**School Ratings Discussion Guide**

*Participant 7 – Cayce Kaminski*

**Intro - 5 minutes**

Thanks for joining us today! My name is Amy and I also have some colleagues on the line observing and taking notes. Today we would like to talk about ratings and what types of information help Veterans determine if a particular school is a good fit for them.  
Before we start, a few things I want to mention:

* **This entire session should take about 45 minutes.** I want to be sure not to keep you much longer, so I may occasionally prompt you with the next question or topic.
* **In this session, we want to hear your honest opinions.** We just want to improve these tools to better meet Veteran's needs. I will not be offended by any opinions you express, and I welcome your feedback.
* **If for any reason and at any time you want to stop the session, please let me know.**
* **Are you comfortable if I record my screen and audio as we talk today?** We use the recordings to confirm that we have captured your opinions accurately. The recordings are destroyed after we complete analysis, and none of your comments will be attributed to you directly.
  + If yes: **Once I start recording, I am going to confirm that you are ok with me recording this session once more.**

*Start recording.*

* \*\*I have started recording. I'd like to confirm: Are you comfortable if I record my screen and the audio as we talk today?"

**Warm-up Questions (Optional) - 5 minutes**

Let’s start with a few warm-up questions.

* Are you currently using or have you ever used your education benefits? I have not used it yet – but in the process of applying to use it. Post 9/11. Yes – I’m leaning towards Western Governor’s Online university. Starting either Aug or Sept. I’m looking for a school for convenience so doing it online is definitely preferable. Western Governor’s you get certifications along with a degree and since I’m doing cyber, that’s a good deal. So I’m in NC so I reached out to the schools like UNC. Some schools didn’t have online programs and I’m trying to keep my day job so that wasn’t going to fit. Some colleges were harder to get in contact with veteran’s office than others. Like NC State called me about a week after I contacted them. But I know if you don’t get your BAH, then it’s something you need to hear back quickly on.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using?
    - When did you start school?
  + If no, do you plan on using your benefits in the near future?
    - Which benefit?
    - Where are you in the school selection process?
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? Yes – saw that when I was going through the separation of the military. Plus they did have reviews like military friendliness. When I first got out, I was expecting to go to work full-time. But that’s not how things turned out. I feel like that’s expected. Veteran friendliness is a big deal, but when it comes to an online school I feel like they’re on even ground. We went through it on my TAPS course because I was trying to map out where I was going because I wanted to get my Master’s in Business. I liked that it was a military focused rating system instead of a general one. It’s different coming from a military background versus regular. I had a Bachelor’s degree going into the service, a lot of people join right out of high school. So you either missed out. But if you’re doing it later in life, you’re coming into it with a different mindset. I think it was good to have ratings and reviews for people in a similar mindset and hearing from people in a similar position.
  + If yes, what did you use it for?

**Ratings Experience and Overall Value - 15 min**

I'm curious about how you use ratings when you're looking at a particular product or service. For example, if you're purchasing a new vacuum cleaner or trying a new restaurant, how do you decide if you want to try that product or service?

* Do you typically look at ratings when making your decision? I always look up reviews first – generally I want to get something other people have gotten and reviewed. And I look to see the number of people who have reviewed it. I also look to see if it goes on sale. Brand reputation as well. The star is a big part of it and I’ll read reviews based on that. If there is one that has a few stars and a few reviews, I’m not going to look at that if another has four stars and 100 reviews. If all the items have an average of 3 stars, I’m not going to hold that against them. But if it’s 4.5 stars…then you get into getting something that’s cheaper but lower quality. That’s not my style, I like to get things that last.
* If someone complains about shipping or customer service, so I don’t really call customer service a lot so I don’t worry about that.
* When you're looking at ratings, what aspects do you pay close attention to (e.g. number of stars, number of people who rated it)?
* Are there any aspects that aren't important to you?
* Why are these aspects important or not important to you?
* What helps you decide if a rating or review is trustworthy? I try to read the one star reviews as well as the highest ratings since sometimes people will pay for ratings, so I try to read the middle road and the lowest ratings because you’ll find more truth there than the happiest people. Influences a good 75%. Ratemyprofessors is along those lines. Some colleges have their own forums for reviews but don’t use those based on their reviews. Facebook has reviews. A lot of people will complain on FB if they have issues. On the school I went to, they were saying how much they liked the school versus complaining about the school. I saw some comments about having issues with the online format, but overall were much more positive than other colleges I was looking at. If you Google a university, Google has a rating system so I try and read those. It’s hard to find reviews on a particular program you’re looking for.
* Do ratings influence your ultimate decision? If so, how much?
* Are there any particular sites that you frequently visit that use ratings? What do you like about these sites?
* Have you ever looked at sites to compare schools?
  + If yes, which ones? What did you like about those sites?

**Categories - 15 minutes**

The VA would like to give prospective students better visibility into the educational experience other Veterans have had at a particular school. Some sites like Amazon allow users to rate a product or service on a variety of factors such as product quality, timeliness of delivery, etc.

* If someone who had previously received VA education benefits provided ratings for schools (particularly ones you were interested in attending), what factors would be most valuable to you? Knowing how flexible they are to dealing with their issue. It can be a confusing process. If you’re reliant on that income, you want to work with people who know how to deal with that. Education quality is also a big deal. I guess you want it to be as uncomplicated as possible and it adds a lot of new factors to people when you go back to college. You’re used to being in a routine, so you want to know what to expect when you go in. Knowing flexibility is reassuring so that it can be molded around my current routine and not making a new one. Being able to go in and being able to get a solution. And knowing that it’s not all for nothing.
* Is there any other information that you would like to know from Veterans who had attended a school you were interested in?
* How valuable would that information be in making a decision to attend the school or not?

**Pull up categories visual provided by EDU**

* (As applicable) In terms of school ratings, there are a few factors I would like to get your feedback on.
  + What do you think this factor means?
  + Would it would be helpful in your decision making process?

Five Star Ratings:

* Institution Overall – I would assume it’s the general experience that you have at the college. I think that’s more applicable for in-campus than online. If you’re in-person you find out more about the campus
* Quality of Classes – making sure that what you learn will help you be productive after college
* Veteran Friendliness – flexibility, helping you through different paperwork and stuff to maintain your status as a veteran student
* Employment Preparation – that’s a big one too. Not a lot of colleges do this automatically. Resumes. Preparing LinkedIn.
* Recruiting/Marketing Practices – I’m guessing that is talking about how they bring in students, whether they blow up your inbox if you ask them a question. Does the college contact you for money after you leave? I know that can be annoying.
* Most helpful – Quality of Classes and Veteran Friendliness. If they don’t have veteran friendliness, you may be stuck dealing with issues on your own
* In the grand scheme, I don’t think Marketing/Recruiting would be a big deal to me.
* Are there any other types of ratings that you would like to see? (For example, the percentage of Veterans who would recommend a particular school). I don’t know if flexibility…I feel that would be hard to quantify. Different colleges approach courses differently. Flexibility with courses, completing assignments, are you in the traditional show up in class…I think that might be helpful.
* Who do you think should be able to submit ratings for a school?
  + Someone who applied and was accepted – Helpful, because they’ll know what the process is for admission
  + Someone who applied and was rejected – I don’t know if they would be relevant for the ratings…if they can leave a comment talking about it, if they didn’t like anything in the process. I feel they’d been equally relevant as someone accepted but not in ratings
  + Someone who attended classes, but didn't complete their degree – That would be important because you don’t know if the college was a contributor to that.
  + Someone who finished their degree – Important as well.
  + Veterans versus beneficiaries: That’s an interesting question – I think it should be all inclusive. I doubt the ratings would change if you were in the military or not.
  + Personally I probably wouldn’t need anything to leave a review – but people like gift cards. As long as the email didn’t look computer generated or sent to the spam folder, I’d leave a rating.

**Pull up a school profile page on the CT**

The VA is considering incorporating ratings into the GI Bill Comparison Tool so beneficiaries of education benefits can provide feedback on the schools they have attended. The page in front of you is a school profile page on the GI Bill Comparison Tool.

Searched Raleigh. That was another thing that was helpful was seeing the tuition out-right. Clicked Campbell university. I feel like the ratings would go on this page [profile page]. I feel they would be too busy on the other page [ SRP]. So like down here…it goes along with the student feedback. And that was another thing was seeing the pass/fail rate…to see how many people passed their degree. If there’s a disproportionate number of people not finishing their degree, then it’s a flag that something is wrong. I would say it’s a case by case – if I can see myself encountering the complaint, then I might consider it. I remember seeing some complaints I would just toss out the window because it wasn’t something I would encounter. So then I go to general consensus instead of just one story. So I would say the ratings would weigh more than the complaints. I remember choosing between Post 9/11 and Montgomery, but it was helpful to be able to weigh each one and see which one I preferred.

* If ratings were incorporated into the Comparison Tool, where do you think it would make the most sense for the ratings to appear?
* What are your thoughts on the trustworthiness of ratings that would appear in the Comparison Tool? Why? I mean I wouldn’t assume that…if anything I would trust it more than another review site where a college could pay for reviews. I think it would be harder to get reviews on this site than just looking up your traditional civilian website.
* You could do the whole Amazon thing with verified and unverified reviews.
* Additional breakdown – after the admissions process and maybe by program. The more you can tell the better, but it can complicate the system.

**Post-Task Interview - X minutes**

* Any questions for me?

**Thank-You and Closing - X minutes**

Well we really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts with us today. Your feedback is so helpful to us as we continue to work on the site and make sure it really works for Veterans.

Thanks! Lastly, do you know any other Veterans, caregivers, or service members who might be willing to participate in a future user research session? If Yes: Thank you! I'll have our team send you an email with a little blurb that you can pass along.

Great, well thank you so much again, and enjoy the rest of your day!