**School Ratings Discussion Guide**

*When the participant is ready, begin the session with the following intro*

**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?

P: I have used them. I used them during an apprenticeship just to kind of help cover some bills while I was working. And then I did school for an online course. It wasn’t even a full semester. It was a month and a half where I used it there, too, with Thomas edison state college.

* + If yes, which benefit are you using?

P: Post 9/11 Gi bill.

A: When did you start using your benefits?

P: That would be going back 2011 with the apprenticeship and probably around 2014 for that brief stint in college.

* + - 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? I have. Not recently.

A: okay, perfect

* + If yes, what did you use it for?

A: Any post 9/11 entitlement remaining?

P: Yes, I believe I only have about 26 months or something like that. I haven’t checked in a while. This was probably in 2014. I’m just getting back into the schooling now to getready for the fall. .

**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?

P: Yes.

A: how do you decide?

P: I would type in whatever that product was, and then reviews, then consumer reports. I’m more likely to watch a video review of the product.

* Do you typically look at ratings when making your decision?

P: Yeah, like in consumer reports or other websites. I’ll do 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)?

P: The stars or the rating however they’re grading it will be first. I like to go right to a propon[sp?] list, especially if you’re talking about a tool or vehicle. I’ll try to narrow the options down.

A: what kind of information are you trying to get?

P: I’m trying to get information that won’t be listed on the products website. It’s usually better to go to a third partly, like consumer reports, and try to get one that’s non-biased.

* Are there any aspects that aren't important to you?

P: it’s pretty broad. Are we trying to narrow that down to a school rating?

A: if you were looking at a rating for a particular product, are there sometimes ratings that are applied that you think, this isn’t really that helpful for me. Like categories of ratings or attributes.

P: the overall, sometimes I’ll miss that. usually, they’ll try to have two categories below that, depending on what the product is, like ease of use, durability, depending on what it is. Typically, overall, and then when it has scores below that, how they got to that, that’s the most useful.

* Why are these aspects important or not important to you?
* What helps you decide if a rating or review is trustworthy?

P: So, not just the review, but reviewing the site that got it. I had to purchase a computer not long ago, and a lot of the review sites were backed by apple, so they’re going to have biased reviews. I found that out when I was reviewing that for a computer to go back to school.

* Do ratings influence your ultimate decision? If so, how much?

P: Maybe like 1/3rd. typically I do my own research, and then I look for something to back up what I’m thinking.

A: so you’re looking for ratings that refute what you’ve discovered through your research?

P: right. So I can go to a website and get all the factsheets about it. So I already have that information before I start looking at the reviews. When I see a review, I want to see somebody who’s already done it or has it so I can get their opinion.

* Are there any particular sites that you frequently visit that use ratings? What do you like about these sites?

P: consumer reports, like I said, and then one that’s called ratings. I don’t think there’s an a in it. It’s like Rtings. It’s like a youtube channel. They do a lot of technical stuff, and I watch a lot of their videos.

A: what do you like about those sites in particular?

P: I really prefer the video. I feel like I get so much more out of the video, like a deeper dive into a review instead of reading the reviews. A lot of the reviews, they’re like 10 things at once and they give you one paragraph per each item instead of like the video that dives deeper into that.

* Have you ever looked at sites to compare schools?

P: I have. I’m really more narrowed down to something that’s local. I’ve been reviewing some of the online for profit schools, but those reviews can be all over the place. I’m leaning more towards Delaware tech. they have a strong online presence, but they’re a community college, so they’re backed by that. Online schools scare me because the accreditations are all over the place. When I started Thomas Edison, it sounded great, but reading up on it, their credits don’t transfer, that type of thing. So I need to do more research on it before I get back into it.

A: have any of the sites that you’ve looked at had ratings for the schools?

P: yes. I can’t remember it off the top of my head, but it was a pretty… [tried pulling it up. Couldn’t remember which].

A: if it comes to you while we’re talking, just shout it out.

P: gradereports is one that I use. [gradreports.com we later looked up]

* + 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?

P: for me getting into it, it would be their insight into if they have a veterans counselor and how they went about using the gi bill benefits. If they worked together with the counselor or it was mostly thems to get to that point.

* Is there any other information that you would like to know from Veterans who had attended a school you were interested in?

P: if you’re saying only from a veterans perspective, I want to know how they went about their counseling, how their school worked with them and their gi bill. If I can get their experience at the school.

A: so you said only veterans. So saying gi bill beneficiaries, does that broaden the scope?

P: to me, I think the toughest part is getting the ball rolling. Even between delaware tech and the coronavirus this summer, I find a lot of these places haven’t been that responsive. On top of that, if you’re a veteran that wants to go back to school, you get bombarded by for profit schools. Excelsior was one. There’s a couple others, phoenix, they were very aggressive.

A: I know what you mean. You want to know the research, but as soon as they know, it’s piranhas. Certainly they’re interested in helping with your education.

* 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.

A: you should be seeing a star rating structure.

P: yeah, this is exactly what I was talking about. The overall, sometimes, I don’t pay attention to.

* + What do you think this factor means?
  + Would it would be helpful in your decision making process?

Five Star Ratings:

* Institution Overall: on this one, I went over to employment preparation because I feel that’s the whole point of this. My own background, I’ve been out of work for about a year. I’ve been trying to find different programs. The whole point is to go back to work.
* Quality of Classes: a great benefit, something I’d use in weighing the decision for a school.

A: in your mind, is institution overall, what’s the relationship between average rating and average rating details?

P: I see them equally, as the same. That general, I don’t put that much value into because I’m going into the next four categories and put my own weight into it. the employment preparation getting five stars weights a lot heavier than the veteran friendliness and the recruiting.

* Veteran Friendliness: The schools, they have their own counselors and what kind of access they provide for veteran-only areas. the counseling is the big one for me. Getting someone to get one on one attention to get the ball rolling, and if you had someone who knew the gi bill background, that would be a huge factor in deciding.
* Employment Preparation
* Recruiting/Marketing Practices: that’s like a nuisance for me. That’s not a huge deciding factor on this screen, I would say.
  + A: is it something you’d be interested in knowing from them?
  + P: whatever school we’re pretending this one is..i guess that’s a low mark, one star for that. That would be a pretty annoying school. so it’s a benefit, but it’s not a deciding factor type benefit, to know that.
* 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)

P: I’m always interested in the class sizes and the availability of the instructors.

A: we talked a little bit about the “who” earlier. I’d be curious in getting your thoughts on certain people.

* Who do you think should be able to submit ratings for a school?
  + Someone who applied and was accepted: interesteding only if they were talking about the process that got them there. the application, if theere was a counselor involved. Initiating the gi bill benefits. The person has a valuable opinion up to that point, but not necessarily the school.
  + Someone who applied and was rejected: I wouldn’t put much weight on that one.
  + Someone who attended classes, but didn't complete their degree: I would because that is a reflection of me.
  + Someone who finished their degree: yes, I’d be interested because they already got to the point that I’m trying to get to.

A: would ratings be more helpful if they were veterans only or for anyone receiving va education benefits?

P: so children of deceased and everyone else?

A: and spouses. Sometimes you can transfer your benefits

P: I’m more interested in the veterans opininon because that’s more a reflection of what I’m doing.

**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.

A: [had him search for Delaware Tech]

P: [found delaware technical and community college-george-wilmington] I think here, where it says 2 gi bill students [school card], some kind of link to see the reviews right off the bat would get my attention.

A: that’s a good idea. That would be for reviews, like if they had written something or they had a video of them talking about their experience at this school?

P: right. It’s nice to just kind of see the number of how many active students, I’m assuming, that would be. it’s a very small school in a very small state, so I’m not expecting there to be too many. But that’s nice information right off the bat.

A: what about the star rating? Or is it not as important?

P: yes, but I’d like to have the star rating, but then also notated that it’s only based off the two reviews or however many there’d be so far seeing as how there’s only two students.

A: [took him to profile page] if you’d like to scan this to see what’s on here

P: this is very important to me, the housing allowance [benefits panel]. This gets my attention here, too, student veteran groups, I’d be interested in seeing that. I think it’s a good, if not on the first page, the reviews, oh there’s more. I’m scrolling down. This is veteran only complaints? [student feedback]

A: that’s a good question. Would that be what you’d assume by seeing that?

P: that’s what I’d assume, and I’d be curious if there were gi bill complaints. 10 years or so ago, I knew there were some stories where the gi bill wasn’t coming through and va wasn’t making payments so the school was calling on them.

A: how would you figure out of that was veterans or not or a wider array of people?

P: [clicked on “All campuses” ] is this where it should have brought me?

A: do you feel ilke you got the information that you were looking for in this location?

P: no.

A: this page is a little bit hard to make some sense of, but kind of in the middle, just right above that, it talks about complaints submitted to the gi bill feedback system. That narrows down to the va proper.

A: can you find your way to the page where we were?

P: I don’t think I’m getting the page back option.

A: [told him to select the tab] alright. So there’s a little more information on this page to take a look at.

P: I feel like here, [SCO area] I thought they were veteran counselors, but they’re certifying officials. Ok.

A: ok, so you made it all the way to the bottom.

* If ratings were incorporated into the Comparison Tool, where do you think it would make the most sense for the ratings to appear?

P: for my own information, this is concerning to me because I was hoping to get my credits for my military training to transfer over and some of the ACE courses, so that’s a big deciding factor for me. [institution summary]. Alright, back to the top and to where I think the ratings should be going in. Right here would be a nice spot for me [near gi bill students at top] and then I guess the overall, and to be able to expand it, and then the subcategories, would be a benefit.

A: and then thinking about who should be able to give a rating…

P: anyone who’s been accepted and taken a course has a valuable opinion to that. Applied and didn’t get in, I don’t think that weighs in too heavily.

* What are your thoughts on the trustworthiness of ratings that would appear in the Comparison Tool? Why?

P: on the va website, I would trust that it’d be somebody who had access to this, that they’d been vetted as a veteran.

**Post-Task Interview - X minutes**

* Any questions for me?

P: no. this is already up, this website? [ct]

A: [explained to him how to find the comparison tool]

J: [asked about gradereports website] what were you looking on that site?

P: [?] [mentioned it wasn’t as valuable as hearing from a veteran]

J: you were also interested in hearing [?]

C: [asked about how they decide which reviews to read first ] [2-step process]

**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!