

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Comparison Tool Redesign

Discovery Research

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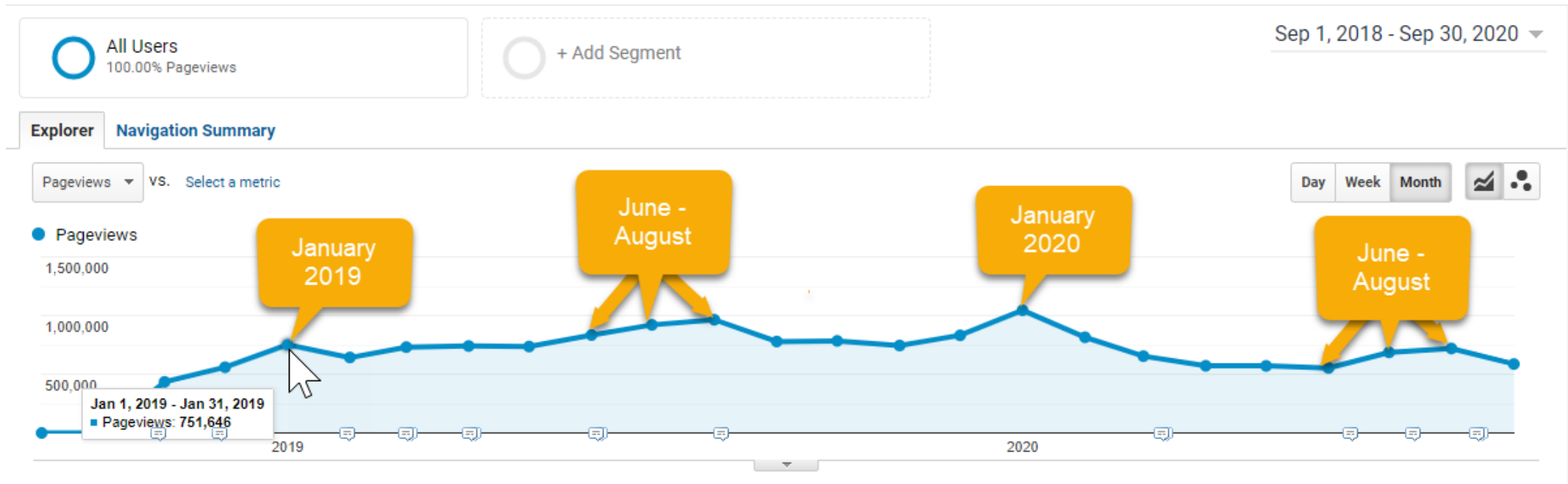
Analytics Investigation

Recent variations in Comparison Tool usage



Google analytics tracking began mid-September 2019. This view plots each week for the last 2 federal FY. Note lower engagement with the tool beginning in March 2020.

General traffic patterns

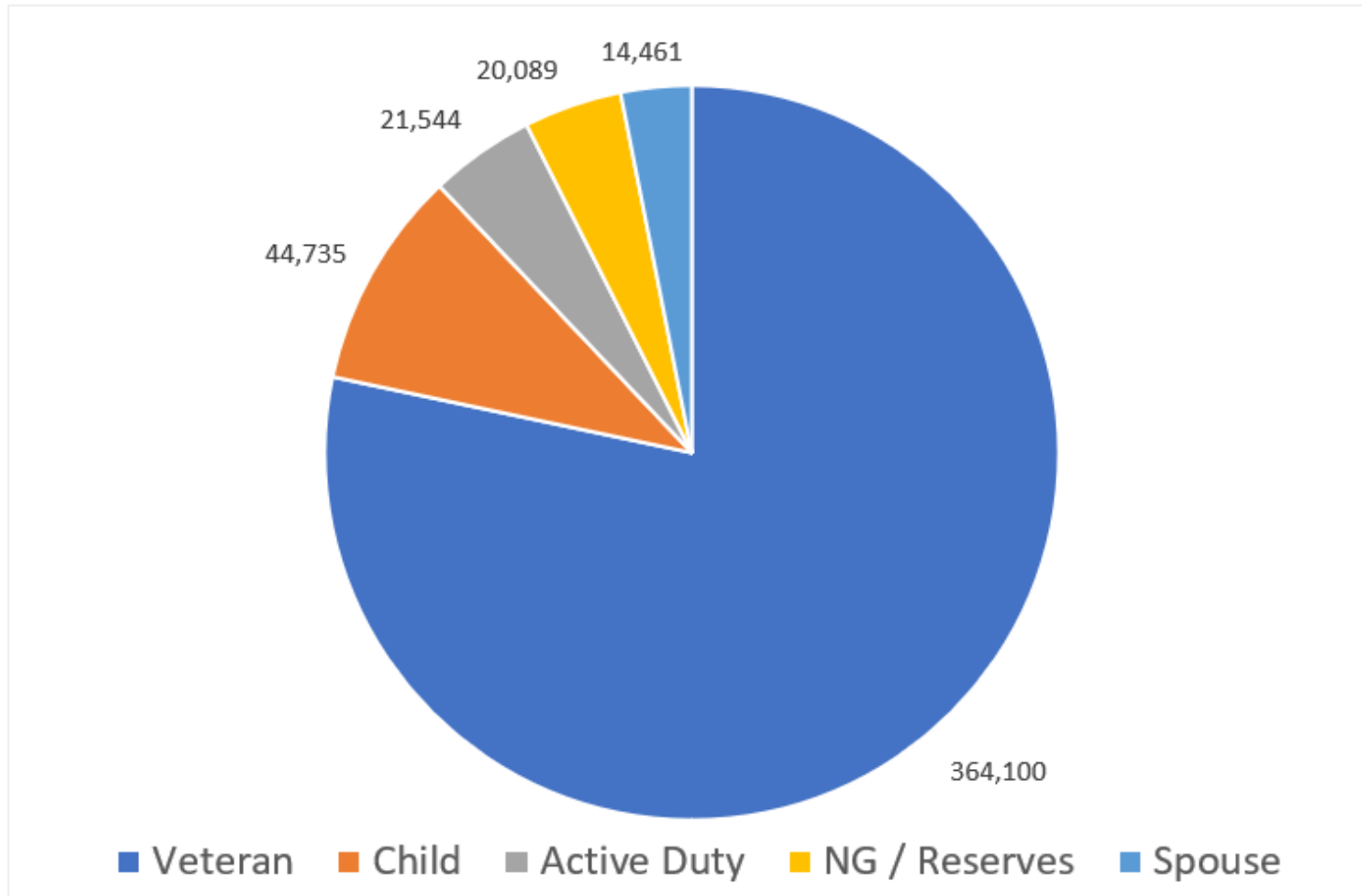


2019: Traffic peaks occurred in January and during summer months.

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”



[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

Top 25 Searches June – Sept., 2020, by “military status”

Veteran		Child		Active Duty		National Guard / Reserves		Spouse	
Within top 25 Searches		Within top 25 Searches		Within top 25 Searches		Within top 25 Searches		Within top 25 Searches	
Public Schools	8	Public Schools	18	Public Schools	11	Public Schools	15	Public Schools	5
Private Schools	7	Private Schools	5	Private Schools	9	Private Schools	6	Private Schools	6
For Profit Schools	4	For Profit Schools	0	For Profit Schools	2	For Profit Schools	2	For Profit Schools	6
Location searches	5	Location searches	1	Location searches	2	Location searches	1	Location searches	7
Unique searches	3	Unique searches	7	Unique searches	6	Unique searches	5	Unique searches	7
Veteran searches		Child searches		Active Duty searches		National Guard / Reserves searches		Spouse searches	
arizona state university-tempe	2,158	texas a	304	arizona state university-tempe	201	liberty university	154	liberty university	162
name	2,149	university of texas	261	liberty university	175	name	146	southern new hampshire university online	109
american public university system	1,896	arizona state university-tempe	254	american public university system	163	american public university system	126	western governors university salt lake city u	101
liberty university	1,864	name	241	university of texas	134	arizona state university-tempe	115	walden university	87
university of texas	1,722	new york university	217	harvard university	133	western governors university salt lake city u	113	arizona state university-tempe	80
southern new hampshire university online	1,630	university of florida	187	university of southern california	132	southern new hampshire university online	88	name	77
san francisco state university	1,553	university of central florida	173	san diego state university	115	university of texas	75	san antonio	69
western governors university salt lake city u	1,438	san diego state university	169	name	109	texas a	73	grand canyon university	66
texas a	1,322	university of southern california	168	western governors university salt lake city u	105	harvard university	67	capella university	55
san diego state university	1,269	george mason university	161	southern new hampshire university online	104	ohio state university-main campus	57	san diego	54
san diego	1,264	auburn university	157	san diego	103	university of houston	55	american public university system	53
university of southern california	1,247	university of alabama-tuscaloosa	155	texas a	102	american military university	53	university of phoenix	53
new york university	1,087	old dominion university	149	american military university	91	purdue university global	53	purdue university global	50
harvard university	1,024	university of arizona	149	university of florida	91	grand canyon university	52	las vegas	48
san antonio	1,004	virginia commonwealth university	149	los angeles	86	university of washington-seattle campus	51	ashford university	46
university of phoenix	990	harvard university	146	stanford university	83	university of central florida	50	tampa	46
university of maryland global campus	915	liberty university	145	georgetown university	82	university of florida	48	university of southern california	44
san francisco	909	texas state university	145	purdue university global	74	university of hawaii at manoa	48	chamberlain university	43
university of washington-seattle campus	888	clemson university	144	george washington university	73	university of north texas	48	university of texas	43
los angeles	884	florida state university	138	ucla	73	new york university	46	george mason university	41
american military university	876	university of washington-seattle campus	136	duke university	71	san francisco state university	46	old dominion university	41
houston	867	grand canyon university	132	old dominion university	71	university of arizona	45	texas	35
ashford university	863	university of georgia	130	university of california los angeles	71	university of kansas	45	dallas	33
grand canyon university	839	san antonio	124	university of washington-seattle campus	68	valencia college	44	national university san diego	33
university of florida	807	university of north texas	123	university of arizona	67	san antonio	43	colorado springs	32

CT: Highest use of “Learn more” on profile pages (June – Sept., 2020)

Top Learn More Selections on GIBCT Profiles

Event Action	Total Events
GIBCT Learn More - calcKicker	11,841
GIBCT Learn More - gibillstudents	11,727
GIBCT Learn More - yribbon	9,669
GIBCT Learn More - calcYr	5,488
GIBCT Learn More - ta	5,396
GIBCT Learn More - calcTuition	4,895
GIBCT Learn More - poe	3,744
GIBCT Learn More - whenUsedGiBill	3,299
GIBCT Learn More - calcScholarships	3,283
GIBCT Learn More - giBillChapter	2,703

Estimate your benefits

The 4 sections below include questions that will refine your benefits estimate. Use the fields in each section to make your updates.

Your military details +

School costs and calendar +

Learning format and location +

Scholarships and other VA funding -

Will you be a Yellow Ribbon recipient? ([Learn more](#))

☐ Yes

☒ No

Eligible for kicker bonus? ([Learn more](#))

☐ Yes

☒ No

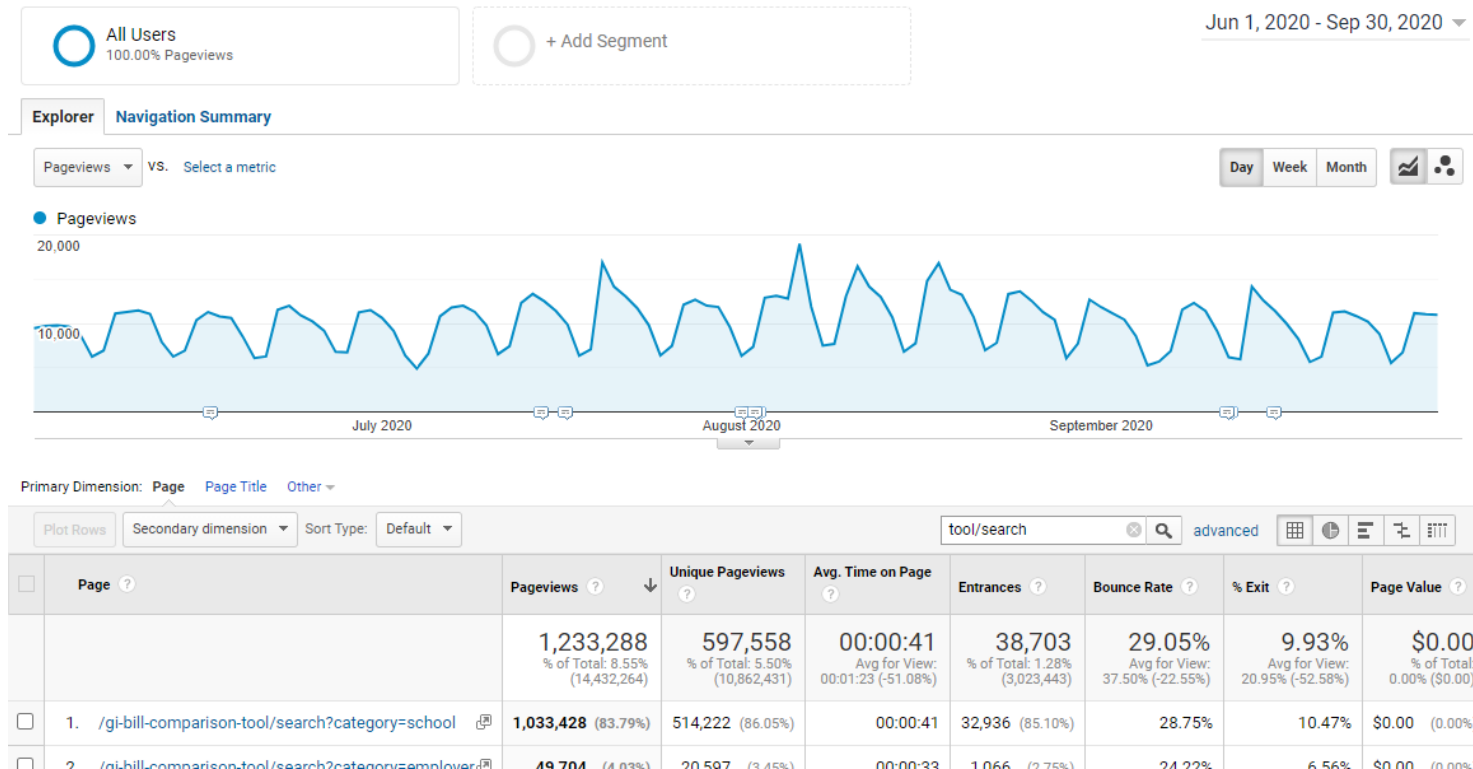
Scholarships (excluding Pell Grants) ([Learn more](#))

\$0

Update benefits

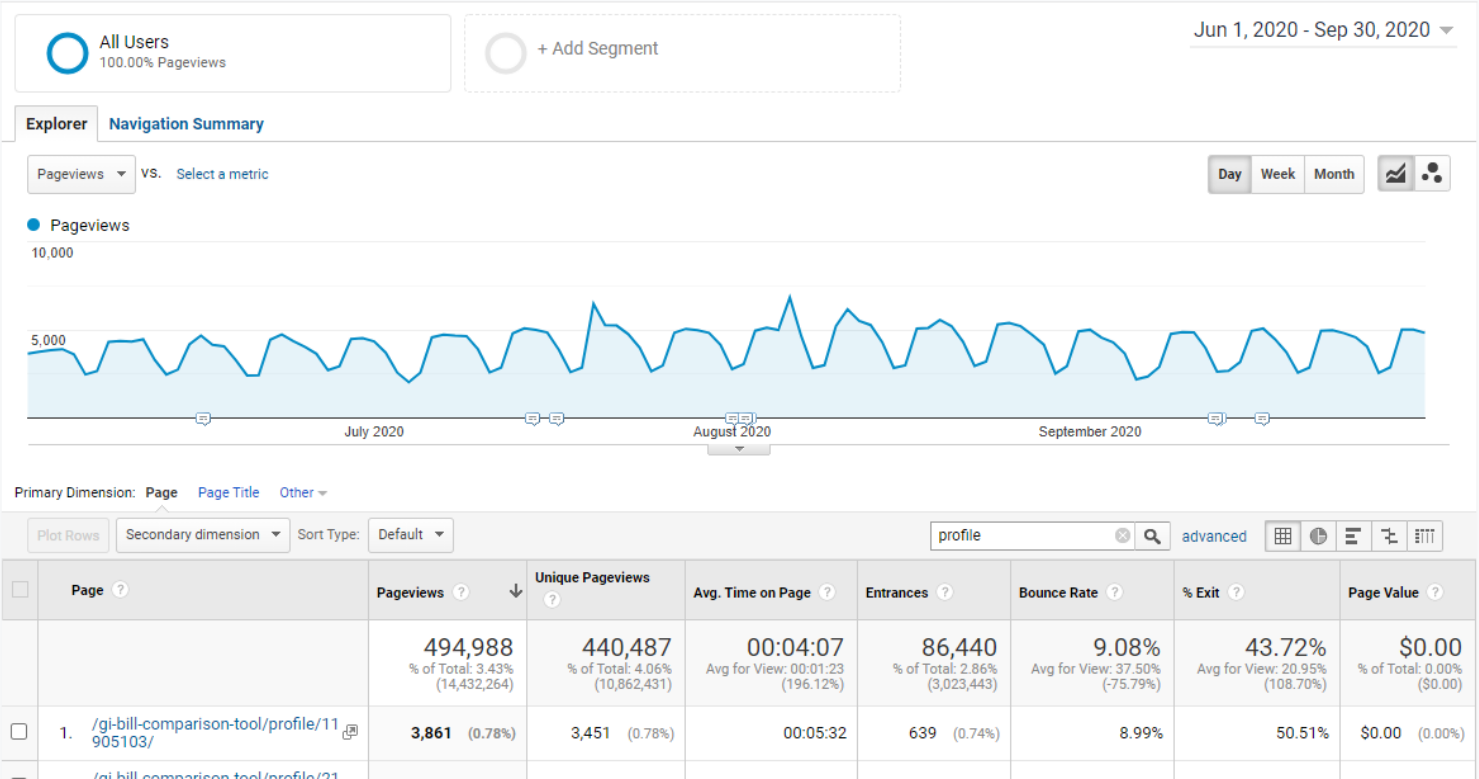
Many “Learn more” explorations are within the benefits calculator

Time on search results page



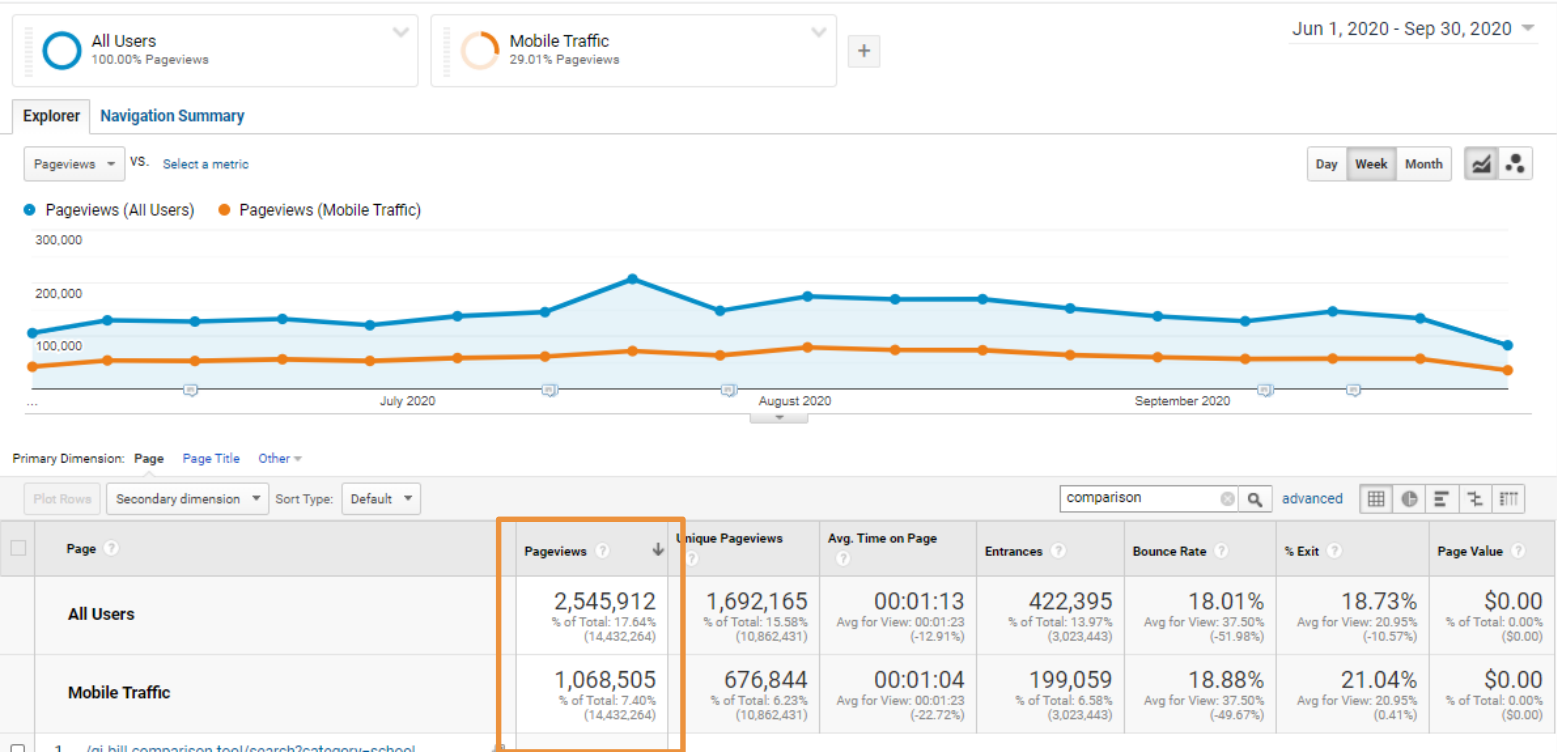
- Not many users arrive directly onto the CT search results page (SRP).
- Users spend less time on the SRP on average than they do on other pages on the Comparison Tool.
- SRP appears to have a higher bounce rate on average than other CT pages.
- SRP has ½ the number of pageviews but less than 1/3 the number of unique page views, showing users return to SRP in their session.

Time on profile pages



Users are spending significantly more time on profile pages than other pages on the CT or even on VA.gov.

Mobile traffic

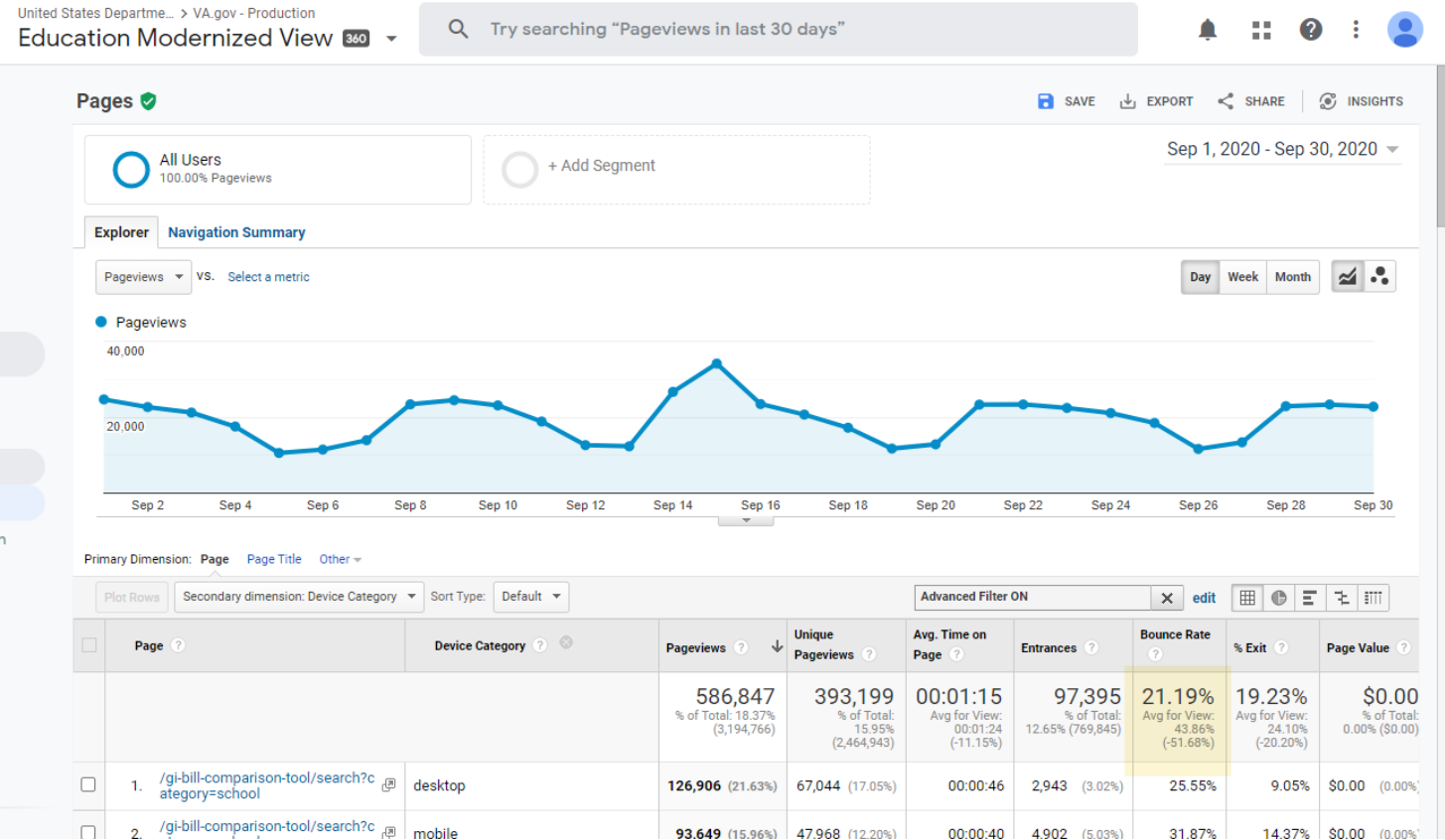


Comparison Tool has significantly higher rates of mobile traffic.

Mobile traffic for VA.gov / Education content is around 29%.

Nearly 42% of CT pageviews are from mobile devices.

Bounce rates -- by device

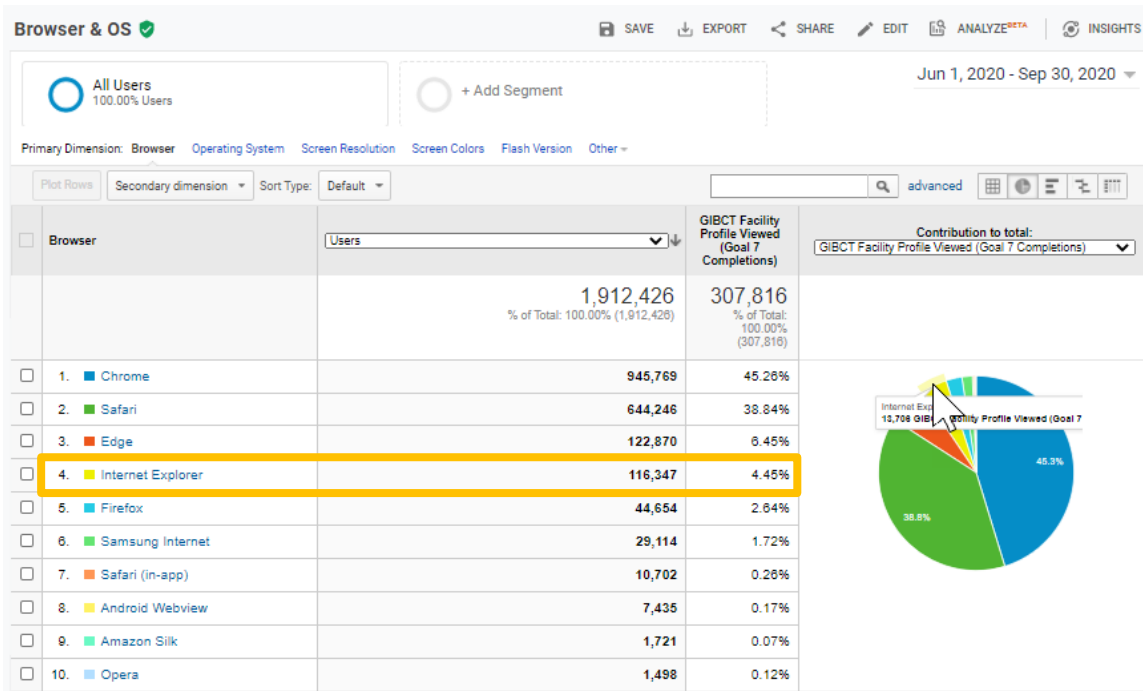


Bounce rates for Education content on VA.gov hover around 44%.

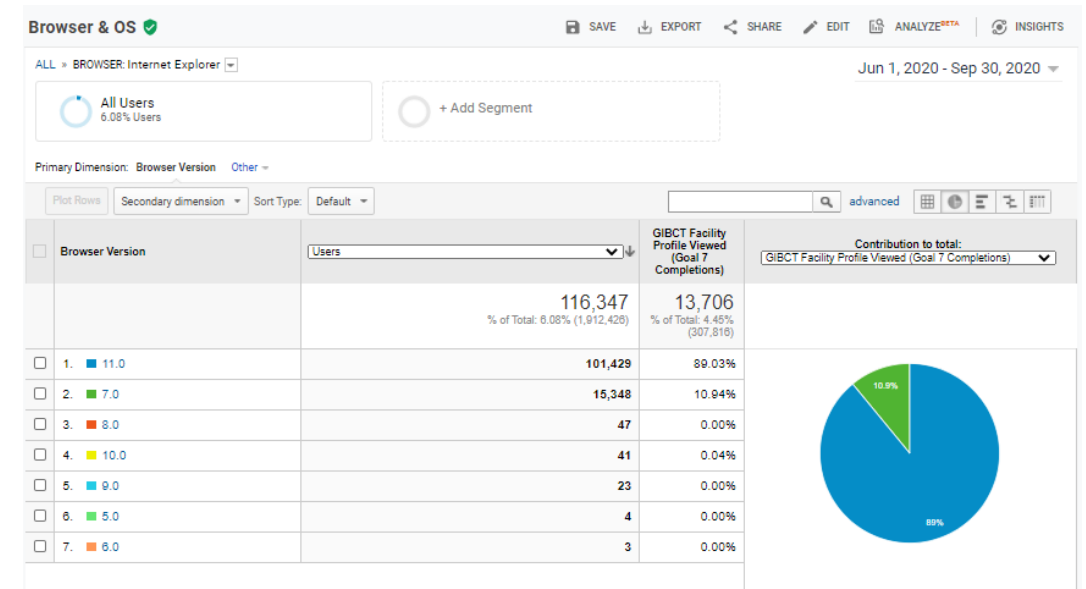
Bounce rates average 21.19% for the Comparison Tool.

	Bounce rate - %
VA.gov / Education (all)	43.86
CT Desktop users	10.23
CT Mobile users	20.91
CT Tablet users	25.94

Comparison Tool traffic by browser, June – Sept. 2020



Chrome (45.26%) and Safari (38.84%) make up the majority of visits to Comparison Tool profile pages.



99.97% of users with Internet Explorer were on version 11.0 or 7.0.

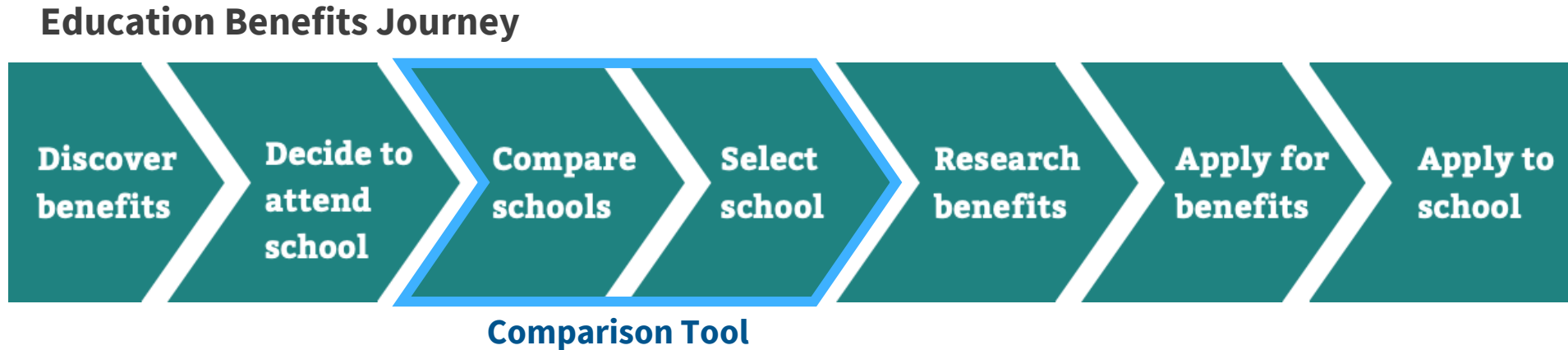
Background & Goals

Background

Many updates and improvements have been made to the Comparison Tool over the past few years. The VA Education Service team would like to gain a better understanding of the various users and stakeholders of the Comparison Tool, to learn more about their respective needs and challenges with the tool.

From this research, VA Education Service hopes to fully redesign the Comparison Tool to better meet the needs of its users.

Research goals



- Understand what various audiences need from the Comparison Tool – how it helps them now and how it can better meet their needs
- Identify how the Comparison Tool can help users optimize their VA education benefits
- Explore how to support prospective beneficiaries to take the next step in their education journey after finding a school that meets their needs

Methodology

Method: Remote moderated interviews

Reasoning: The research team conducted remote moderated interviews to delve deeply into:

1. How beneficiaries research and find schools
2. Beneficiaries' experiences with the Comparison Tool

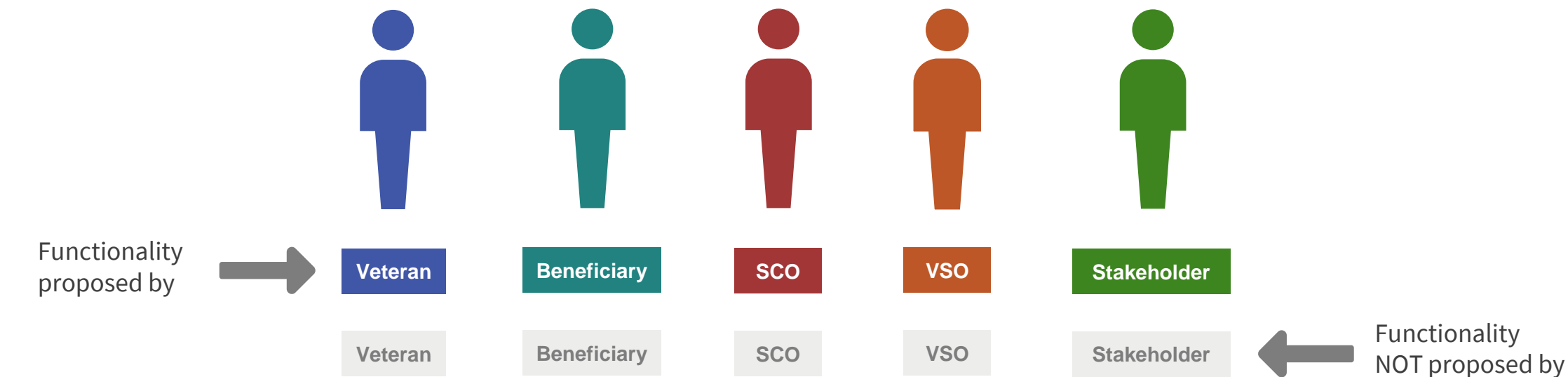
These interviews were conducted with direct users of the Comparison Tool, and with stakeholders who interact with beneficiaries who use the tool OR help manage the tool's data.

Research questions

- How are users currently using the Comparison Tool?
 - What information are they looking for?
 - What does it do best?
 - What challenges do they have with it?
- What information and resources are used when finding and selecting schools?
- What questions or struggles do users have during their education journey?
- From a user's perspective, what would be the ideal Comparison Tool?

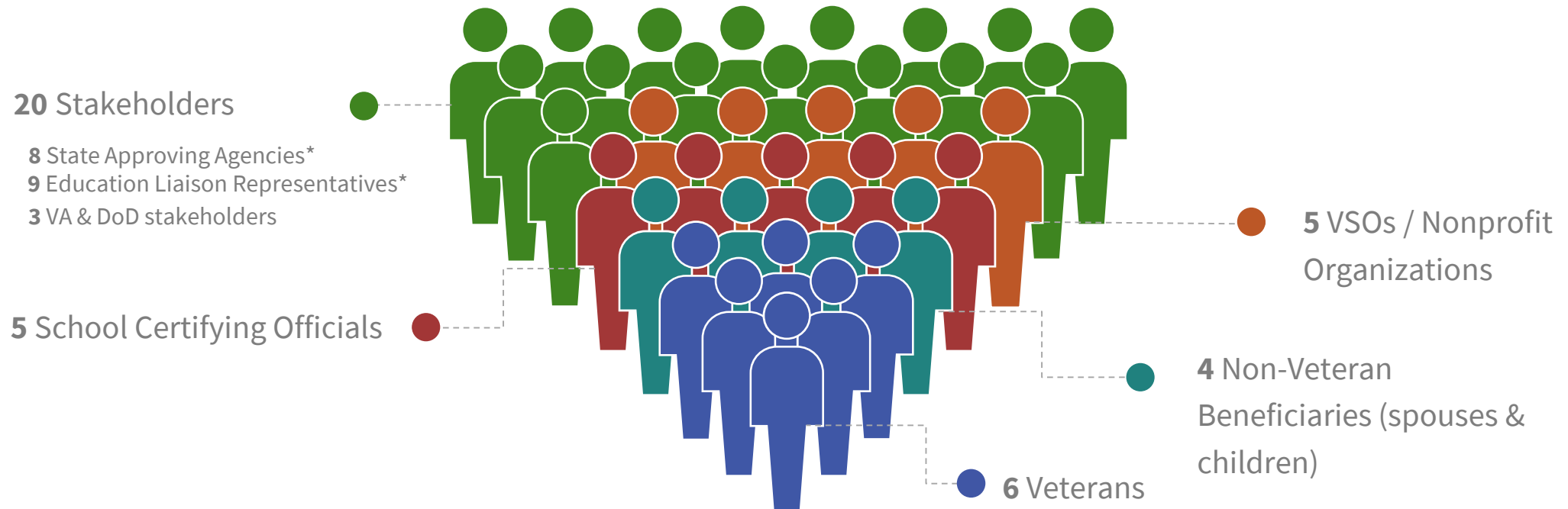
User Profiles

Key



* Also supported by former research

Who participated



*Numbers are approximate

User goals, motivations & frustrations

Veterans

Audience priority: Primary

Goals:

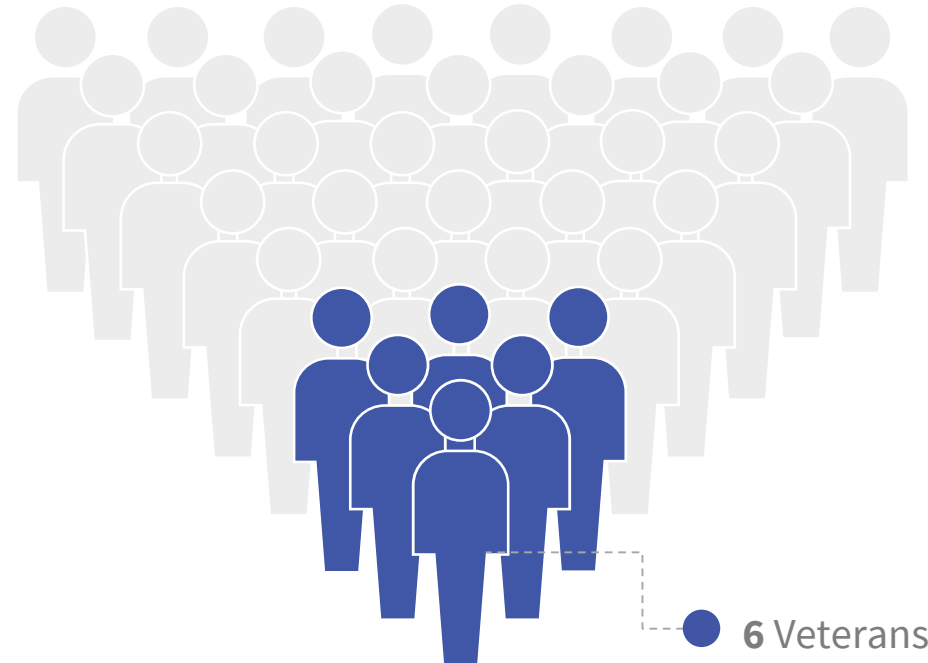
- Find a school that's a good fit
- Optimize housing allowance

Frustration:

- Determining what their experience will be like as a Veteran

Motivations:

- Find a school that will give them an excellent education
- Finding a school with a strong Veteran community



● 6 Veterans

User goals, motivations & frustrations

GI Bill Beneficiaries – Children

Audience priority: Secondary

Goal:

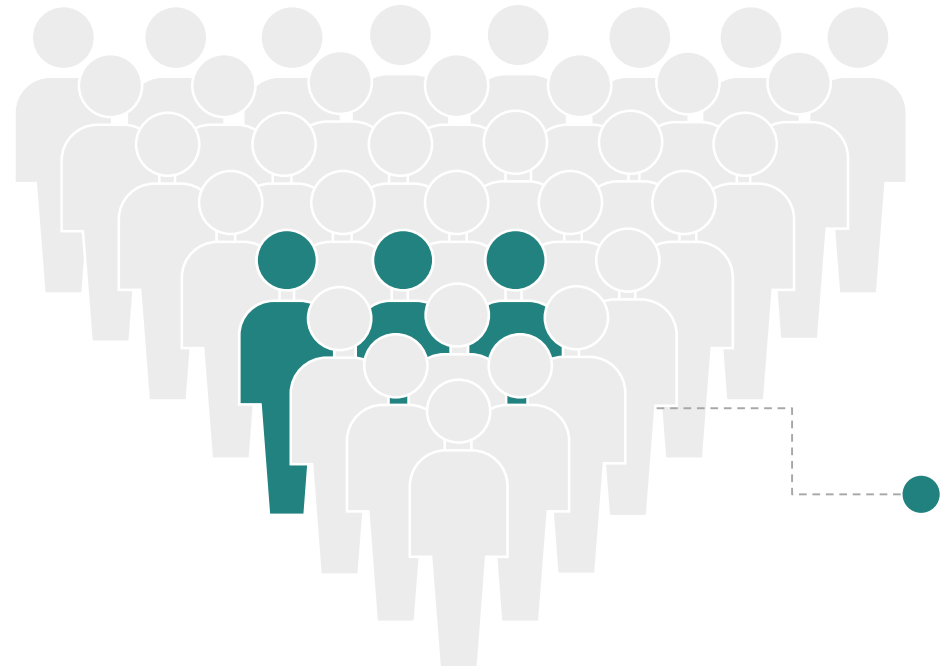
- Optimizing parent's benefits

Frustration:

- Jargon within the tool

Motivation:

- Want to know how they stack up against other students



3 Non-Veteran
Beneficiaries: Children

User goals, motivations & frustrations

GI Bill Beneficiaries – Spouses

Audience priority: Secondary

Goal:

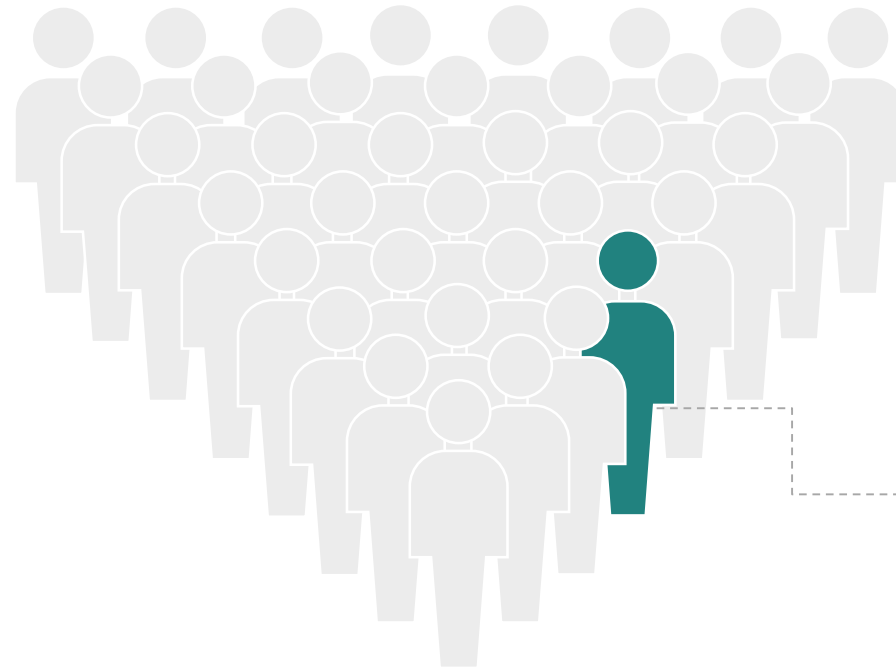
- Finding schools that'll be flexible with their unique situation

Frustration:

- Jargon within the tool

Motivations:

- Finding schools based on location
- Finding schools that make it "easy" to apply and attend classes



1 Non-Veteran Beneficiary:
Spouse

User goals, motivations & frustrations

School Certifying Officials

Audience priority: Secondary

Goal:

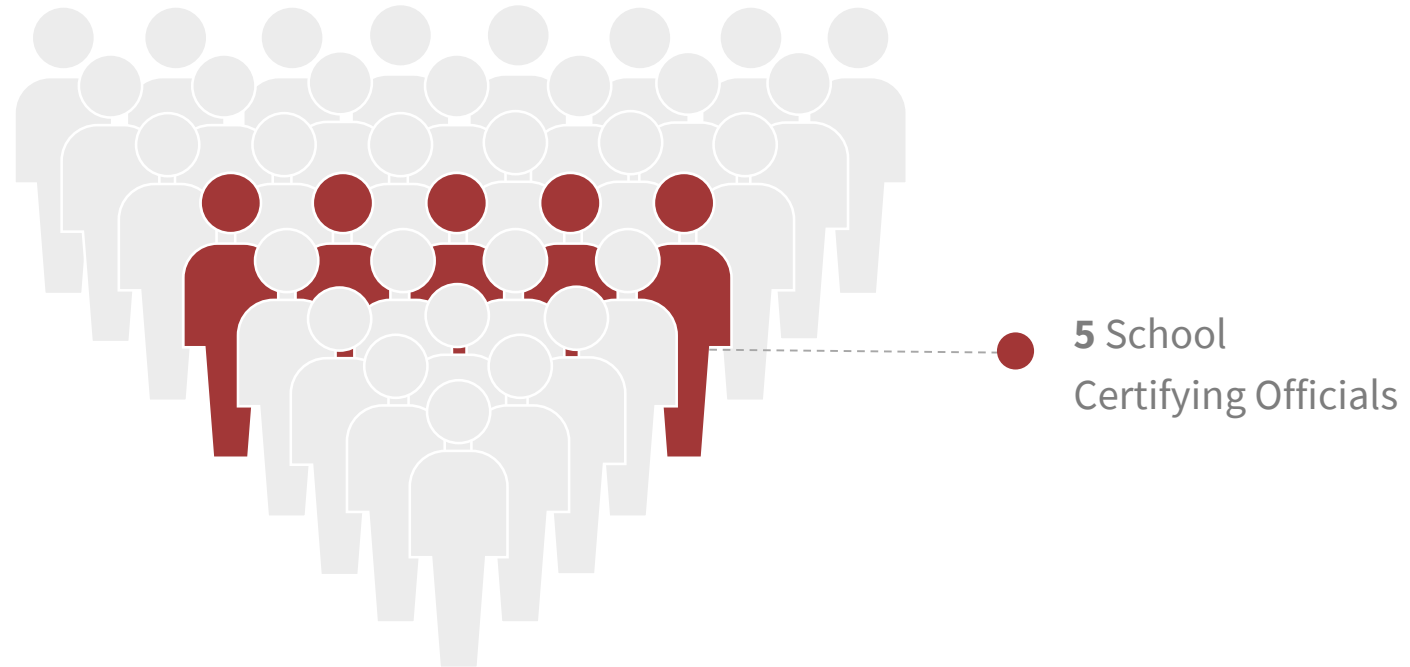
- Support GI Bill students
- Support prospective GI Bill beneficiaries

Frustration:

- Jargon within the tool

Motivations:

- Building good will
- Increasing GI Bill beneficiary attendance



User goals, motivations & frustrations

VSOs / Nonprofit Organizations

Audience priority: Secondary

Goal:

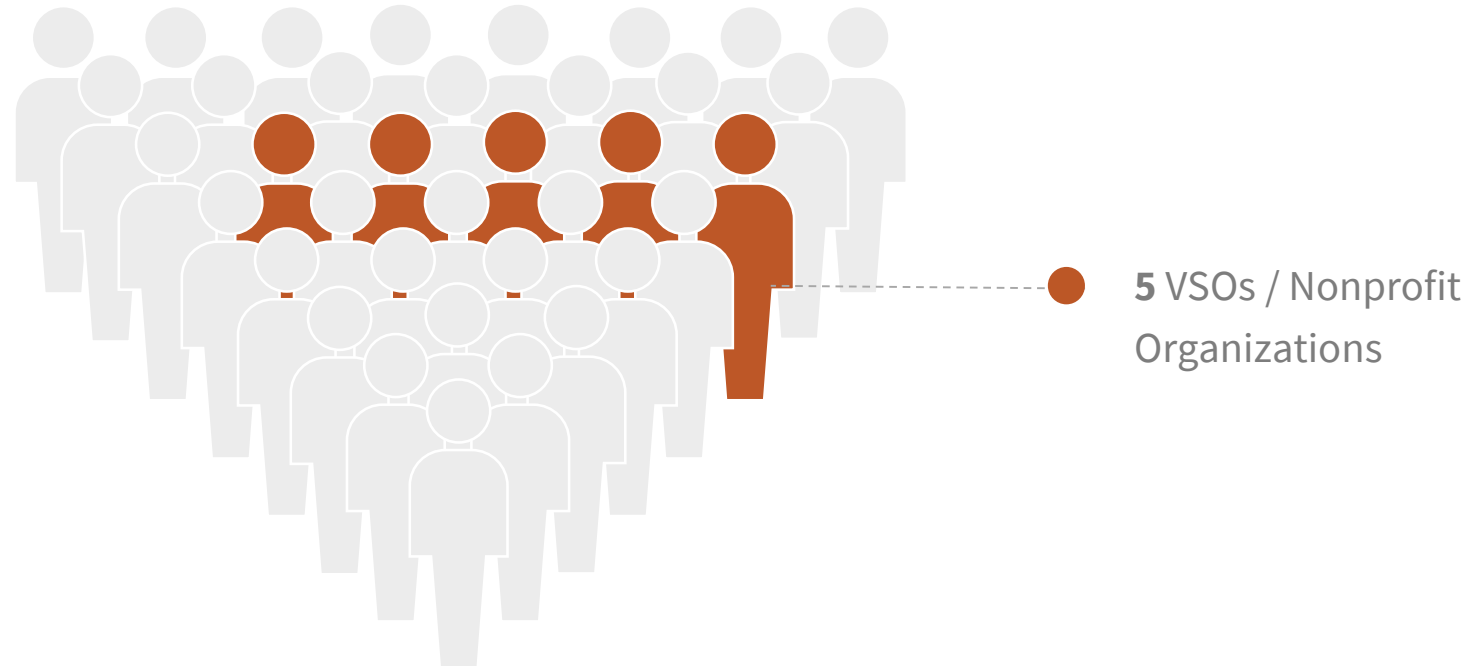
- Advocate for GI Bill Beneficiaries to VA and Congress

Frustration:

- Lack of reporting data for research and inquiries from Congress

Motivation:

- Protecting GI Bill beneficiaries and making sure they're fully informed



Themes

Research Findings

Themes

Search



Explore



Compare



Data Integrity



Search Q

Search

Searching is the primary way users find an initial set of schools. Each user has different baseline criteria for schools they want to attend and the Comparison Tool needs the ability to search in a variety of ways.

1. When users are searching for schools, **location is a major factor**
2. Users like to **search by type of degree (e.g. Bachelor's) and major (e.g. Mechanical Engineering)**
3. When looking for a specific school, users will **search by the school's full name, acronym or nickname**

1. When users are searching for schools, location is a major factor

Search by state, city or ZIP code



“I’m from North Carolina, so more than likely a North Carolina school.” – Veteran



“I like seeing other [school] locations so if I moved, I could see where else I could go.” – Veteran

Searching for schools “near me” (geolocation) or within a certain radius



“Being within a 30-45 minute drive or remote is very important” – Veteran

Research Findings

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

Input type of degree



"I think this is only for undergraduate – is there a function to switch between graduate and undergraduate? I assume the tuition and fees chart would change – I think it would be beneficial to switch between the two"
– Beneficiary

Input specific major



"I knew I wanted to do Computer Science, but there weren't any resources to see the departments without going to the schools in person." – Beneficiary

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

Research Findings

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

Usage of acronyms and nicknames



“One of the reasons they have difficulty finding their school...they type in “Vol State” and they have to type out Volunteer before they get any results” – Stakeholder

Full name search

Users begin typing out the name of the school and select the option they want when it appears in the auto-populated list

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

** Also supported by former research*

Search - Recommendations

- Improve and expand the search functionality
 - Expand name variation search data to increase accuracy of searching by non-standard names (e.g. acronyms, nicknames)
 - Location
 - Geolocation
 - State or ZIP code or “City, State”
 - Radius from a particular city or zip code
 - Educational options
 - Type of degree (e.g. Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Master’s)
 - Program/major (e.g. Political Science, Mechanical Engineering)
 - Online/in-person
 - Top schools for programs

Explore 

Explore

After discovering an initial set of schools, users dig deeper into those schools to identify any red flags and assess if the school's culture and academics are what they're looking for.

1. **Financial information is a key factor** in narrowing down school selection
2. **Accreditation is important** to Veterans
3. **Cautionary information and student complaints are important** to prospective students
4. **Additional historical information, outcomes and rankings help prospective students** determine their likelihood of success at a particular institution
5. Prospective students are **interested in various aspects of student life**

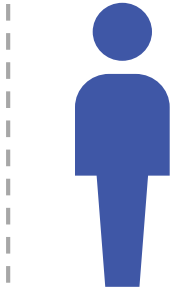
1. Financial information is a key factor in narrowing down school selection

Benefits



“Students tend to focus on tuition and housing but there’s more to the decision.” – VSO

Yellow Ribbon



“Yellow Ribbon...if I wasn’t getting fully [covered by the] GI Bill, that would be important” – Veteran

Out of pocket expenses



“I guess first and foremost, what’s covered and knowing if you’re going to have any out-of-pocket expenses” – Veteran

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

* Also supported by former research

2. Accreditation is important to Veterans

Veterans have been hurt by accreditation issues or heard of others who were



“[It’s a] big deal for me...there was one school I started to attend and they lost their accreditation and that was devastating for me”
– Veteran

One non-Veteran beneficiary was hurt by a non-accredited program



“That same diploma I got when I was in school for 2 years...I don’t know why they wouldn’t accept it. I believe they said it wasn’t accredited.” – Beneficiary

Functionality proposed by:

3. Cautionary information and student complaints are important to prospective students

Greater detail & consistency of caution flags



“Currently caution flags are inadequate and incomplete. Sometimes there’s a caution flag if there’s an accreditor acting against a school and sometimes not.” – VSO

More information on student complaints



“It would be helpful to have more info on the complaints. And perhaps information on if that complaint was resolved.” – SCO

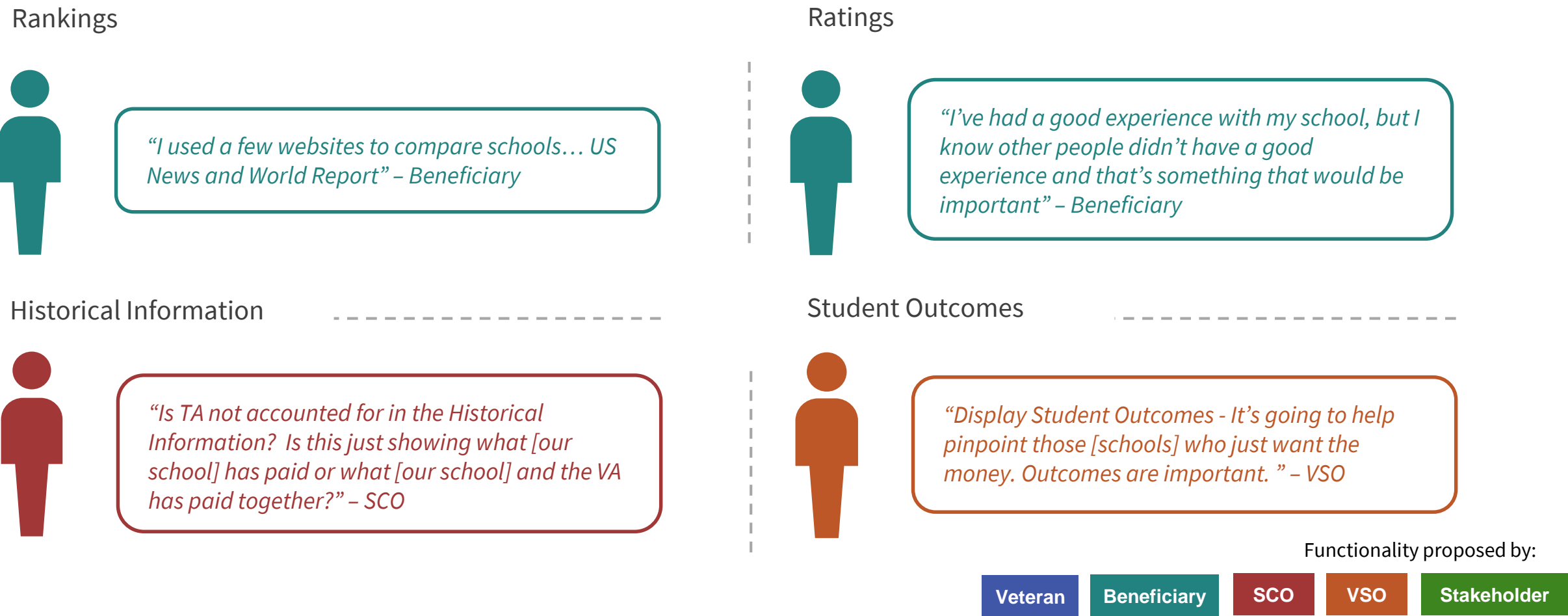
Inclusion of Education Compliance Survey results



“When a discrepancy is found, I think it would be helpful for students to see that this might be something they might encounter” – Stakeholder

Research Findings

4. Additional historical information, outcomes and rankings help prospective students determine their likelihood of success at a particular institution



* Also supported by former research

5. Prospective students are interested in various aspects of student life

Estimated cost of living



“Housing allowance is important because they tell you you should be able to live off your GI Bill.” – Veteran

Campus amenities



“Satellite colleges come in such a wide variety of flavors – you can get just bare bones that its rooms and free-floating teachers or so involved that you have every amenity possible (library, cafeteria, etc.). You just never know until you get there.” – Veteran

Veteran-specific offerings



“We do have a Veteran group – we have a few actually. That would be great to post that.” – SCO

Functionality proposed by:

Explore - Recommendations

- Enhance the user's ability to calculate their benefits
 - Increase visibility of out-of-pocket costs
 - Better integration of Yellow Ribbon information (e.g. amounts, limitations, etc.)
 - Make tuition rate policies more evident for in-state, out-of-state tuition and foreign schools
 - Bring clarity to online/in-person housing stipend
- Incorporate and/or emphasize data that aids a student's assessment of their likelihood of success at a particular school
 - Student outcomes
 - School accreditation, rankings and ratings
 - Cautionary information
 - Student life

Compare 

Compare

Once users have a good understanding of the schools they're exploring, they compare their options on a more detailed level and begin to seek out information on their benefits.

1. Prospective students need the **ability to easily compare schools**
2. Prospective students find **specific numbers help them make decisions more confidently**
3. Prospective students have **a lot of questions about their benefits**

1. Prospective students need the ability to easily compare schools

Ability to compare information between different schools



“If I could pick 3 or 4 schools and put them right next to one another, I think that would be easier to pick and choose schools” – Beneficiary

Ability to compare benefits received for a single school (e.g. Montgomery vs Post 9/11)



“Can I compare benefit options? ...I get calls from people about to leave the military and I don’t know which benefit is better” – SCO

Encourage prospective students to “aim high”



“Each service member should shoot as high as they can go...If you look at this school, here are other comparable schools. Or more prestigious ones” – Stakeholder

Research Findings

2. Prospective students find specific numbers help them make decisions more confidently

Housing rates for different school locations



"I do like that you've added our extensions. It shows that there will be a difference [in housing allowance]" – SCO

Additional scholarship information



"I had scholarships to the school and with using the GI Bill...I didn't get those scholarships anymore and it would have been helpful to know that before going to school." – Beneficiary

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

3. Prospective students have lots of questions on their benefits

How to get started



“This is a lot of information and it’s confusing. Where would I actually start? If I were to pick something and go with it... what would I need to do to get everything going?” – Veteran

Understanding of how benefits work



“Students say ‘So last semester I got X amount of money and this month I got X.’ Why?” – SCO

Usage of multiple benefits



“5-10% of [our claims appeals] cases are benefits overlapping over programs. Issues are usually between 9/11 and Montgomery. But also Reservist” – VSO



“I’m a Veteran and a dependent so we’re trying to work through the best way to use it [benefits]...That calculation is a bit daunting” – Veteran

Functionality proposed by:

Compare - Recommendations

- Offer users the ability to do a side-by-side comparison of schools
- Provide recommendations for higher performing schools so students can optimize their VA benefits
- Provide basic, easy-to-digest information on benefits
 - What to expect
 - How to get started
 - Clarify labels and include additional helper content to address areas of confusion
 - Link to start the application process

Data Integrity

Data Integrity

VA needs to provide consistent, quality data so prospective students can make good decisions on schools

1. Prospective students **expect up-to-date school contact information** in the Comparison Tool
2. Prospective students **need cautionary information to be clear, detailed and up-to-date** so they can understand the risks of attending a particular school
3. Prospective students **need information presented in plain language**

Research Findings

1. Prospective students expect up-to-date school contact information in the Comparison Tool

Adding email and phone number for SCOs to Comparison Tool

Ability to provide timely updates of staffing changes



“I would love to have their emails or numbers. The names are great, but I can’t do anything with that.” – Veteran



“We’re going to need phone numbers and possibly email addresses for this. I do know that SCOs reach out to the counterparts at other universities if they have trouble getting transcripts and enrollments.” - Stakeholder



“Another thing would be, to be able to change one of your employees. Sometimes there’s a lot of turnaround – and just be able to update [that information would be nice].” – SCO

2. Prospective students need cautionary information to be clear, detailed, and up-to-date so they can understand the risks of attending a particular school

All Student Complaints should be made public



"I understand things can change significantly in a 2 year period, but we think its important for students to be able to look back in time and see the full picture and full number of complaints" – VSO

- No time-boxing
- Legitimate and illegitimate complaints
- Status of complaints

Investigate ways to provide greater detail on caution flags



"Have the site be more specific about accreditation warnings instead of sending to the accrediting body site" – Stakeholder

- Accreditation ones are a particular concern

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

3. Prospective students need information to be presented in plain language

Many non-Veteran beneficiaries have little to no knowledge of military terminology



*“Under ‘Which GI Bill benefits do you want to use?’, I would add ‘Fry Scholarship’. It falls under Post 9/11, but they don’t realize that”
– VSO*

- Fields like “Cumulative 9/11 active-duty service” aren’t understood

Many individuals (especially Beneficiaries) don’t understand jargon used in the Comparison Tool



“I think understanding what it is they’re reading is helpful...a teenager doesn’t understand the difference in a for profit and state school” – VSO

- Beneficiaries and Veterans may not know the name of their benefit or the chapter number

Functionality proposed by:

Veteran

Beneficiary

SCO

VSO

Stakeholder

Data Integrity - Recommendations

- Present military and higher education information in plain language
- Incorporate school contact information into the tool and utilize a system that ensures timely updates
- Investigate ways to incorporate more detailed information into caution flag data
- Provide public access to a full and robust dataset of Comparison Tool data to aid in compliance with reporting to Congress and other entities
 - Detailed student data (e.g. undergrad vs graduate, Veterans vs beneficiaries)
 - Increased transparency of student complaints and complaint review process
 - School – specific data (e.g. information on closed schools, better detail on Historical financials)
- Investigate options to automate data upload to streamline the process and minimize manual intervention

Next Steps

Next Steps

1. Incorporate Education input into findings
2. Prepare executive summary & support presentation to VA Education leadership
3. Identify key features
4. Align on prioritization features

Thanks for your attention