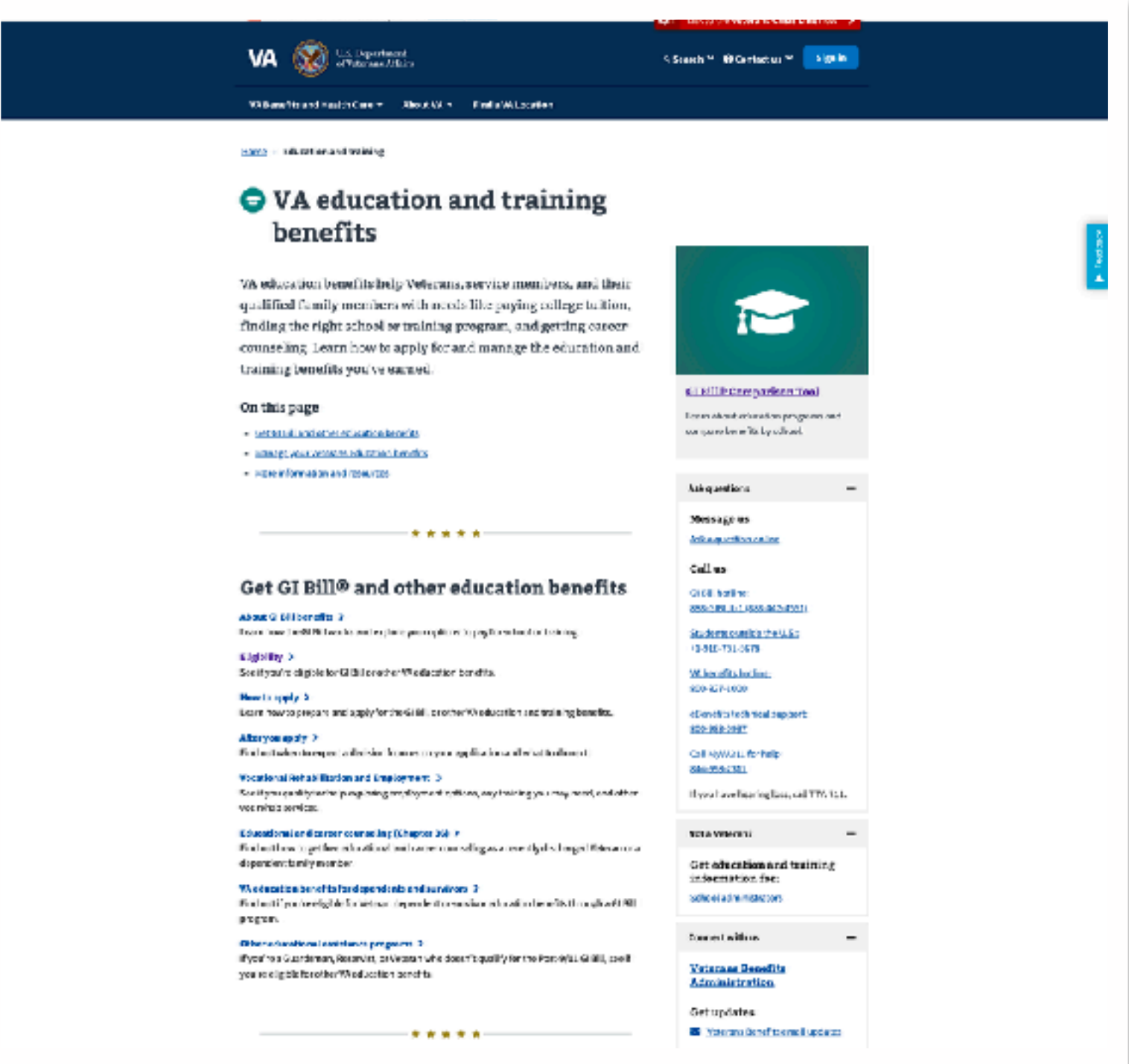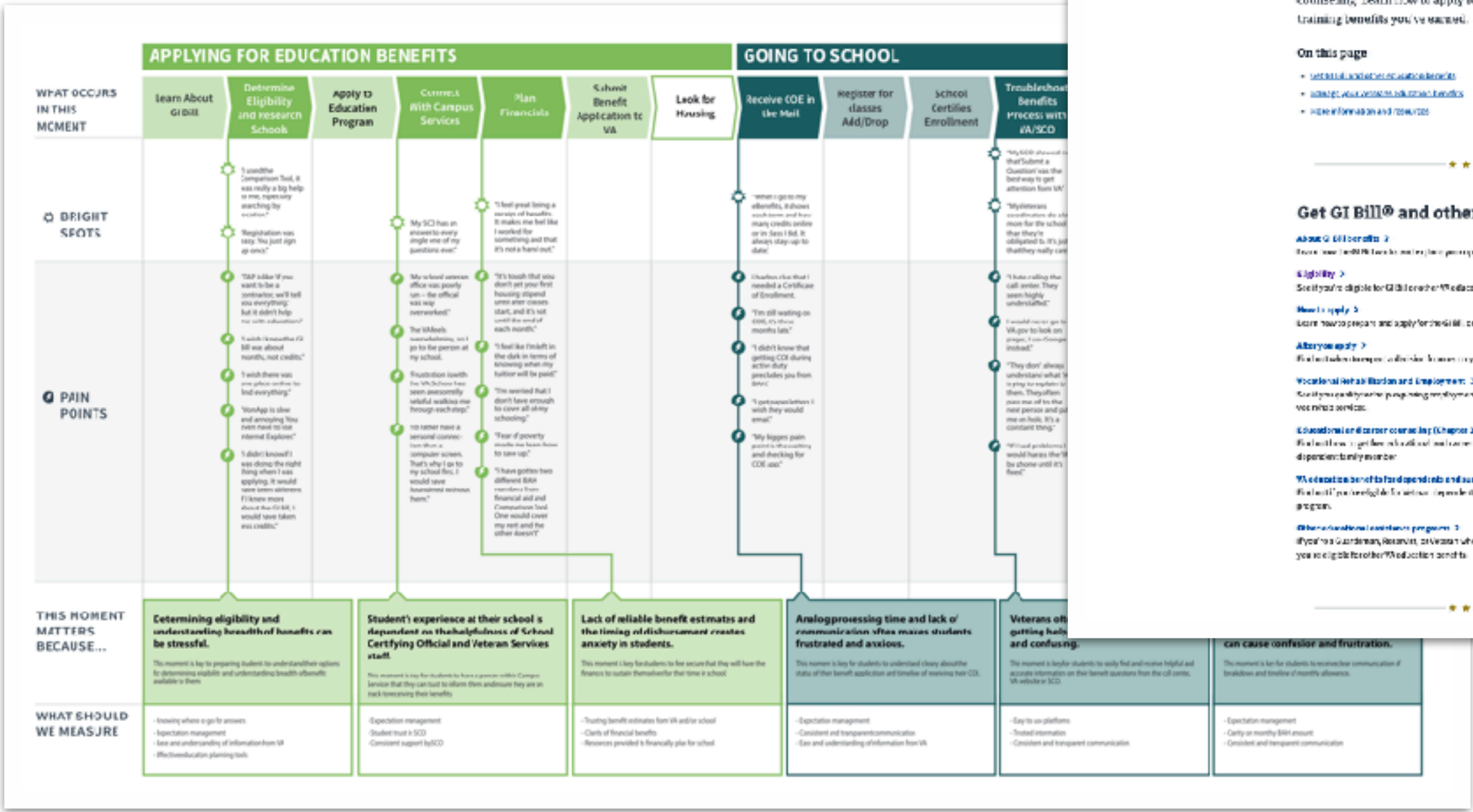
JOURNEY STAGES

Discover benefits

Decide to attend school

Compare schools

Select school

Research benefits

Apply for benefits

Apply to school

How does a Veteran first learn about benefits?

What motivates a Veteran to choose to advance their education?

How do Veterans compare and contrast schools in support of their education goals?

What factors make the difference between a first choice school and other choices?

How do they confirm what benefits they have, and if the benefits will be appropriate for their educational goal?

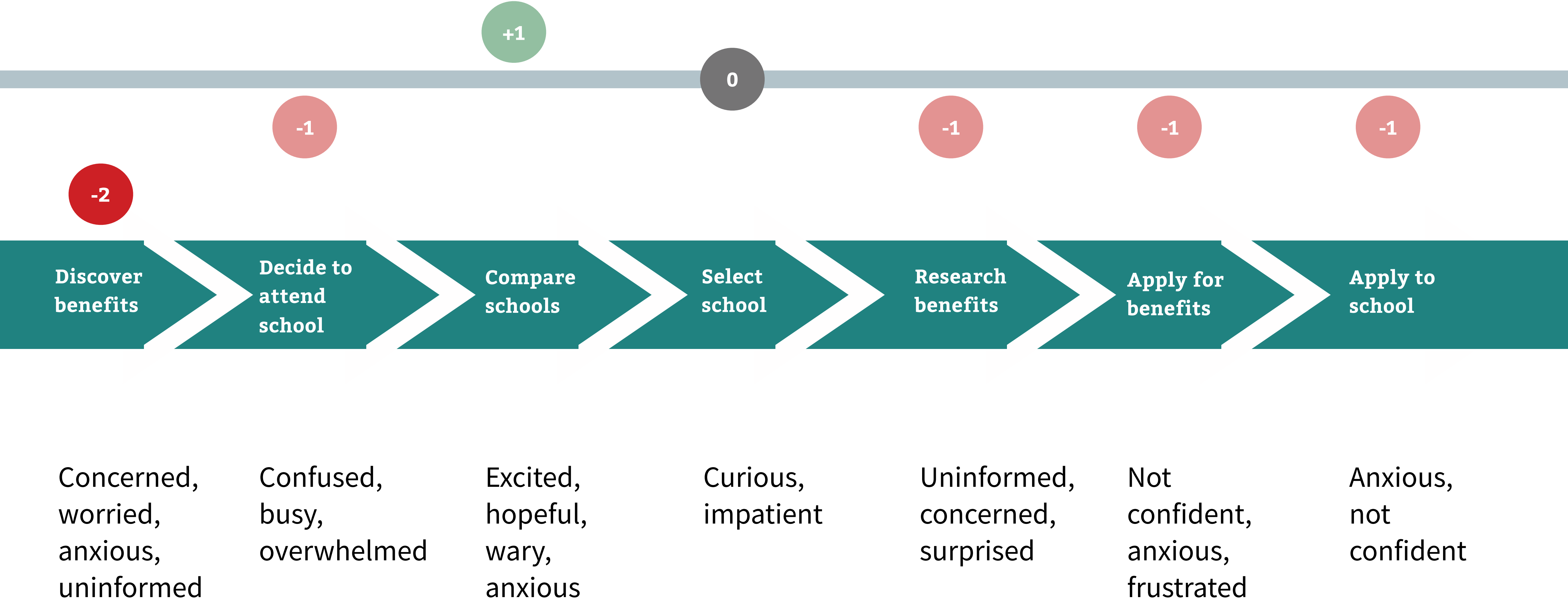What are the steps in applying for benefits, as seen by a customer ?

What are the steps in applying to a school, as seen by the customer?

VETERAN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Discover benefits	Decide to attend school	Compare schools	Select school	Research benefits	Apply for benefits	Apply to school
-2	-1	+1	0	-1	-1	-1
Concerned, worried, anxious, uninformed	Confused, busy, overwhelmed	Excited, hopeful, wary, anxious	Curious, impatient	Uninformed, concerned, surprised	Not confident, anxious, frustrated	Anxious, not confident

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Although the journey is experienced linearly for an individual, it is not always a linear process, and it isn't the same for everyone.

These steps do not always happen in this exact order and aren't necessarily discreet from one another. Although customers see them as different phases, they may bounce between them, repeat steps, and go in a different order than a "standard approach."
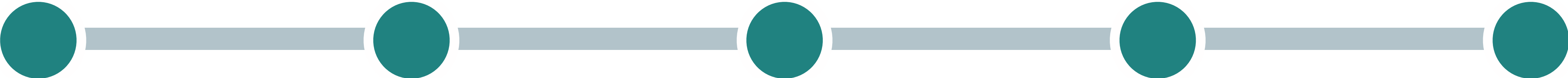
Discover benefits → **Decide to attend school** → **Apply to school** → **Apply for benefits**

An active military member already knows that a desired school is covered.

Discover benefits → **Compare schools** → **Select school** → **Research benefits** → **Select school**

A Veteran discovers his first choice school isn't covered by benefits.

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Compare schools

Select type of degree or certificate

Compare degree/ certificate program specifics between schools

Decide between online, in-person, or both

Discuss options with friends, colleagues, and family

Consider known schools versus unknown schools

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The journey across channels

Education benefits customer journey

Imagine someone helps you through a process...

...you might speak to them in person informally, through text messages or e-mail, through websites and documents you share, in the context of specific events, and more. Our research demonstrated that customers occupy specific channels across this journey, and in each channel, have specific styles of conversation (such as informal or formal), use different technical platforms (e-mail, websites, etc.), and behave in certain ways (such as how they format a search term or phrase).

Veterans and active duty service members receive and provide information that helps them make decisions through this experience by using four channels:

Military/Department of Defense (DOD) Programs

Conversations

Websites

E-mail

Note: each section lists channels from most to least influential and/or impactful.

Compare school options

Websites: search terms

Google search terms
- schools/colleges in [area of study]
- [state name] schools/colleges
- online schools/colleges in [area of study]
- [school/college name]
- [state name] average tuition per semester
- military friendly schools for [area of study]
- [school/college name] [area of study]

> " **I prefer/trust a .org site.**

General websites

- Discussion boards and forums related to an area of study
- TheBestSchools.org (look for military friendly score)
- USNews school ratings (look for military friendly score)
- CollegeCostCompare.com
- LinkedIn.com (find graduates who are Veterans)
- securitydegreehub.com (and other domain specific "link farm" sites)
- Joint Services Transcript system
- VA.gov - clicked on "Check my Post 9/11 GI Bill Benefits" (usability issue)

Educational institution websites

- Look for "military" or "veterans"
- Look for school fact sheet
- Look at course descriptions in [area of study] across schools
- Submit a "Contact Me" or "Request Info" form
- Read Veteran Support Office pages
- Look for Yellow Ribbon information

> " **I would see if there is a reserve unit nearby.**

> " **I would look for a military friendly score.**

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Compare school options

Conversation with…

During service
- Family members who are active duty and/or Veterans

After transition to Veteran status
- Other Veterans
- Family members who are active duty and/or Veterans

> " Other Veterans went there, and say good things about (a specific school).

> " My uncle/ex-wife went to school there.

E-mail

- Contact the school via public e-mail address for military/veterans.
- Fill out a contact form; be contacted via e-mail.

> " I would wait for them to contact me via e-mail. They usually contact me within a few hours.

Military/DOD programs

No Veterans or service members reported comparing school options based on information learned from a military or DOD program.

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Compare school options

What experiments could we run to have greater impact on how Veterans compare school options?

- Add an Apply for Benefits button to the Comparison Tool (CT) school profile page.
- Simplify and restructure the CT school profile page against the highest priority elements as identified by Veterans
  - Tuition
  - Housing allowance
  - Yellow Ribbon programs
  - Veteran support programs/office
  - Veteran graduation rate
- Assess the SEO of CT school profile pages against the most common Google behaviors of Veterans and service members. Redesign (or build in parallel) the profile page to prioritize appropriate content.
- Create custom SEO optimized landing pages for key Veteran comparison search behaviors. Example: list the most attended Veteran schools, or list schools that are receiving the fewest Principles of Excellence complaints.
- Partner with a school ranking site to improve CT data accuracy, surface CT profile content (such as Principles of Excellence complaint rates, benefit rates, etc.)

- Create functionality and editorial reminders for schools to self update with VA review and approval.
- Provide direct links from school sites (Veteran support pages) to the VA CT profile page for that school by giving them embeddable, VA branded code (e.g. a badge) that reads something similar to "Estimate your GI Bill Benefits for [School/College]"
- Create a capability within the comparison tool to select and compare school profiles by variables (e.g. tuition, housing benefit). This functionality currently exists in the form of filtering, but it isn't explicitly user-driven because it doesn't task the user with making a selection of what variables to compare.
- Create a map view for the CT showing schools based on geographic location similar to Columbia University's Veteran Transition Tool (https://ahemap.veterans.columbia.edu/);
- Integrate school and CT data points into the facility locator.
- Purchase (or request a donation of) Google Ads for search combinations that do not favor a particular school but are aligned with search behaviors.
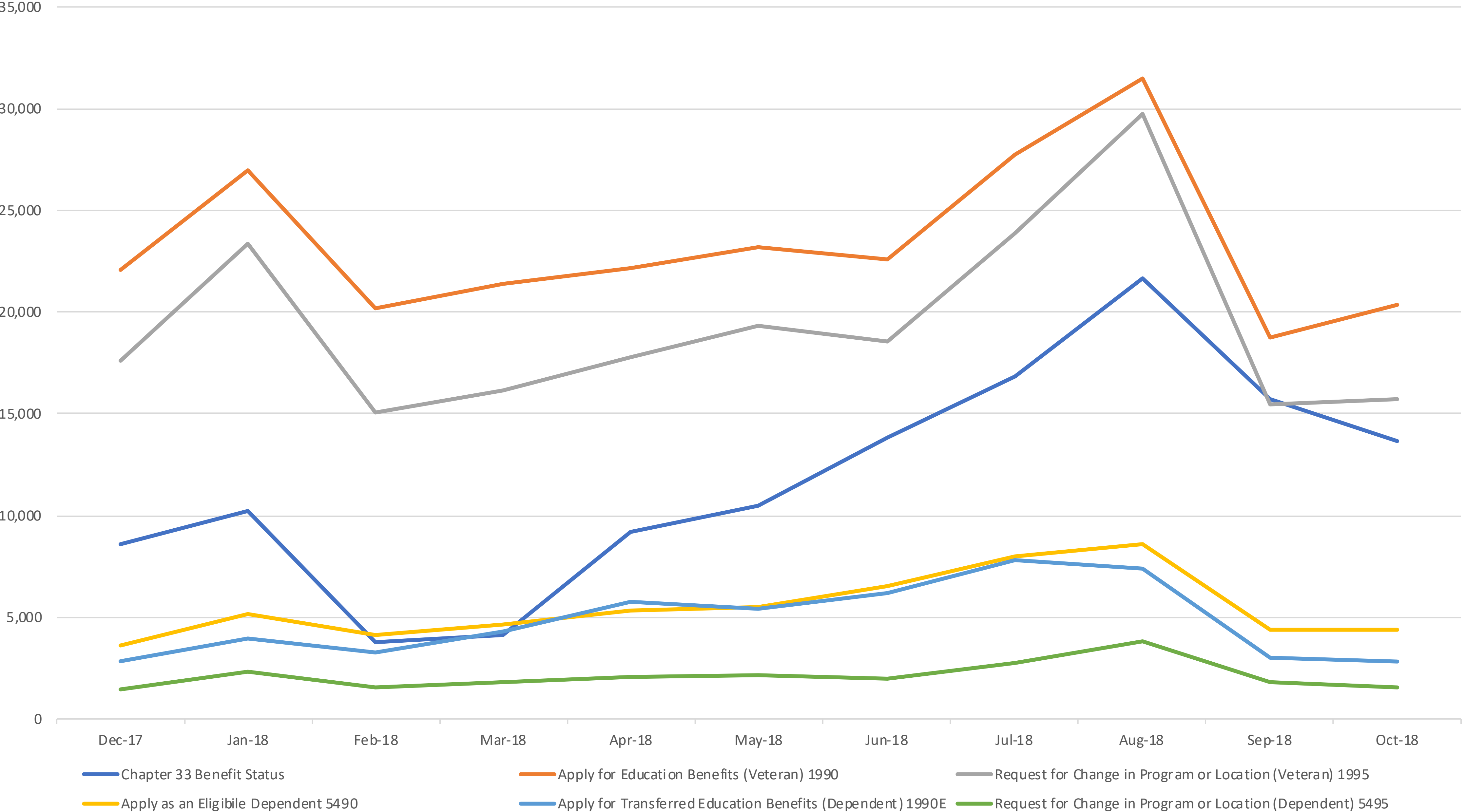
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User stories

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Product metrics

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Vets.gov Application Completion Rates, December 2017 to October 2018

Legend:
- Chapter 33 Benefit Status
- Apply for Education Benefits (Veteran) 1990
- Request for Change in Program or Location (Veteran) 1995
- Apply as an Eligibile Dependent 5490
- Apply for Transferred Education Benefits (Dependent) 1990E
- Request for Change in Program or Location (Dependent) 5495

VA.gov Application Completion Rates, November 2018 to September 2019

Legend:
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- Request for Change in Program or Location (Dependent) 5495
- VET TEC Application 0994
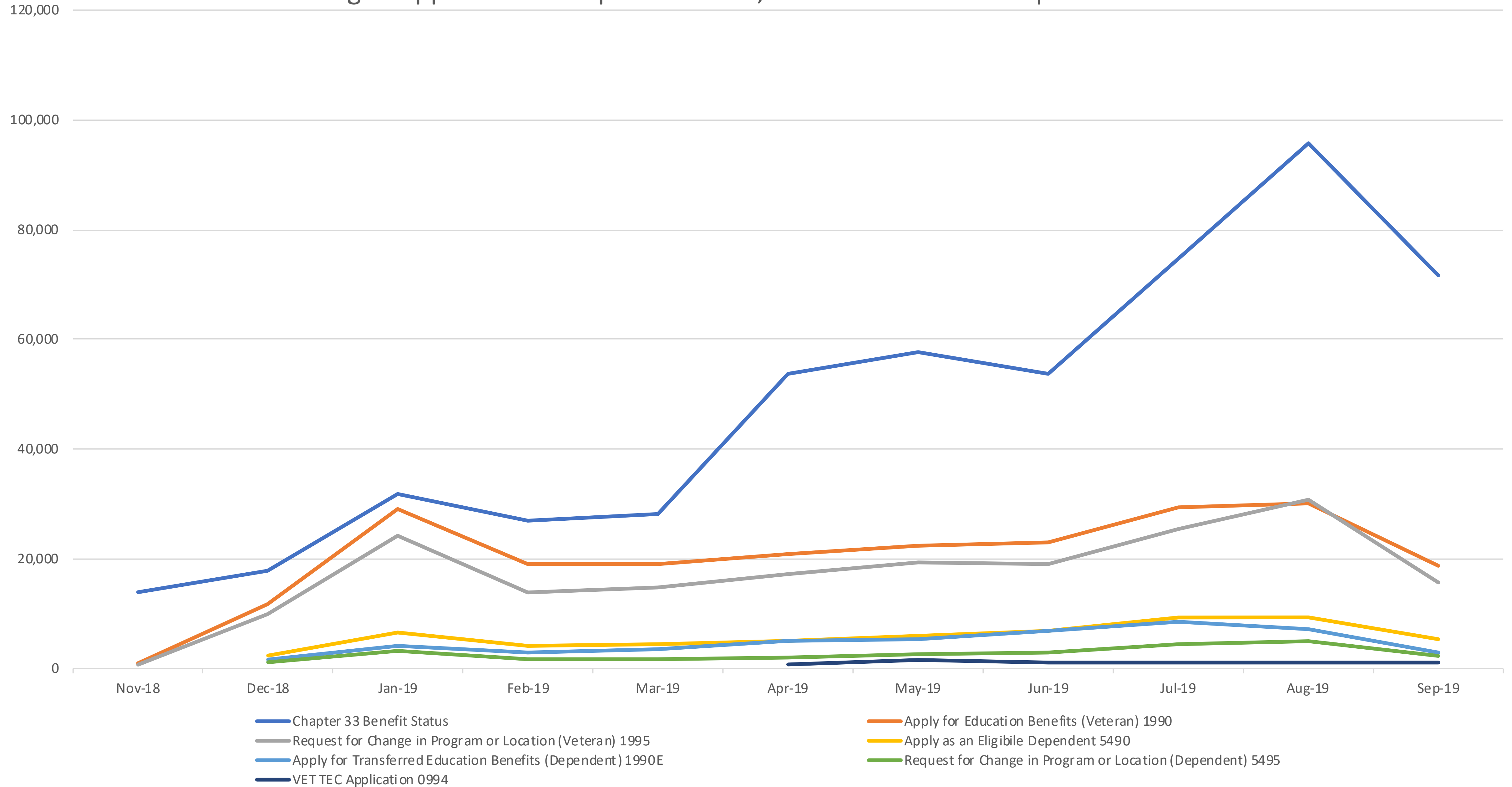
Roadmap workshop

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Product prioritization list

How we discussed relative merits of different product efforts

Are Veterans asking for or using the product or service?

Is the product a priority for the Edu services team?

Is the product a priority for VBA?

Does the product have associated policy mandates? If yes, where are they documented?

Is there an associated deadline with the policy mandate?

Is the success of the product clearly measurable? If yes, define those measurements.

Will the product positively impact Veterans?

Is the work technically doable?

Is the work funded with development budget? Sustainment budget?

Does it have significant dependencies? What are they?

Is the product currently difficult to use?

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Proposed roadmap

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Proposed priorities

Best bets for future impact on the Veteran user experience

| 1990 & Applicant Experience | Certificate of Eligibility Process | GI Bill Statement of Benefits | GI Bill Comparison Tool |

Explore the connection between the 1990 (and possibly 5490) to "Digital COE" workflow; more clearly tie the completed forms to next steps in the Veteran/beneficiary workflow

Create and/or clarify an experience for an "on demand" Certificate of Eligibility (COE)

Establish new workflow with School Certifying Officials to reduce time to confirmation of benefits

Address Veterans Benefits and Transition Act of 2018 (VBTA) compliance

Clarify GIBSB can be integration into Veteran and SCO workflow

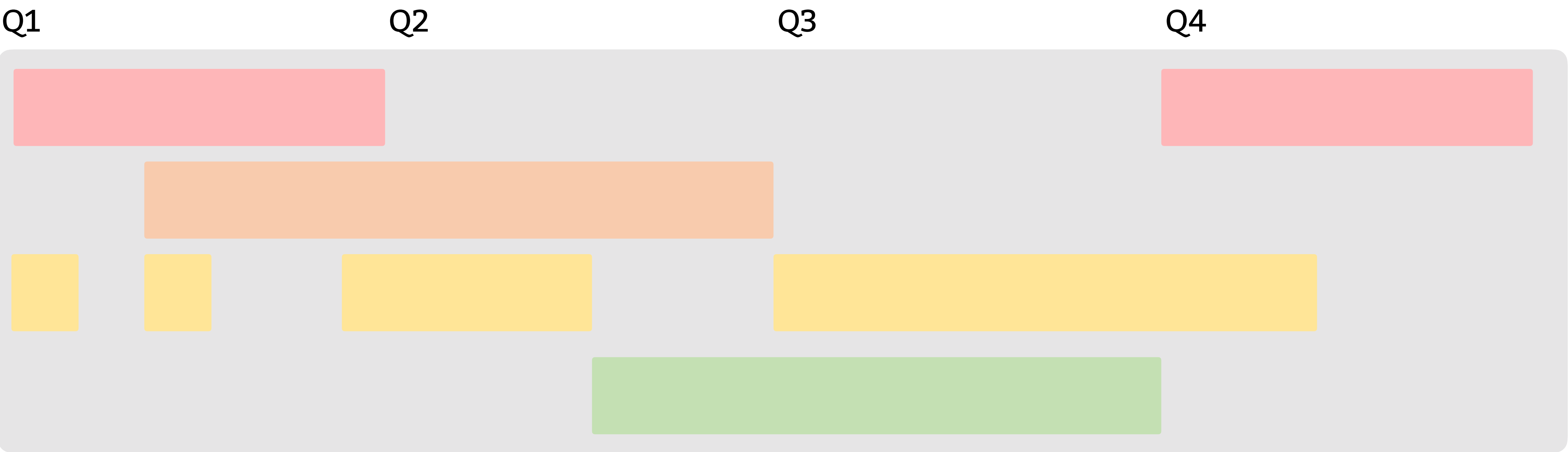Improve availability/ stability

Perform policy assessment of tool data points, better align UX to Veteran priorities, promote increased usage, identify staff pain points

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Proposed 2020 Roadmap

Education benefits products on VA.gov, proposed approach

Q1　　　　　Q2　　　　　Q3　　　　　Q4

1990 & Applicant Experience

Certificate of Eligibility Process

GI Bill Statement of Benefits

GI Bill Comparison Tool

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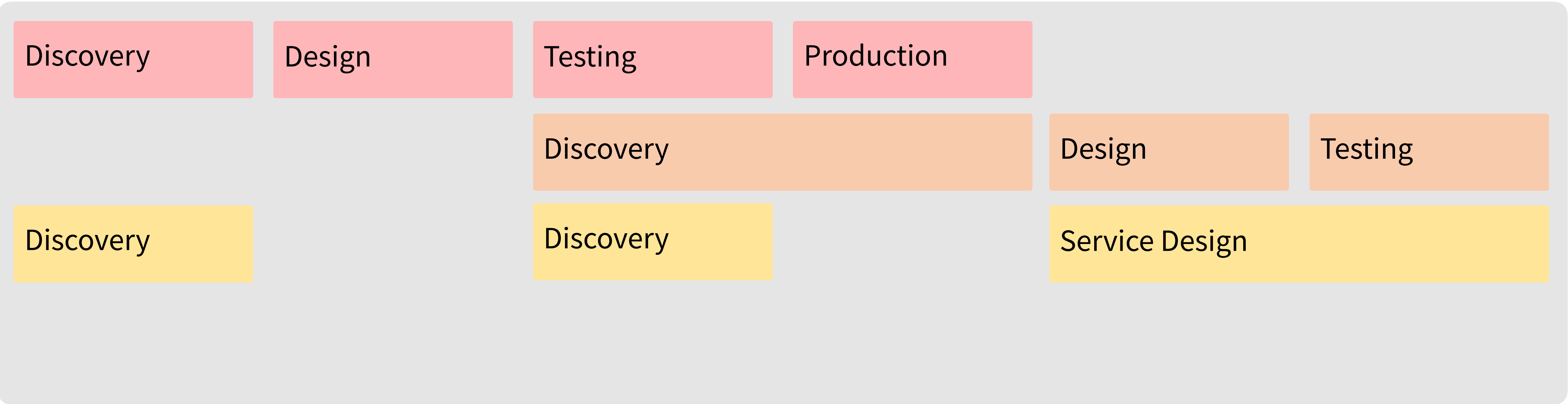
Suggested future efforts

Education benefits customer journey

Connect to VBA Priorities & Efforts

Connect Edu findings and recommendations with larger VBA priorities, look for lift from technical strategy by breaking down what happens inside of processing.

Continue on the Veteran Education Journey

Service design efforts for management of benefits, research with Veterans on how they experience using their benefits and how they finish out their benefits.

Let's Do a Roadshow!

Develop appropriate stories around this work, measures of success, and socialize further throughout Edu services, VBA, and beyond.

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Questions & comments

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Thanks!

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