VA | U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Rogers STEM Scholarship

VA Form 22-10203

Research Readout

July 23, 2020

Background & Goals

Background

During the initial implementation of the STEM Scholarship application as part of the 22-1995, an issue arose where a high number of ineligible people (>80% of applicants) were applying for the scholarship. This resulted in significant work for the application processors.

When the stand-alone STEM scholarship was designed, the team focused on reducing the number of ineligible submissions. Testing the new application showed the application was still easy for applicants to complete, however additional improvements were identified to further reduce the number of ineligible applicants.

Research goals

- Determine if updated design does a better job of deterring ineligible applicants from applying

  Design changes include:
  - Introducing more ineligibility alerts
  - Presenting an applicant's remaining entitlement to them earlier in the process
  - Revising content to make the application requirements clearer
  - Making content about ineligibility more emphatic
  - Appealing to a sense of community by adding language that explains ineligible applications slow down the review process

Hypotheses to be tested

- Providing alerts earlier in the process and alerts that are more emphatic will help deter ineligible users. They will realize they're ineligible and will want to exit the application.

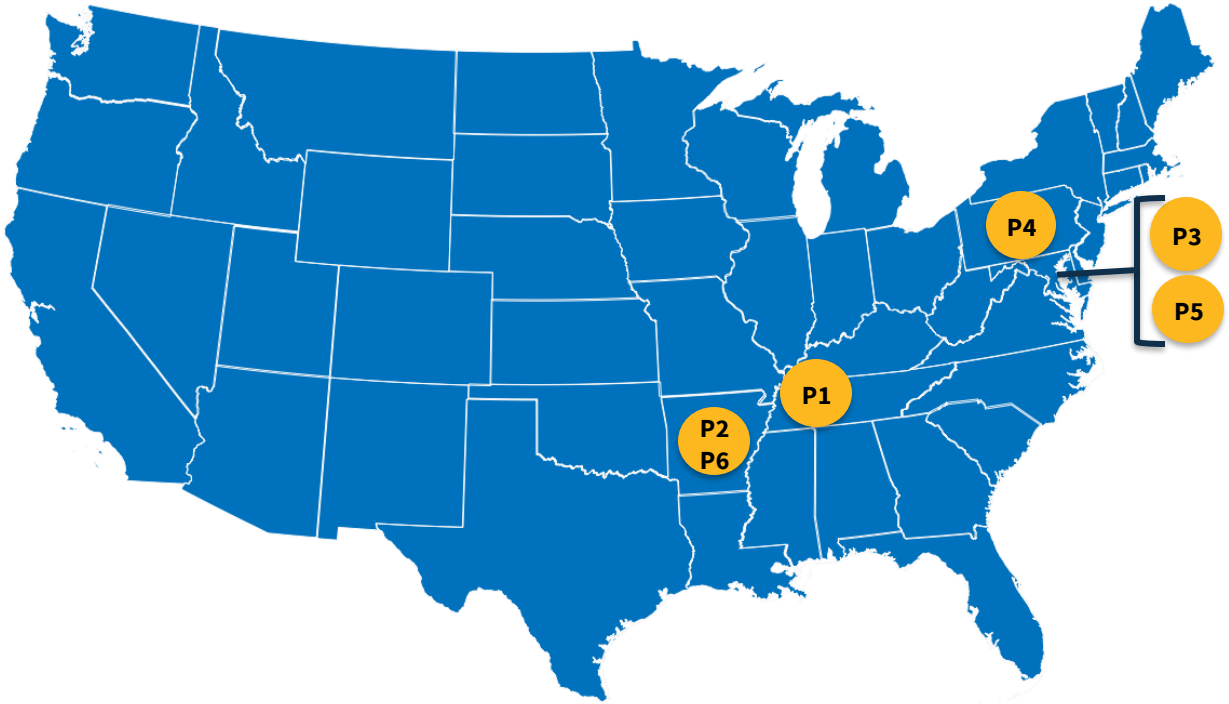
Methodology

Method: Remote usability testing

Reasoning: Researchers need to observe users interact with the form, to see their reaction to alerts and content changes, to ensure that updates made to the design are effective. Conversation with the participants provides rich, qualitative data to better understand their thinking and rationale for taking particular actions within the application.

Methodology

Who we spoke with



2 Women
4 Men

6
Veterans

4
Branch

3
Ethnic Backgrounds

25-54
Age Range

Research questions

Alerts

- How do non-Chapter 33 participants react to the new, benefit-specific alert?
- How do non-STEM participants who aren't eligible react to eligibility alerts?
- Are entitlement warning alerts effective at deterring ineligible, authenticated applicants?
    - From beginning the application
    - From submitting an application when displayed within application

Applying for STEM

- How many participants say they would still apply after learning that they were ineligible for the scholarship? Why?
    - Note: Study was designed so that all participants received an ineligible alert

Research Findings

Key Findings

1. All participants appeared to read requirements, but **most didn't retain them as they moved through the application**

2. While going through the application, **participants had questions on whether a degree qualified as STEM or not**

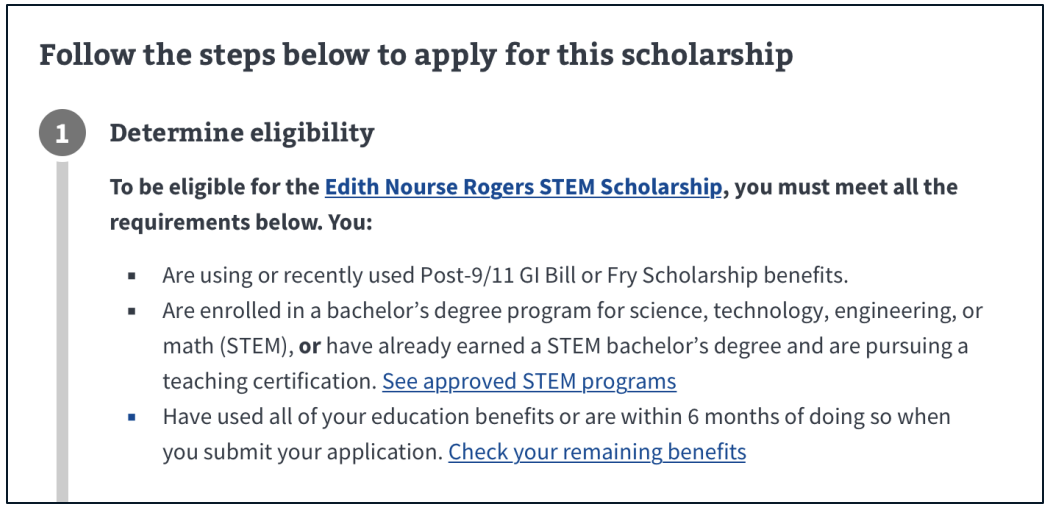
3. Participants noticed and read alerts, **but in some instances, interpreted the content differently than intended**

4. All participants **were able to determine whether they were eligible for the STEM scholarship**

5. Several participants stated they'd **apply for the STEM scholarship regardless of their eligibility**

1. All participants appeared to read requirements, but most didn't retain them as they moved through the application

- 4/6 participants were confused or surprised when ineligibility alerts appeared
- One participant viewed the requirements 3 times and discovered something new every time



Follow the steps below to apply for this scholarship

1 **Determine eligibility**

To be eligible for the Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship, you must meet all the requirements below. You:

- Are using or recently used Post-9/11 GI Bill or Fry Scholarship benefits.
- Are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program for science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM), **or** have already earned a STEM bachelor's degree and are pursuing a teaching certification. See approved STEM programs
- Have used all of your education benefits or are within 6 months of doing so when you submit your application. Check your remaining benefits

"It would be helpful to have one of these bullets say that you have to have less than 6 months…wait…have you used all your benefits or less than 6 months…okay, I missed that part" – P4

2. While going through the application, participants had questions on whether a degree qualified as STEM or not

- Only 2 of 6 participants noticed or opened the STEM approved programs on the application intro page

  “Not really sure how I would figure out if my degree was STEM. I’d probably talk to someone at the VA – someone at the registrar" - P6

- Many participants were unsure if their personal, “real-life” degree would qualify as STEM

  Does your degree qualify as STEM?

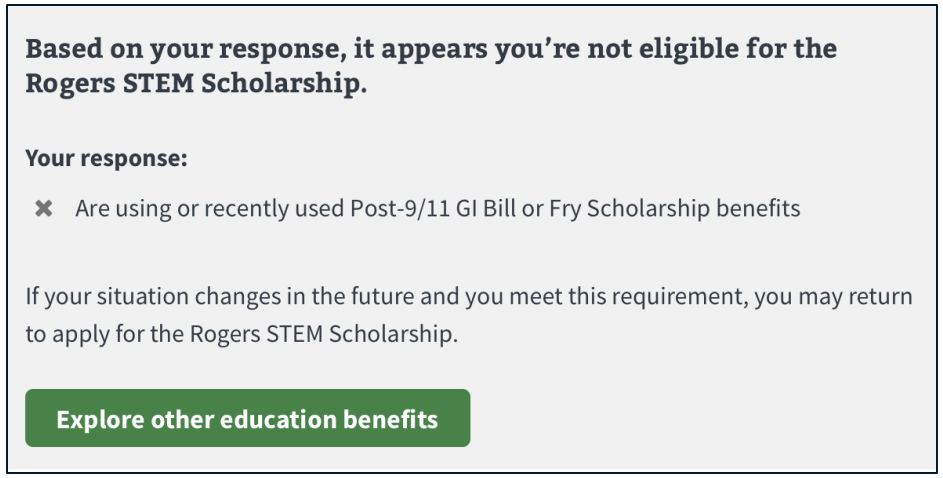
  "It depends on how they define it. Technically, I’m in Behavioral Health so it’s social science. But maybe it would be…I’d have to look into that" - P1

3A. Participants noticed and read alerts, but in some instances, didn't interpret the content as intended

- Thought the alert meant they had inputted the wrong value

  "Right now, I think there's a glitch in the computer system, and it's recording my response wrong." - P1

Before

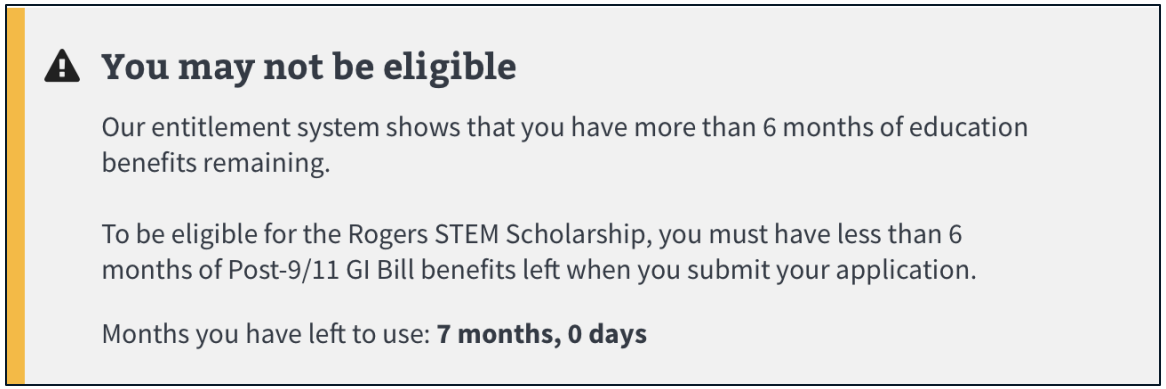


After

3B. Participants noticed and read alerts, but in some instances, didn't interpret the content as intended

- There was confusion on whether they were truly ineligible

  "I mean "You may not be eligible". I'm not sure I should apply or not. It doesn't sound like I meet the requirements, but it sounds like I could still be approved for this" - P5



4. All participants were able to determine whether they were eligible for the STEM Scholarship

- Participants identified what criteria rendered them ineligible and stated what their subsequent response would be

> *“I’m not using that [benefit], so that’s the problem. I’m going to apply anyway. They aren’t meeting their quota and I’m going to apply anyway." - P1*

> *"In my mind, Philosophy will count as a science. I’m reading on the screen that it isn’t a science, but in my mind it is... So I guess I would suggest selecting No [to "Are you enrolled in a STEM program?"] and letting [VA] review." - P3*

> *"After learning I have too much eligibility left, I would close out the application and take note of that so that when I do get down to less than 6 months, I would come back and apply." - P4*

5. Several participants stated they'd apply for the STEM scholarship regardless of their eligibility

- 3/6 participants said they would apply even though they saw an ineligibility alert
- Participants gave a variety of reasons for this:
  - Free money
  - “There’s a chance…”
  - Meeting a quota

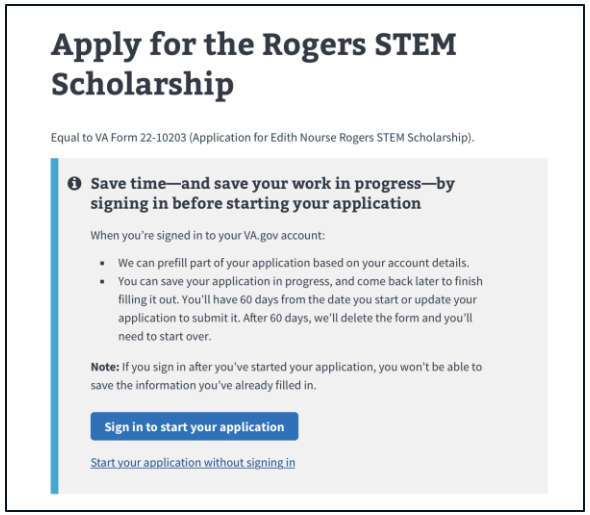
“Free money is worth trying for." - P5

“There’s still a good chance they’re going to apply for it. It’s like fishing. Even if you have to cast 1000 times, there’s still that one chance.” - P1

Additional Insights

- Participants mentioned the resources for help during and after filling out the application should reflect more useful, education-specific contact information
- Participants had questions and concerns about direct deposit
- Participants were able to scroll to the bottom of the intro page to sign in or begin the application without issue

Before



After

Recommendations

Recommendations

- Make scholarship requirements easier for users to scan
- Update help content on application intro and confirmation pages to direct to resources that'll be most helpful to applicants
- Incorporate updated help content on 22-1995, as relevant
- Include the link to the approved STEM programs within the application
- Modify copy on all alerts to remove ambiguity about the applicant's eligibility
- Acknowledge that the Rogers STEM Scholarship application will likely have a significant rejection rate

Enhancements

- Look for ways to minimize the impact of STEM Scholarship direct deposit on other VA payments
- Improve the ease of discovering if degrees are eligible for the STEM Scholarship
- If rejection rates continue to be a problem, consider introducing an obstacle for submitted applications that triggered an alert

Next Steps

Next Steps

Content & Development

Finalize content and begin development efforts

UAT

Prepare for User Acceptance Testing

Thank you