Comparison Tool Redesign

Executive Summary and Condensed Readout

Booz Allen UX Team

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Executive Summary

The Booz Allen team conducted extensive research with Comparison Tool users and stakeholders to identify their needs and challenges when researching schools to attend.

Research Goal: Understand audiences' unique needs from the Comparison Tool and how the Comparison Tool can help users optimize their VA education benefits.

Findings & Recommendations: The team identified 4 primary themes for findings and recommendations: Search, Explore, Compare, and Data Integrity.

The themes outline the process a user follows when researching schools and provide guidelines for ensuring that information is robust and up-to-date. Recommendations focus on optimizing search functionality, incorporating information and functionality that facilitate school selection, and encouraging prospective students to take the next step in their education journey.

Recent variations in Comparison Tool usage
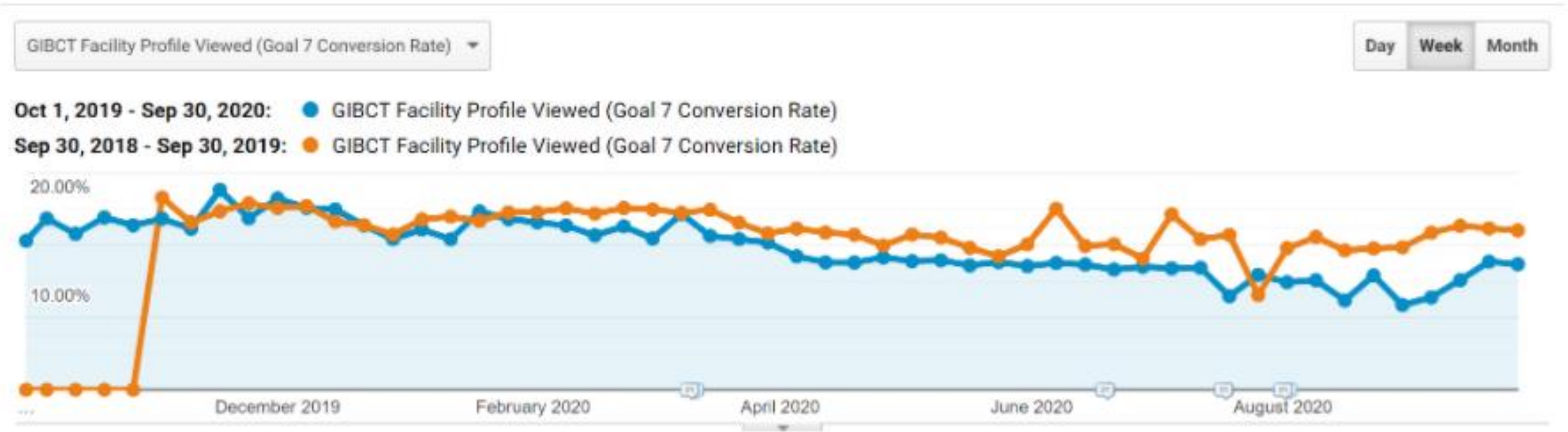
Google analytics tracking began mid-September 2019. This view plots each week for the last 2 federal fiscal years. Note lower engagement with the tool beginning in March 2020 with the onset of COVID-19 .

General traffic patterns
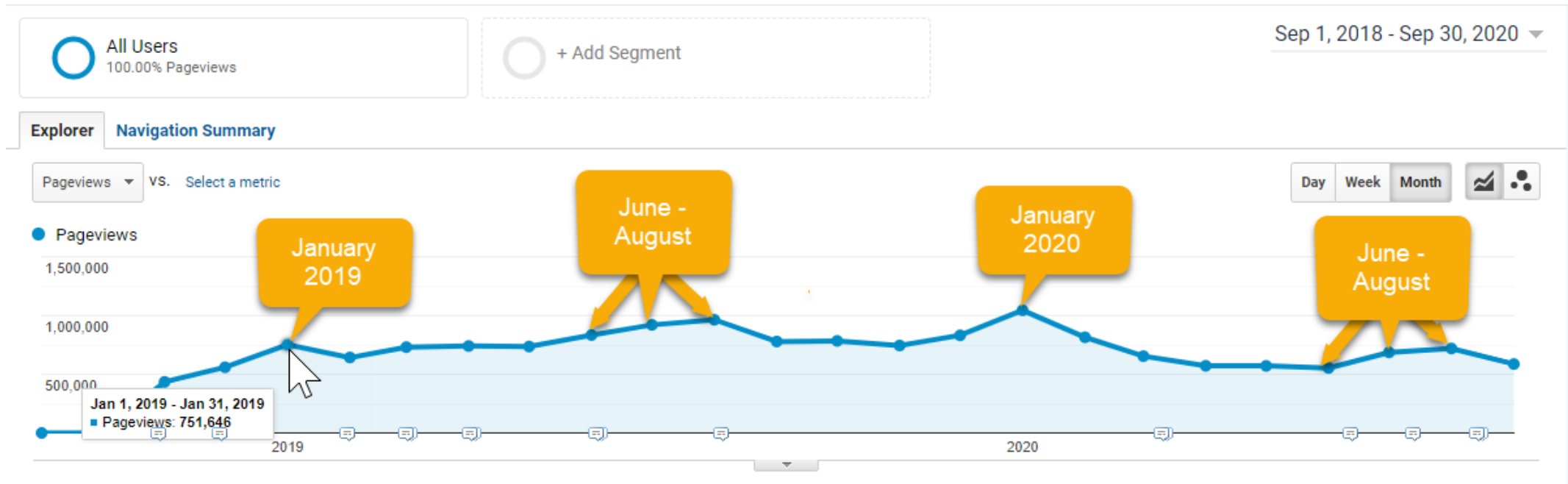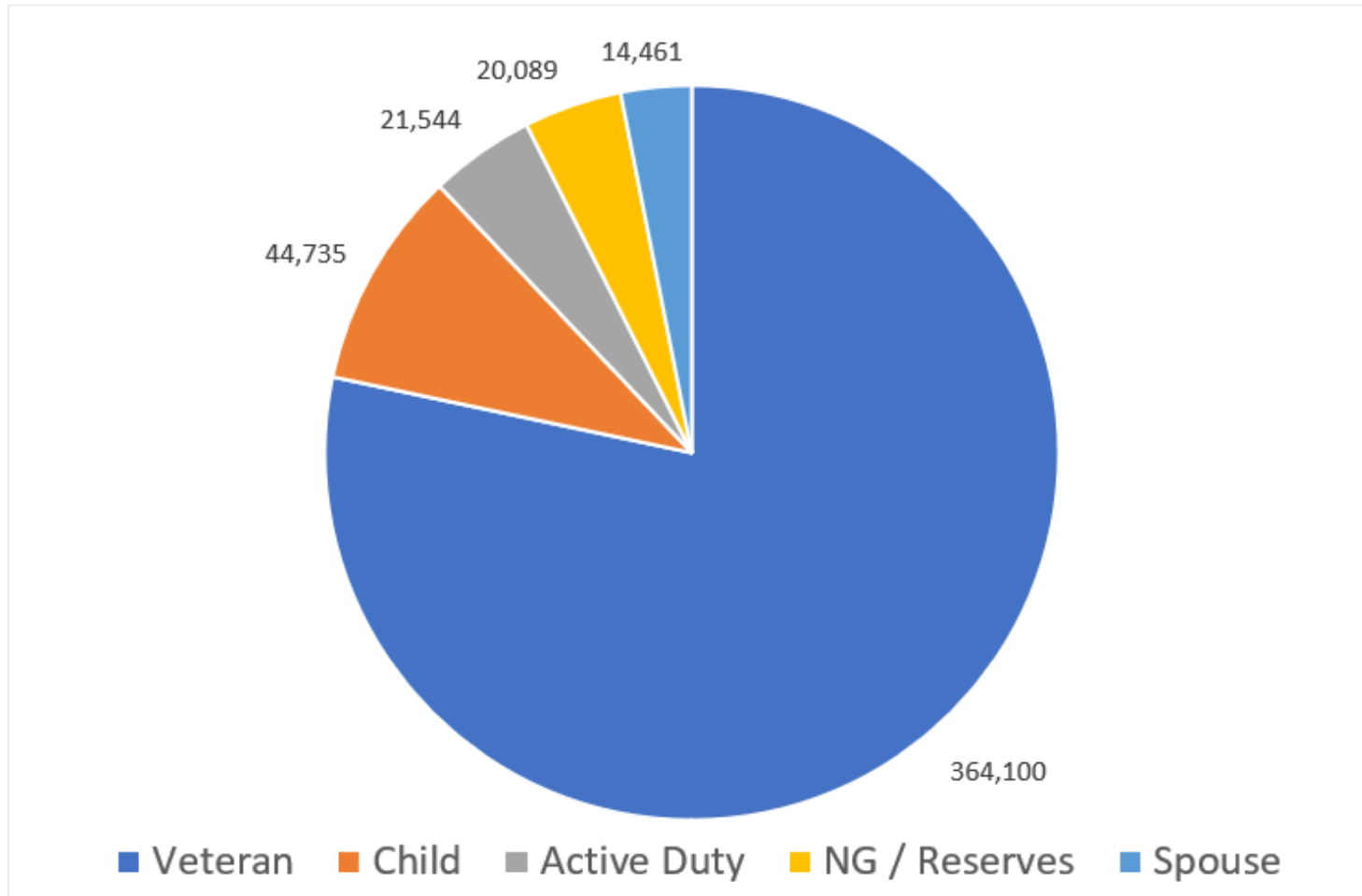

2019: Traffic peaks occurred in January and during summer months.

2020: Similar peaks can be observed in January and during the summer despite lower traffic overall.

Across both years, **Augusts** were the busiest month of all.

Searches June - Sept. 2020, by "military status"

Pie chart "Searches June - Sept. 2020, by military status":
- Veteran: 364,100
- Child: 44,735
- Active Duty: 21,544
- NG / Reserves: 20,089
- Spouse: 14,461

GI Bill® Comparison Tool screenshot:

Home › Education and training › GI Bill® Comparison Tool

GI Bill® Comparison Tool

Learn about education programs and compare benefits by school.

What's your military status?
Veteran
- Veteran
- Active Duty
- National Guard / Reserves
- Spouse
- Child

Cumulative Post-9/11 active-duty service (Learn more)
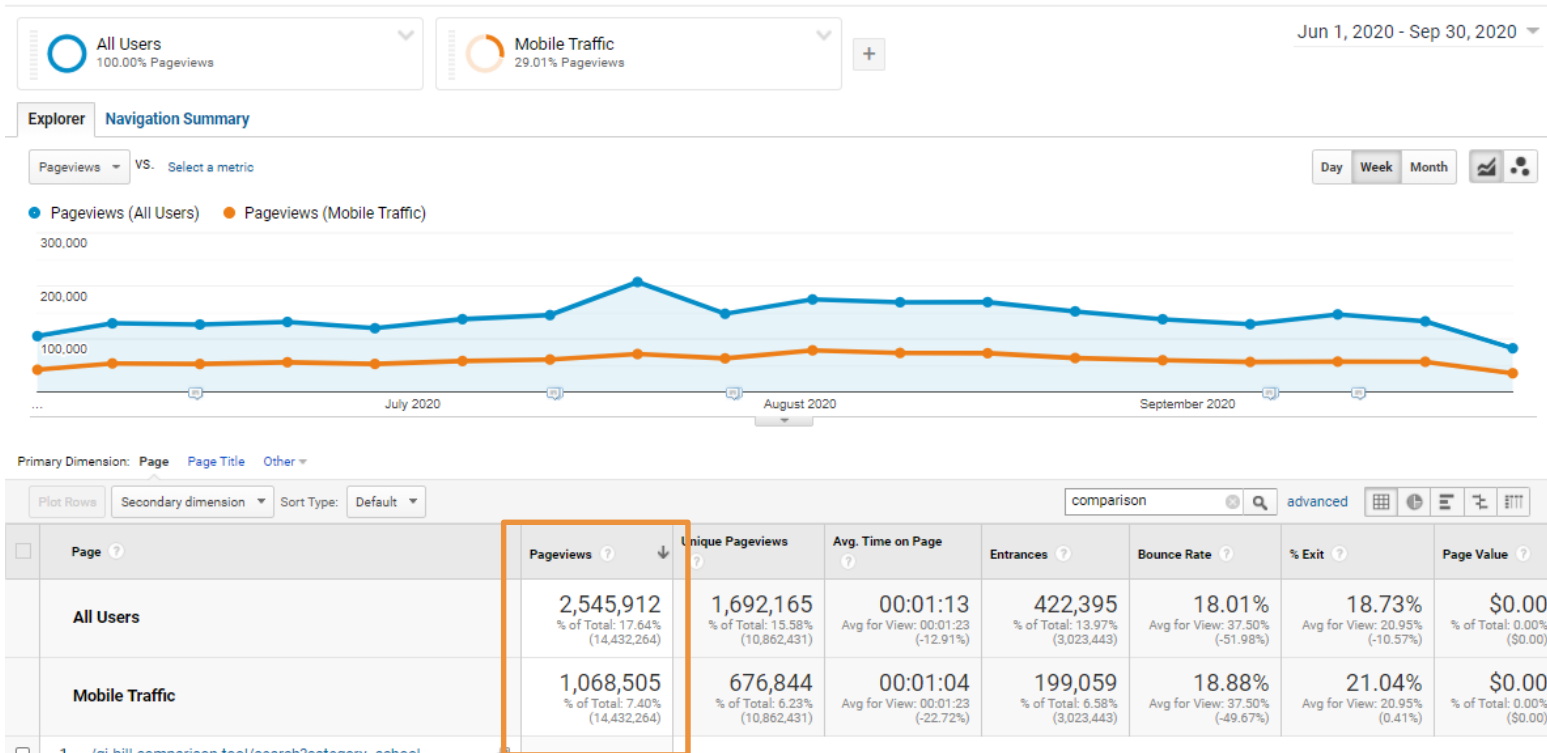36+ months: 100%

Select an institution
- ● Schools
- ○ Employers (On-the-job training [OJT], apprenticeships)
- ○ VET TEC training providers only (Learn more)

Comparison Tool users self-select military status

Mobile traffic

Comparison Tool has significantly higher rates of mobile traffic than the rest of education content on VA.gov.

Mobile traffic for VA.gov / Education is around 29% while nearly 42% of Comparison Tool pageviews are from mobile devices.
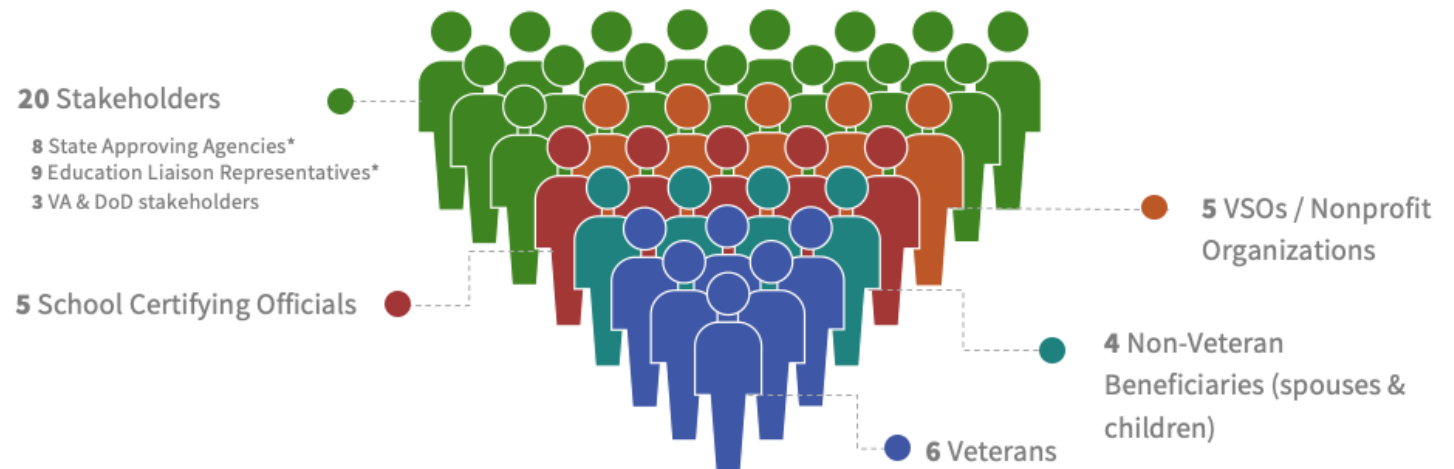
Background, goals and methodology

The VA Education Service team would like a better understanding of the needs and challenges of users and stakeholders of the Comparison Tool. The goal is to fully redesign the Comparison Tool to better meet those needs and optimize the user experience.

To understand user needs and challenges, the research team conducted interviews with an array of GI Bill beneficiaries and Comparison Tool stakeholders.

Primary Audience

Veteran

Secondary Audiences

Beneficiary   VSO   SCO

20 Stakeholders

8 State Approving Agencies*
9 Education Liaison Representatives*
3 VA & DoD stakeholders

5 School Certifying Officials

5 VSOs / Nonprofit Organizations

4 Non-Veteran Beneficiaries (spouses & children)

6 Veterans

*Numbers are approximate

General Themes

Search 🔍

Users initiate the search for a school using a variety of criteria. The Comparison Tool needs to support a wider range of search options so users get results that are useful and usable.

Explore ➤

After discovering an initial set of schools, users dig deeper into the details of the schools to identify any red flags and assess a school's culture and academics.

Compare ⚖

Once users have a good understanding of the schools they're exploring, they compare their options on a more detailed level and seek out information on the potential benefits they'll receive at the school.

Data Integrity 🗄

The Comparison Tool runs on data pulled from many disparate sources. VA must ensure it's providing consistent, high-quality data so prospective students can make good decisions on schools.

Search 🔍

Findings:

- Location is a major factor when users are searching for schools

- Users would like to search by type of degree (e.g. Bachelor's) and major (e.g. Mechanical Engineering)

- When looking for a specific school, users will search by the school's full name, acronym or nickname

Recommendations:

Expand search capabilities, including:

- Location
  - Geolocation
  - State, ZIP code or "City, State" format
  - Radius from a particular city

- Educational Options
  - Type of degree (e.g. Bachelor's)
  - Program/major (e.g. Political Science)
  - Online/in-person options
  - Top schools for specific programs

- Expand name variation search data (e.g., acronyms, nicknames)

Explore

Findings:

- Financial information is a key factor

- Accreditation is important

- Cautionary information and student complaints are important

- Additional historical information, outcomes and rankings help prospective students

- Student life is a point of interest

Recommendations:

- Enhance ability to calculate benefits
  - Better integration of Yellow Ribbon (e.g., amounts, limitations)
  - Make tuition rate policies more evident (e.g., in-state vs out-of-state, foreign schools)
  - Bring clarity to online/in-person housing stipend
  - Emphasizing that financial calculations are estimates

- Incorporate data to help determine success
  - Student outcomes
  - School accreditation, ratings, and rankings
  - Cautionary information
  - Student life

Compare ⚖️

Findings:

- Users need the ability to easily compare schools

- VA has the opportunity to encourage beneficiaries to "aim high" in school choice

- Specific numbers help users make decisions more confidently

- Prospective students have many questions about benefits

Recommendations:

- Offer the ability to perform a side-by-side comparison of schools

- Provide recommendations for higher performing schools

- Showing housing rates for specific campuses aids users in making choices of where to live

- Provide basic, easy-to-digest information on benefits
  - What to expect
  - How to get started
  - Helper content to address areas of confusion

Data Integrity 🗄

Findings:

- Users expect to see up-to-date school contact information; names of SCOs are insufficient

- Cautionary information should be clear, detailed and up-to-date

- Non-Veteran beneficiaries struggle with military jargon in the Comparison Tool

Recommendations:

- Incorporate school contact information

- Provide greater detail on Student Complaints and caution flags

- Present military and higher education information in plain language

- Provide public access to Comparison Tool dataset to aid in reporting to Congress and other entities

- Investigate options to automate data upload (based on prior conversations with stakeholders)