**STEM Wizard Update Discovery Research Discussion Guide**

**Introduction**

Thanks for joining us today! My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I also have two colleagues on the line, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. They’ll be taking notes to ensure that we capture your feedback accurately.

We are interested in speaking with you today because the VA would like to understand more about how military-connected students learn about educational benefits.

As part of this research, the VA is interested in understanding how students:

* determine their eligibility for educational benefits, and
* modify their existing benefits.

This week, we are talking with military-connected students in sessions like this to gather feedback on the process of applying for a specific educational benefit.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Can you see our screen in the WebEx?

**Recording**

We generally record our sessions, in case we need to confirm that we’ve captured people’s opinions accurately

* Are you comfortable if I record the audio and screen movements as we talk today?
* Great, I’m going to go ahead and start the recording.
* Once it’s on, I’ll ask you if it’s okay one more time, as we like to have your verbal consent.
* [Only if we use our WebEx] There will be a slight pause, then we’ll hear an announcement that the recording has started.

[Start recording] Are you comfortable if I record the audio as we talk today?

Thank you. Let’s start with a few questions about your degree program.

**Educational background**

1. How did you go about applying for educational benefits? (paper form, online, worked with SCO, etc) [A bit beyond our scope, however it may help us understand their comfort level with online forms] I worked with the university veterans department.

T: did they do the paperwork for you?

P1: Yeah. It was paper.

1. What type of degree are you pursuing? I have a degree but I would like to extend my degree and add an educational technology endorsement. I have benefits left.

T: you have benefits left?

P: Yes.

1. How far through the program are you?
2. Approximately how many months or years of educational benefit do you have remaining? I’m working right now with an university to determine that.

T: what was your degree in?

P: Elementary education.

1. [If STEM] Do you have any interest in obtaining a teaching certification after you graduate?

**Set the stage**

[Bring up the Wizard on one of the following pages:

* <https://www.va.gov/education/eligibility/>
* [https://www.va.gov/education/how-to-apply/]](https://www.va.gov/education/how-to-apply/%5D)

[ Participants may be less inclined to wonder aimlessly if we start on the eligibility page.  
Give the user context on the page we'll be reviewing, then focus in on the section of interest. ]

Let's look at the "How do I apply" section of this page.

Take a moment to read the 2 sentences above the green button and read the title of the green button.

P1: I’ve actually been on this recently and the phone number does not work. It just sends you through a terrible cycle of terror…

T: Oh, no.

P: Yeah. It looks like, hey call this number and it answers none of the questions on this page, and you cannot talk to a person on that number. At 8am, anytime Monday through Friday…It does not work. Part of this page is leading you to this number if you’re confused, right, and the number doesn’t work.

T: we’ll make a note of that. We don’t have control of that per se.

Part of this page is leading you to this number, the focus of this page is calling this number. In person, it is very difficult to work with anybody in person from a va regional office. It’s very very difficult. I’m glad I’m a part of this because I want this online thing to work because there are so many people not using their benefits.

T: what’s going on with the in person part of it?

P: You leave a message and they don’t call back, you try to make an appointment. It’s just. I’ve been trying because I want the rest of my benefit. I kind of figured out how to do everything online, but I haven’t received any response. So who do I call to check on a follow through on that? I got no confirmation email. I’m not sure what went on there, but talking about the page… what was your other question?

T: That’s ok. That was all so interesting. I’m sorry that it was such a challenge.

T: the section that we’re going to be looking at is the How to Apply section…

**Questions**

1. What would you expect to happen when you click the green "Find your education benefits form" button?

P: That you’re going to get a form that you’re going to fill out and then they’ll respond and let you know how much benefits you have.

T: ok. let’s go ahead and click that green area and see what happens. I’ll let you do that.

P: I’m trying to click it and it’s not…I’m just not being able to click [she was having issues with mouse control] Go ahead and click that for me.

T: I’m interested in your thoughts here. Kind of talk through what you’re reading, what you think each of these options would be.

P: I’m applying for a new benefit would mean… updating my current education benefit, applying to extend my benefit. I would think updating, I’m currently in school, I want to continue my benefit and I need to update. I would think apply for a new benefit would mean I want to start using my benefit. I would think applying to extend my benefit would be I’m already using my benefits and I need more benefits to continue my education.

T: The last one you were just talking about, you want to extend and need more…Have you heard of the stem scholarship before?

P: No.

T: just off the top of your head, what od you think that would be?

P: I would think that if I’m going into a stem career, I could keep using my benefits to add to my endorsement or add to my education. But I’m wondering, here’s the thing. I’m Montgomery GI Bill. Does it apply to the Montgomery and post 9/11? There’s different levels of the gi bill and I’m wondering if it would apply to me.

T: excellent. That’s a great question. What else do you wonder about that?

P: If I graduated, could I still use it? I would like some background about the edith nourse rogers stem scholarship.

T: how would you like to see that background?

P1: Maybe like, edith nourse rogers stem scholarship “at” link. Maybe it could lead to a general overview of the stem scholarship. Maybe there could be a hot link? What is a new benefit? Does that mean I’m new to college or I’m just recently using my benefit? Current education benefits…why would you want to update it? Why do I have to come on here to update my current education benefit if I’m already using my benefit and shouldn’t it be in a different section? That’s what I’m thinking. If I’m updating my current benefit, I should already be in the system and I should have my va rep and they should be helping me through that that. What incidences would I ever need to update it if I’m already in college using my benefit? I say that because in the past, I’ve had my va benefits canceled without me knowing it and my university told the va that I wasn’t in school when I was so I’ve I had a really bad situation with that. So updating my current benefits, how often do they need to do that, and why isn’t that separate from applying to a new benefit or applying to extend your benefits? When you’re applying to extend a benefit, I’m thinking you might not have been using them. Maybe you dropped out of school for a while because you ran out of money and now you can extend it so it’s kind of a new thing. So I’m wondering, why updating would be with applying for new. Those are two totally different tasks.

T: you’re doing such a great job of talking out loud and explaining your thought process.

P: I was hoping it wasn’t so confusing.

T: no, that’s fabulous. That’s exactly the information we need to know for what to put on the page.

T: going back to the last one, we’re focusing on the most today, applying to extend my benefits. You mentioned you’d like to know which bill, post 9/11 or Montgomery.

P: Here’s another question I had. If I graduated, could I still extend it and use it for additional education or is that done? There’s a lot of people too that get a degree that are like, oops, wrong career for me, I want to go back to school, could I still use these benefits, especially in stem? A lot of people are reassessing their lives and realizing that stem is the direction they should have went. What classes could I take that could make my current degree stem focused? Sometimes if you have the undergraduate done, it would be easy to switch to a stem situation.

T: what sorts of degree programs do you think would qualify for the stem scholarship?

P: I would think science, technology, engineering and math, but engineering and math could go in many different directions like if you’re an educator in those. It’s an educational degree but you’re still teaching stem. I would think that would qualify. Possibly vocational.

T: talk to me about that.

P: There’s a large push for technical education. I would think if you’re going to extend into the stem area, it could be anything technical, automotive, robotic. There’s even [?] people could get. Possibly, you could apply this not just to a college, you could also apply it to a technical school or a certification. I’m hoping that’s what it’s for.

T: that’s great. Fabulous. Any other thoughts?

1. Feel free to click the button. What are your thoughts on this question?
2. What would you expect to happen if you clicked each of the 3 radio buttons?

a. Let's explore the radio button options… Could you talk me through what you think “Apply for new benefit” means?

b. What about “Update my current benefits”?

c. What does “Applying to extend my benefit using the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship” mean to you?  
[We'll use this question to determine if they’re familiar with “STEM” as an acronym… If they don’t mention “STEM – for science, technology, engineering & math”, ask “What fields of study do you think the scholarship might be focused on?”]

T: anything else related to applying to extend my benefit?

P: “Extend my benefit”, it’s just interesting that that’s there. I love the opportunities in that. That invites me to want to know more. If edith nourse rogers stem scholarship could be highlighted and there could be more detail to that.

T: For updating my benefits, the idea there is that people could be changing schools.

P: Ohhh.

T: [she talked to her about what happens when you click apply] [15:07] I want to show you one other page because we have a lot of time left. This is a page that is a part of the actual form itself. When you click on any of the buttons, you get to go to a form. The second page happens to be when you’re applying for a stem scholarship.

P: It says page 3 of 6. I was wondering if I apply for the stem scholarship, would it disregard what’s left in my first gi bill? I was hesitant about are you applying for the stem scholarship? Now I’m wondering what my benefits are? What happened with that? How much of my gi bill do I have left? What do I qualify for after school to get a stem certificate? I’m still curious about the stem scholarship, but I don’t think I can do that right now while I’m applying for my main benefit. What if I get disqualified for my main benefit if I didn’t qualify for the stem scholarship?

T: so you want to finish off your main benefit first?

P: Sure. I would be very hesitant to click if I’m applying for a scholarship. One, I like that there’s a dropdown. What is it. But two, right now, I just want to get my main benefit and I want to know what’s left of my main benefit. I’m afraid If I click yes, and there’s a red required that looks like uh oh, this is a required question, this is really important, what if me applying for this stem scholarship and I don’t qualify for it, messes up all of my other my paperwork?

T: I will say that there’s a separate process for understanding how many benefits are left and I’m not up to speed on what that is, but this section is allowing people to apply for the first time. There’s probably another form.

P: You can’t do the benefit and apply to extend the benefit at the same time, right? You can only do one.

T: That’s a good question. It certainly looks like that.

P: I think so. Dealing with the va in the past, I want to keep things as simple as possible.

T: There are other ways of understanding how much of your benefit you have left. I don’t know them off the top of my head

P: Well, don’t call the phone number!... Another thing is getting a veteran’s person to talk to at the colleges is very difficult. I’m very excited about the online options. I really think it will help veterans access their benefits better.

T: what do you think would happen if this area opened?

P: I would think it would drop down and explain it. [T expanded helper link] Wow, 30,000 dollars, oh, but it’s post 9/11 so Montgomery gi bill people cannot apply. “Veterans and fry scholars…” does that mean all veterans including montgomery gi people or is it only post 9/11?

T: I do believe it’s just 9/11. I do believe it’s an extension of the 9/11 bill, but that’s a good clarification.

P: Since it says veterans, I would probably just try to apply for it anyway.

T: ok, that’s good to know.

P: So these are people that fought in the Iraqi war and were war veterans, just because they didn’t serve in the military after 9/11, they don’t get all these additional benefits? Is that true? It just seems so wrong. You could join the military and do basically nothing, but we have war veterans that don’t get the benefit?

T: I see what you’re saying.

P: I don’t know. Maybe they don’t want to go back to school.

T: I think that’s all the questions I have. Do you have any other thoughts on this little section here that you’d like to share?

P: It’s a piece of information I would have liked to see sooner because I’m like, whoa, that’s what it is. I love that piece of information, and I like that there’s a link to learn more about the stem scholarship. Can you click on that libnk and see where it takes you? [T clicks and opens stem page] That’s really nice. That’s fabulous.

P1: This is a great opportunity for our veterans. This is excellent. I have a question, anybody after 9/11, even today, like if theyr’e serving right now, they qualify for this? So if they go into the military right now, they serve a few years, they get their gi bill, I wonder if this is like a program that will be forever. 30,000 is a lot. That’s more than the Montgomery gi bill altogether. Us Montgomery gi bill people had to pay for our gi bill. People could join the military just for this benefit.

T: I wish I had more answers to more of your questions.

T: I’ll give our two other colleagues a chance to ask questions.

A: Thanks so much for joining us today…As you were looking at this how do I apply and looking to extend your benefit for your stem scholarship. How much research would you do as you were deciding to go forward?

P1: Like where would I go? I really wanted to talk to someone, like when I mentioned I was calling that phone number. My go to was I’m going to call that number, talk to somebody and they would tell me where I could go online. When you go online, it’s just a time suck, you go to this page and this page. It could just take up your whole day. So I figured I could just call that phone number, they’ll be able to look up my social security number and guide me on where to go…I just kept focusing on that number, and if I click the wrong one, I won’t get the paperwork to fill out. I kept wanting to call that number to get help. If you don’t want people to call the number to get help, make the online portal, like I said, the hot links. On that second page, that portal, that really answered the questions that I had. I did use some of my benefit, so is that considered current that I used it? I was really confused about that. And then seeing as I had used some of my benefit, does that mean I’m updating the benefit or am I applying for a brand new benefit? Does that mean I’m going to a brand new school? See why there’s so many questions why I wanted to call?

A: Yeah.

P: I don’t want to click the wrong thing that would disqualify me. I’m very hesitant.

A: is there anything that would make you feel like you might be disqualified if you clicked the wrong thing?

P: under find your education benefit form, I have to click one of the 3. I’m thinking if I check one, it’s going to take me to the correct form, right? What if, the thing that’s making me think it would disqualify me is I don’t know which one I’m actually doing because I’m a continuing student. I’ve already started using my benefits. I think you’ll find that with a lot of veterans you’ll start something and then you didn’t quite finish it because we all usually have money problems. It’s hard to go to school when you get out of the military and you’re trying to support your apartment, and eat. It’s very difficult to get started. So if I started my benefit, am I applying for a new benefit because I’m going to a new school or I’m a new student a new program or hey! This stem scholarship looks awesome! I’m really hoping I qualify for this. I want to click that one, too. I know I’m an mgi bill person and I know I wouldn’t qualify for that. At least I’d have these two [first two options].

A: that is helpful…

1. What, if anything, have you heard about the STEM Scholarship?

a. [If they've heard of it] Where did hear that?

b. [If they haven’t heard of the STEM Scholarship] What do you think the STEM scholarship might be?

1. What are your thoughts on who might be eligible for the STEM scholarship?
2. Given the information you have now, how likely would you be to apply for the STEM scholarship?(Consider probing around their thought process for applying or not when they’re not sure if they’d be eligible.)
3. If you wanted to learn more about the STEM scholarship and who might be eligible for it, how would you go about doing that? (allow them to explore the site, if relevant)
4. If you were actually applying for education benefits, what additional information would help you know which option you’d want to choose here?
5. [If on the Eligibility page] What would you expect to happen if you clicked the "Learn more about how to apply for educational benefits" link?

Looks like we have 5-10 minutes left, so I want to pause and give my colleagues on the phone an opportunity to ask any questions they may have.

[Additional questions from any observers on the phone]

Do you have any questions for us?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. We very much appreciate your willingness to be part of our process. The insights you shared are very valuable and will help us ensure that future students have all of the information they need to take full advantage of VA educational benefits.

NOTES: Clarify reason why we chose to make stem question available to all gi bill recipients in the form instead of just to 9/11 and fry scholars.