**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: Yes, I’ve previously used them. I just graduated.

* + If yes, which benefit are you using?

P: Post-9/11

A: are you planning any school searches or planning to use any benefits in the near future?

P: No

* + - When did you start school?

P:

* + If no, do you plan on using your benefits in the near future?

P:

* + - Which benefit?
    - Where are you in the school selection process?
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before?

P: I don’t think I have.

* + 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?

P: Yeah, like how much weight do I put on them? A lot. I really like hearing what other people have to say, their experiences with it.

* 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: I think I look at both [a scale and stars]. I’m used to 1-5 because I shop on amazon a lot. I want to see, generally, are they in the 4-5 range? If there’s only two people, what does that really tell you, as well?

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

P: Not really.

* Why are these aspects important or not important to you?

P:

* What helps you decide if a rating or review is trustworthy?

P: See, I struggle with that one, truth be told because I know there are a lot of fake reviews out there. I try to look for more proof, like videos. Details help me realize if they’re true.

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

P: I would say they’re not solely, but they’re pretty important in how I make a decision.

A: would you just trust a score or not?

P: to me, just numbers doesn’t give me a fuzzy feeling as actual feedback…I think words, to me, hold more credibility.

A: would you think if it was just numbers or words it would weigh in more on your decision?

P: I think I would look at it, but I wouldn’t hold much weight on it.

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

P: I like that you can look at all of them, you can look at the most recent, you can sort, what’s the good , what’s the bad [amazon]… I like that you can sort and that they have them all available there.

* Have you ever looked at sites to compare schools?

P: honestly, I really didn’t. I don’t even remember how I got an email on an environmental program. I was not planning on going back to school. that was the last thing I wanted to do; it was ridiculous. I got an email about environmental classes, and I was like, ooh, I kind of like these, and then I remembered somebody said I still had benefits.

A: so you looked into a school… that’s kind of random

P: yeah…[?]

A: where did you find information about whether it had veteran programs?

P: on its website

A: did you talk to anyone at the school about the veteran programs?

P: I don’t think I did. I think I sent email, but I don’t think I had actual conversations on the phone

A: where did you end up going to school?

P: university of Maryland, global campus.

A: they just changed its name

P: oh, good. I used to think it was the stupidest name. I was like, oh, man, that’s where I’m going to go.[?]

* + If yes, which ones? What did you like about those sites?

P:

**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.

P:

* 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: I would want to know, was it a good program, did you get a lot out of it, did you get a lot of use out of your education benefit?...There are a lot of schools out there that talk a big game. I’d want to know, is it really good? If there was a veteran program there, did it help you out?

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

P: one of the things that impressed me about the school that I actually wouldn’t have thought to ask at the time, was they had veteran-specific scholarships available to assist veterans if their benefits didn’t catch everything…that would have been helpful to know ahead of time, as well.

* How valuable would that information be in making a decision to attend the school or not?

P:

**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.

P:

* + What do you think this factor means?

P:

* + Would it would be helpful in your decision making process?

P:

Five Star Ratings:

* Institution Overall

P: the institution overlal, I think is generally what do you think of the school, how do they operate, the whole process of being involved with the school.

* Quality of Classes

P: did you have good professors, did you have good information?

* Veteran Friendliness

P: you make it easy to use my benefits, you have support

* Employment Preparation

P: the classes and helping you get a job once you get out

* Recruiting/Marketing Practices

P: I don’t know about that one so much

P: I think institution overall and veteran friendliness [?] are super important.

* 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 was wondering, because a lot of people do need a remote school, I’m wondering if there should be something for how well do the classes do online?...that type of thing. I know it doesn’t make sense as I’m saying the words.

A: right now, it’s a huge consideration

P: a lot of schools haven’t done well with transition. And others have had an online base before…

* Who do you think should be able to submit ratings for a school?

P:

* + Someone who applied and was accepted

P: I don’t think they would be able to speak to the whole experience. They’d be able to speak to the application process. Obviously, if they’re trying to speak to the quality of education, I don’t think they have that vacuum to be able to do that.

* + Someone who applied and was rejected

P: no. I see that people would have a negative response and may be very angry. Could it be a valid anger? Maybe. I think that would change their perspective.

* + Someone who attended classes, but didn't complete their degree

P: I think, absolutely. Was it a personal thing or because of the program? They should be able to speak to all of that.

* + Someone who finished their degree

P: Absolutely

A: what about, should it be veterans only or should it be any education beneficiaries?

P: I think it should be veterans only. there are unique aspects of being a veteran that influence your education, both using the benefits and being flexible. If it’s through the va, it should be veterans only.

**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.

P:

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

P: I actually, now that you pull this up, I did look at this. It didn’t help me decide on a school, but I did look at this.

A: what were you looking for?

P: I don’t know. I was clicking on everything just to see what’s out there. I was playing around a lot on the va site to learn as much as I could about all of it. [did a search for university of Maryland global campus]

P: [on srp] there it is. [opened profile]. And this is all new, right? All of this stuff?

A: the tool has been in existence for a while, but we’ve been making some changes.

P: yeah, because this looks like it has a lot more information than what I saw. It gives a lot more information, all in one nice ittle area instead of having to run around…it has a lot of information in one area. Yeah, I like this information, the way it’s laid out. I wills ay, for the estimated benefits per term, my school didn’t have two semesters necessarily. We had like 3 semesters per year, the way that it was laid out, so this wouldn’t be completely accurate, and that’s because I was in a graduate school, not an undergrad, so. [went on to adjust the school calendar under appropriate accordion] and this full time, part time thing gets a little wonky at grad school level as to how many hours dictate… I do like that, of course, now that I say it, I see all these other things

A: can you talk about that for a second?

P: well, at first, it was just two semesters, and then I see all this information here [calculator fields] and that gives a whole lot more information than I was thinking.

A: …is that confusing?

P: I would ask here whether it’s grad school or undergrad as to how many credits. When I got down here to full time/part time, it’s very difficult, as a grad, I was taking 6 hours a semester, if that, and I know it’s not full time, but I know undergrad, you have to have 12 hours per semester. That would change for graduate. And then over here for term 3, it says $0 tuition and fees. I know that’s not real because they would pay it, at least they did for me [benefits panel]. And then for the yellow ribbon, degree level, im assuming would be undergrad or grad. Division or school, I don’t understand if that would be just for this school. and then the yellow ribbon amount should be autopopulated. I shouldn’t have to figure that out. Kicker bonus, what? [opened modal] oh, yeah. I’m not a highly skilled person. That helps, knowing to go all the way down to fill out this information, to make it more specific over here, does help.

A: great. Well, we got just a little bit off topic, but that was helpful to find out your thoughts. Back to the topic, so if you want to continue looking down this page, and see this information available about umgc…

P: yeah, that’s super helpful though to have the estimated housing and all of that already in there. ooo, cautionary information. I don’t know if that’s the worst best words to use for that! Student complaints, quality of education…yeah, I think that overall, it’s always good to know what the complaints are so that you know exactly what’s important. It puts everything in an automatic negative light. Ooo, ok [as she read the full table and scrolled down]. [scrolled down to bottom] yeah, I think this is all good information to have here. It would have been helpful to have this as I was going through the process instead of going through a whole lot of websites.

A: [asked where ratings should go]

P: I think it would be right up here, right above cautionary information.

A: …there’s an opportunity for positives

P: I had a great experience as a veteran at this school. I’d like to tell people how much they helped me while I was having issues with the va. I’d like to tell other people a heads up of what to ask for.

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

P: I mean, I think you have to take everything with a grain of salt. Everybody’s good may not happen to everybody…the individual has to be smart enough to realize that everything that’s put on the page, this may not apply to all.

A: any other information about ratings that could be covered by this tool?

P: the last page, kind of like amazon with the stars, that you could break out with different categories, I think that is most helpful because that’s what people are used to. Having that type of synopsis with all the comments below, and being able to sort…what are all the 1 star reviews and the 5 star reviews.

A: one thing about this school is that it does have a lot of veteran students and they know how to use computers. This school does have some more student feedback than we’ve seen from other schools, but it also has a significant veteran population than other schools

P: which is pretty funny. There was a two year period between my undergraduate and my graduate school. I did not know how to school online… I was kind of nervous…online education was a whole ‘nother ballpark for me.

A: do you feel tech-savvy now that you’ve done that?

P: no. I think I do for their program. [went to sources link for cautionary info]

A: oh, yeah, you want to check out…

P: yeah, where does this come from?

**Post-Task Interview - X minutes**

* Any questions for me?

P:

J: [asked about her veteran experience at the school]

P: [mentioned that the veteran group directed her to scholarship opportunities when she was problems receiving back pay the va owed her]

J: [asked about online classes and ratings she’d be interested]

P: [mentioned accessibility to professors would be helpful]

C: is there anything about the veteran student experience that you think isn’t covered by the rating categories we saw earlier? [online availability, ease of online]

C: other than your school having an environmental program you were interested in, were there other factors that influenced your decision to go therel? [it was also all online, they waived her application fee and she didn’t have to take the gmat]

C: would there have to be a minimum number of ratings for that to influence your opinion about a school? [subjective, would take it with a grain of salt. If she sees 2 reviews, won’t be nearly as influenced]

P: I’m so glad that you guys are doing this [? – GREAT QUOTE ]

**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!