

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Comparison Tool Search and Filter

Research Readout

Background & Goals

Background

GI Bill beneficiaries using the Comparison Tool experience challenges as they search for institutions and lack nuanced data points that could help them find and filter schools and training institutions that are the best fit for their education needs.

If users search for content in the Comparison Tool and use an abbreviation or nickname, or if they misspell an institution, then the results they are searching for will not be returned. Additionally, users are not able to easily identify and filter institutions by certain attributes (i.e. gender-exclusive, religious affiliations).

Research goals

Assess whether enhancements to search and filter help Veterans more easily find and filter schools and training institutions that are the best fit for their education needs.

Understand users' expectations for what they can enter in the search field to get the results they seek.

Determine whether users can successfully use new filters to return valid results on schools with specialized missions: single-gender, Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), religious-affiliated.

Background & Goals

Hypothesis to be tested

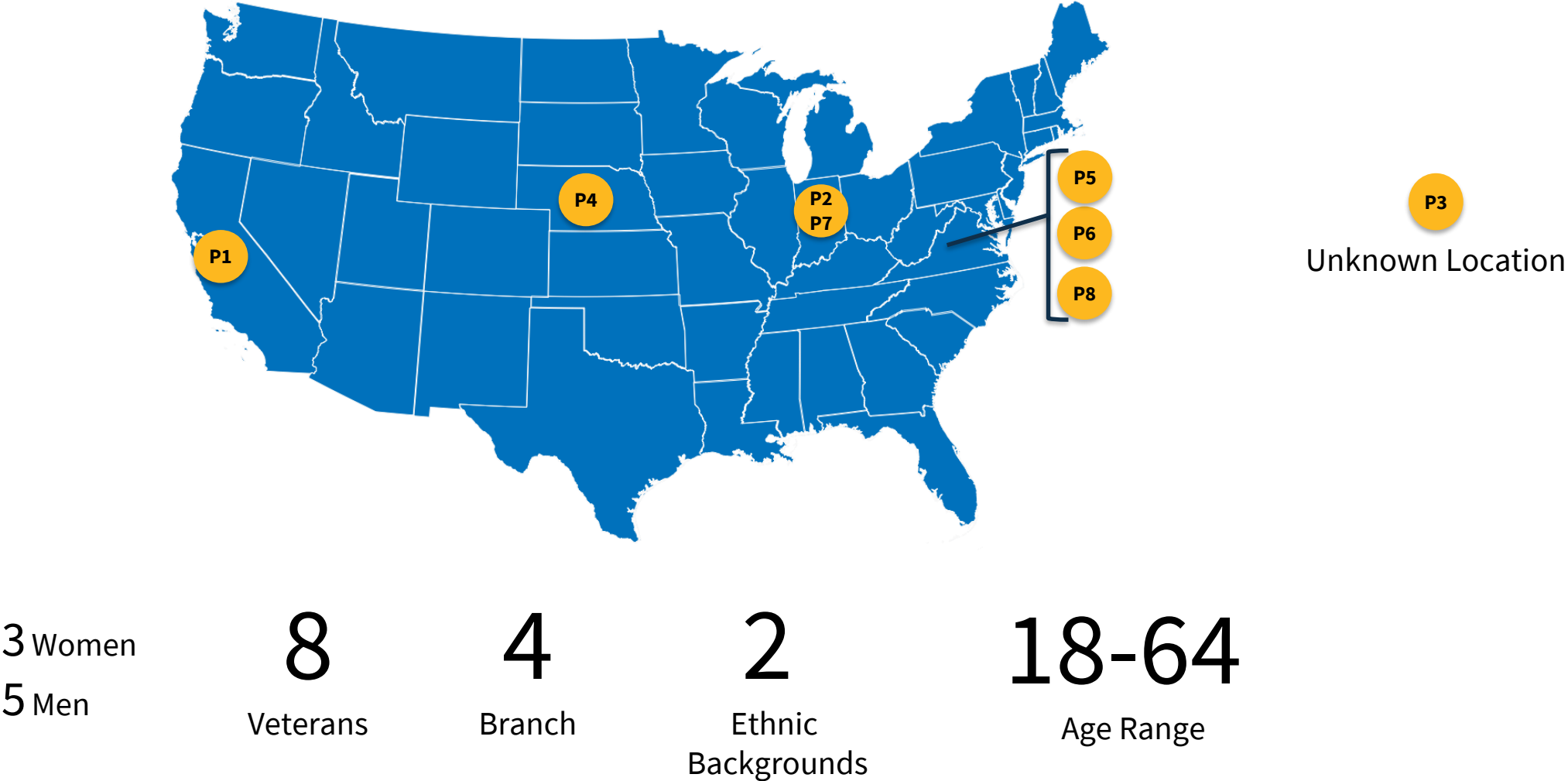
The new search and filtering capabilities will be more effective for users - giving them a better search success rate and enabling them to narrow down results more easily.

Methodology

Method: Remote usability testing on staging

Reasoning: The research team conducted remote usability testing in a staging environment to observe the search habits of users and their interaction with the filters. We also need to be able to ask users what their expectations are for search and filtering - and how those expectations align with what they see on the screen. We need to identify any pain points or UI elements that cause confusion or detract from the user's goals.

Who we spoke with



Research questions

Search:

- Does the search field update make it easier for users to find schools of interest in the GIBCT?
- What types of location-based searching does the user perform (e.g. name of city, ZIP code)?

Filters:

- How do users naturally engage with the filters?
 - Are users interested in using the filters? Which ones?
 - Do users know how to use filters (implement, change, clear)?

Research Findings

Key Findings

1. Participants are **highly successful searching for a particular school by its full name**
2. Presented with a complicated school name, **all participants tried searching the acronym first**
3. Participants **struggled to activate a new search** on Search Results Page
4. Most participants tried to **search a location using a format not supported** by the CT
5. Participants encountered **significant obstacles using filters for new Scorecard data** in the CT
6. Participants had **moderate issues using existing filters effectively** in the CT
7. Participants **think the housing allowance question is a filter**
8. Some filter **labels were not intuitive for users**
9. Some participants had **little or no knowledge of most programs listed within the “Programs” filter**
10. Participant on mobile phone had **unique challenges engaging with the CT**

Research Findings

1. Participants are highly successful searching for a particular school by its full name

Participants often rely on autocomplete to help with spelling and to assist with searching

"I would just type in Georgetown and just click on Georgetown University. The first one is what I wanted to pick."

- P4

"I always just type in the beginning of the school...."

[Typed in Purdue H, revised to Purdue and hit enter]

- P7

Enter a school, location, or employer name

- Georgetown University
- Georgetown University
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL FOR SUMMER AND CONTINUING EDUCATION
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY-CENTER FOR CONTINUING AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION
- GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER

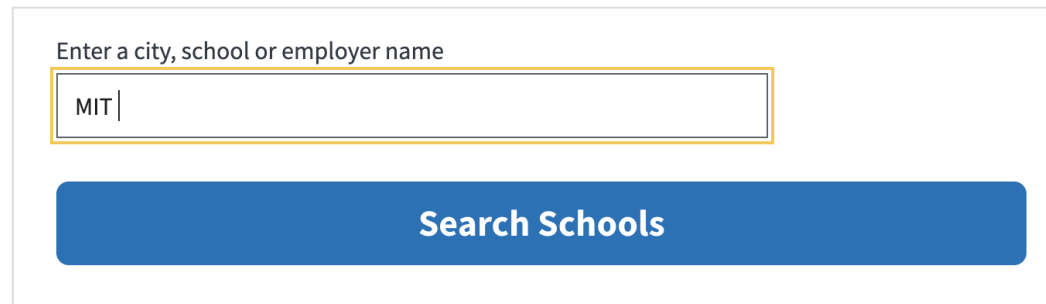
Search

Research Findings

2. Presented with a complicated school name, all participants tried searching the acronym first

Participants are likely to search by acronym (or school nickname) and expect to see their school on the 1st page of results

“In today’s world, when you’re searching something on Google, you usually click on the first or second thing you see. Here, it’s not giving me...I don’t like this site.” -P3



Enter a city, school or employer name

Search Schools

3. Participants struggled to activate a new search on Search Results page

- After their 1st search, many participants returned to the landing page for subsequent searches

"So for me for cleaner options, I'd prefer to go back to the main page" - P5

- 1 participant on iPad particularly struggled to activate new search

[On iPad, participant cleared original search on SRP.

No change in results.

Participant went back to search and typed "schools".

No change in results.

Participants cleared search and typed "massa" and then cleared it.]

- P7

15,297 Search Results

Keywords

City, school, or employer

Institution details

Type of institution

☐ All

☒ Schools only

☐ Employers only (OJT, apprenticeships)

[View](#)

4. Most participants tried to search a location using a format not supported by the CT

- Most participants tried searching by state, a combination of city and state, or borough
- 3 participants showed interest in searching by distance from a location

"It's frustrating because I'm trying to get to schools within drive-able distance to my house and I'm trying to find out how to do that" – P8

- Punctuation sometimes affected or limited the display of results, e.g. Washington D.C. vs Washington DC

[After searching for Washington D.C.:] "Oh, it's actually got Washington state in there [search results]. Let me take the periods out. [Went back to landing page] Gonna take out those periods so I don't get the other side of the coast." – P8

5. Participants encountered significant obstacles using filters for new Scorecard data in the CT

- Participants who tried to use the new filters struggled to find results
 - Filters by themselves would return a low number of results. Pairing them with a user's search almost always brings the result count to 0.

"That didn't go well at all...you would think that if I put HBCU in a search, 13 or so of them would come up" - P8

- Three participants said they weren't interested in the new filters for HBCU, gender, and religion

"I don't care about Women or Men only. I don't care about religious affiliation." - P6

6. Participants had moderate issues using existing filters effectively in the CT

- When modifying a search, participants tended to forget about filters that were already applied
- When they have one search result, participants sometimes expect the result to verify their filter selection

"If I was to click on Yellow Ribbon...[checked Yellow Ribbon]...nothing changes so it says that Yellow Ribbon benefits apply to these schools? What do those filters do?" - P4

- Participants misinterpret how the selection/deselection of filters impacts search results

*"I'm going to start with Yellow Ribbon [deselect]. That didn't change anything. I'm going to change to In-person/online...that didn't change anything. So I'm going to deselect Student Veteran Groups...and it's back. **So it doesn't have any of those things...**" - P6*

7. Participants think the housing allowance question is a filter

- Participants think the housing question will filter their results for in person vs. online options. The question actually changes the housing allowance estimates on school cards and profile pages.

[Selected In person and online:] "...because that gives me multiple options."

-P3

How do you want to take classes? ([Learn more](#))

- ☐ Online only
- ☒ In person only
- ☐ In person and online

8. Some filter labels were not intuitive for users

- Participants weren't sure what selecting "All" for Institution Type would do to their results.

[Clicked "All" under Institution Type:]

"What is this for? What's the difference here?" –P3

- Participants expected different content for "Institution Categories"

"For me, Institution Categories would be what level of education – secondary, undergrad, grad, the professional colleges. Law school. Medical school" –P5

The screenshot shows a user interface for selecting filters. The first section, 'Select an institution type', has three radio button options: 'All' (which is selected), 'Schools only', and 'Employers only (OJT, apprenticeships)'. The second section, 'Institution categories', is a dropdown menu that is currently open, displaying a list of options: 'ALL' (with a checkmark), 'CORRESPONDENCE', 'FLIGHT', 'FOREIGN', 'FOR PROFIT', 'OJT', 'PRIVATE', and 'PUBLIC'. The dropdown menu has a light gray background and a thin border.

9. Some participants had little or no knowledge of most programs listed within the "Programs" filter

- Some participants mentioned they weren't familiar with the majority of programs listed.

"I am a Veteran and I did deploy and I do qualify for a lot of benefits, but I don't know which of those [Veteran programs] apply to me." -P4

- Several participants mentioned they had heard of Yellow Ribbon or expressed some knowledge of STEM.

"The only one I'm really familiar with is Yellow Ribbon. I've heard of STEM." -P8

- 1 participant expressed interest in what the program filters do and in learning about what they are

Programs

- ☐ Student Vet Group
- ☐ Yellow Ribbon
- ☐ Principles of Excellence
- ☐ 8 Keys to Vet Success
- ☐ Rogers STEM Scholarship
- ☐ Priority Enrollment
- ☐ Independent Study

10. Participant on mobile phone had unique challenges engaging with the CT

- The participant testing on mobile used VA.gov site search anticipating it would search schools
"Once I scrolled down, it couldn't be easier. I just couldn't see that I needed to go lower to see military details [search options]" - P1
- Additional resources on the profile page acted as a focal point and derailed user from interacting with the CT
"Additional resources...I guess it's intuitive to people who just scroll...This is really good, the estimated benefits." - P1

Additional Insights: Task Completion

The new search and filter functionality performed as well or better than the original functionality

Task	Average Task Completion Rating for Search/Filter	
	Original	New
Search for specific school	2	2
Find schools in given location	1.18	1.25
Find Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	1.22	1.9
Find public schools in Massachusetts with Yellow Ribbon program	1.25	1.33

Task Completion Legend	
0	Can't do
.5	Can do with facilitator prompts
1	Can do
2	Easily do

Recommendations

Recommendations – Immediate (PI 7)

- **Search**

- Implement a best bet type approach that ensures relevant results for key acronyms are returned on the first page of search results

- **Filters**

- Do not implement “Scorecard” filters on search results page
- Display “Scorecard” labels on school cards on search results page and in the profile page heading to allow users to identify HBCUs, single-gender schools, and schools with religious affiliations

Recommendations – Short Term

- **Search**

- Consider adding a button to the search field to facilitate searching on the Search Results page
- Consider indexing the CT schools in VA.gov site search
- Continue to investigate user search behaviors to determine how to best address location searching

- **Filters**

- Consider renaming the Institution filters (Institution types, Institution categories) so they're easier to understand
- Update the Housing Allowance question so it's clear that it changes housing estimates on school cards, not filters for learning format.

Recommendations – Longer term / Redesign

- Revisit location, display, and function of the Scorecard filter controls within the CT.
- Identify a more intuitive, user-friendly, and accessible filter solution
- Provide information on the programs so users know what the filters are for

Next Steps

Next Steps

1. Make UI refinements listed as Immediate
2. Deploy to Production
3. Define and deploy Google analytics

Appendix
