**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’ve not used it yet, but I’m in the process of applying to use it

A: which one?

P: The post-9/11

A: Have you selected a school yet?

P: Yes, I’m leaning towards \_\_\_governor online

A: When do you think you’re starting school?

P: Either in August or September

A: so you’re leaning towards a school. can you tell me about the selection process?

P: [?] doing it online is definitely preferable. I’m leaning towards western governor’s because [?]

A: how are you going about finding out about schools?

P: I’m in north Carolina. I reached out to some of the staples schools. Some schools didn’t have online programs, and I’m trying to keep my full time day job, so that didn’t fit with my schedule…some colleges are harder to get in touch than others. Like NC State, they called me back after a week or so. I know the veteran’s office, when you don’t get paid for a week or a month, that’s someone that you’d want to get in touch with. So for western governor’s that was reassuring.

* + If yes, which benefit are you using?

P:

* + - 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:

* + 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?

P:

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

P: I always look up reviews, generally. I always want to look at things that are doing well. Sometimes, if it’s an odd thing, I look to the wayside. Sometimes, after reviews, it’s worth waiting to see if it’s on sale. Those are the two things I look at, and brand reputation as well.

* 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: yes, definitely. That’s a big part of it, the stars and I’ll read the descriptions. If we have 3 products in front of me and one of them has 3 stars and 200 reviews and the other has 4 stars and 100 reviews, I’m not even going to look at it.

A: how do you make sense of that?

P: it depends on what’s on the market. If all of the items have 3 stars, I’m not going to hold it against them. [?] that’s usually something I don’t do. I try to buy things that last.

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

P: usually, personal experiences, so stuff that doesn’t surround the product, so if someone complains about shipping, that’s not important. Or if someone calls customer service and they have an issue, that’s not important because [it’s not about the product]

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

P:

* What helps you decide if a rating or review is trustworthy?
* P: I try to read the middle ground and the lowest ratings and usually find more truth there than with the people that are fully satisfied.
* Do ratings influence your ultimate decision? If so, how much?

P: I would say at least a good 75%

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

P:

* Have you ever looked at sites to compare schools?

P: there’s rate my professors. Some colleges have their own forums with reviews, but usally I don’t base too much on them because they can be skewed. Or they might have facebook pages ratings. One thing I found interesting is college ads, ads they’ve put out. So if you have people that are disgruntled, they’ll complain on an ad on facebook. That’s where they can give their opinion. So the comments for GWU, I saw some comments that talked about issues with the online format. Overall, the comments were a lot more positive than other universities that I saw or was considering. If you google a university, usually google has their own rating system as well, but it’s hard to find their specific reviews because each department can be different. Usually you have to sift through all the departments to find the one you’re considering.

A: have you come across the gi bill comparison tool?

P: yes, I’ve used that when I was going through separation with the military. That was really helpful in finding out how much they’re paying or in finding out which schools have military friendliness, for example. When I was getting out, I was looking for a school, but that didn’t work out. I feel that it’s geared more for if you’re going to school full time. Military friendliness is a big deal and everything, but when it comes to online schools, I feel like they’re going to be mostly on even ground.

A: we don’t come across a lot of people that have used the comparison tool

P: yes, we went through it during my taps course. Originally I wanted to get a master’s in business, but I shifted gears. I wanted to find a school that had the best internships [?] I wanted something that was oriented for the military

A: can you talk a little bit about that?

P: [?] a lot of people that do join do it straight out of high school. you might have skipped out of the college experience.[?] I think it’s good to have a ratings system from people with a like mindset. it’s important to hear things from people that are in your same position.

* + 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: [?] also, the veterans office and how responsive they are and how much they want you to do yourself because it can be a confusing process. I know when I got my bachelor’s I went to school with a lot of military. They would come in with varying needs. If you’re relying on that income, you won’t be able to get in touch with people when you need it. Overall, education quality is important. The professors, and how many students there are for each person.

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

P:

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

P: I guess you want it to be as uncomplicated as possible when you’re going for your degree, and it’s adding a lot of new factors than people are used to, typically in the military, to a routine…so you want to know what to expect when you go in….so knowing there’s flexibility and that you can mold it to your current routine is good. Knowing that your veteran’s office is helpful is good. And then professor quality…

**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: I would assume it’s the general experience you have when at the college. I think that’s more applicable to NC. [?] if the staff is friendly, everything like that

* Quality of Classes

P: quality of classes ties in earlier to what I was saying, earlier making sure that you have everything you’ll need to be productive once you get out of college

* Veteran Friendliness

P: I think this is to have everything important you’ll need as far as your paperwork

* Employment Preparation

P: helping to prepare your resume, helping to prepare your [?] is also imporant

* Recruiting/Marketing Practices

P: I’m guessing this is talking about how they’re bringing in students and if they’re blowing up your inbox, but also, does the college talk to you after you leave. That can be kind of important.

A: which of these would be most helpful in your decision-making process?

P: personally, it would probably be quality of classes, first. It would be a tie between that and veteran friendliness. I would say quality of classes because veteran friendliness, you can fix issues on your own, but if there are bad instructors, you can’t do anything about that

A: not helpful?

P: recruiting/marketing practices

* 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 don’t know if flexibility, I feel that’d be hard to quantify. Different colleges approach courses differently. Flexibility could be one of them. Like flexibility in completing your courses. Is it selfpaced? Is it a traditional class everyday?

A: anything else?

P: not that I can think of off-hand.

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

P:

* + Someone who applied and was accepted

P: I would say that would be helpful because they’ll know what the process is for admission, and that’s a big part of it.

* + Someone who applied and was rejected

P: I don’t know if they would be relevant as far as the rating system is concerned. if they can leave a comment talking about it, if they didn’t like something in the process talking about it. I can say they’d be equally as relevant as the person that was accepted but not as relevant as far as the ratings are concerned

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

P: I’d say that would be an important rating because you don’t know if the college was a factor in them not completing their degree or if there was something a different college could have done

* + Someone who finished their degree

P: I would say they’re important, as well

A: should it be just veterans giving rating or anyone receiving va education benefits, including spouses and children?

P: that’s an interesting question. I think they should all be able to. I think all inclusive as far as the ratings situation is concerned. I doubt they would change if they are all going through the same process. The child’s situation would be similar to their parent, as far as having to move. A lot of the same struggles are there.

A: what would be an incentive for you to give feedback on a school?

P: [? Gift card?]

A: if you got an email saying, hey, you just completed the 6th semester of your school. would you like to provide feedback on it?

P: yes as long as it’s not like spam. [?]

**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: that was another thing that was helpful. It was helpful knowing the tuition outright. [had looked up Raleigh] I would imagine the ratings should go on this page [had clicked into campbell university – Raleigh campus] if you put it on the other page, it would be too busy [srp]. So yeah, I’d put it down here, because it sort of goes along with the student feedback. I liked, when I was searching through this, seeing the pass and fail rate, so the number of people that actually finished their degrees. Does that mean that there’s a disproportionate number of people not finishing their degree, that it has to do with the college?

A: [explained why student outcomes got taken out] excellent memory on that, about the stuff that was in there. so you think ratings would fit with student feedback?

P: yes, definitely

A: talk to me about how we’re weighing the complaints vs. ratings.

P: If I can see the complaint applying to me, then it would be important, but if I see it not applying to me, then I would negate it. I can’t remember some specific cases, but I saw some complaints that I would toss out the window because I wouldn’t see it applying to me… I would say the complaints definitely have an impact, but definitely not as much as the overall for the school. the other helpful thing about the website, I had the option of choosing between the post-9/11 and the mgi, now it’s not much of an option since everyone that joins is 9/11, but it’s still helpful to compare.

A: good to know. We hear a lot of people that join are now post-9/11. It’s good to hear people are using it to do the comparison for the benefits.

P: yeah. The good thing about the post-9/11 is that it covers a lot of different programs, but if you go to a traditional program, it’s good to see how much you might be missing out on

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

P: as far as the ratings being valid?

A: yes

P: I wouldn’t assume they aren’t valid. If anything, I would trust it more than a traditional review website where a college can just pay for reviews.

A: why would you trust it more?

P: I can see a college trying ot get more reviews on this site, being that it’s not as publicised. I feel that it would be harder to manipulate the reviews overall

A: what do you think would be required of the people coming in to leave a review? Do you think there would need to be any verification of any sort?

P: I would think so. Knowing that the va knows who’s using benefits, using something like id.me or being able to link to the curriculum, to their account, it should be able to verify everything. Either that or you could do the whole amazon thing and have verified reviews, and unverified reviews.

**Post-Task Interview - X minutes**

* Any questions for me?

P:

C: \*you mentioned you heard about the comparison tool during taps class - how much did they teach you about the comparisom tool?

[they had their own computers at this time. pulled up a powerpoint, they walked them through how it worked]

C: at what point in their education journey do you think people should be able to give feedback? [thought that this could be broken out into separate areas for people who are attending, who might have finished school. you might not remember what you had complaints about years down the line]

C: have you had much contact with your new school’s veterans office?

[some, mainly for the enrollment process]

J: [asked a follow up on breaking up the separate groups of people who can apply] [mentioned it could be one group for who’s attending, another for [?]].

**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!