**Discussion Guide for Comparison Tool Redesign (Veterans and Beneficiaries)**

**P1 – Travis Gagnon**

*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're going to talk about your education journey - what's important to you in selecting schools, how you go about finding information and ways to streamline your experience with the VA.

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 are not testing your ability. 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 the 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 - 5 minutes**

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

* Are you currently using or have you ever used VA education benefits?
  + No I fit into that category of looking to start using them in the near future. I had started doing a program through American Military University which is a part of American Public University. I’m Coast Guard. They have a program called Coast Guard tuition assistance. I ended up getting into a Coast Guard grad program and I was able to get a degree, but now I have the chance to go back to that original degree. So I was strongly considering using the VA funding as an option. The Post 9/11 GI bill.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using?
    - Was that benefit yours or was it transferred to you?
    - When did you start school?
  + If no, do you plan on using your benefits in the near future?
    - Which benefit?
    - Is that benefit yours or was the benefit transferred to you?
    - Where are you in the school selection process?
      * I would be interested in using them again, but if I could find a school I could transfer those credits, a more prestigious school. To get a degree or finish a degree. I would be interested in that too.
      * Prestigious? I forget the acronym for the company that does the school rankings…I would just Google and search the rankings for the program I want to do. It was actually a masters degree in management that I wanted to do. I’m interested in changing that to an MBA. I would just start off with the top MBA online programs. I would definitely be interested in selective duty. The opportunity to do that remotely in my free time is critical.
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? No.
  + If yes, what did you use it for?
  + How did you hear about it?
  + Do you remember when you used it (while researching schools, after you had picked a school)?

**First Topic: Researching and Picking Schools - 15 minutes**

Let's talk about when you first decided to go to school.

* What made you decide to go back to school?
  + So I’m trying to…the Coast Guard values continued education. It’s a big part of our promotion process. I’m trying to make a career out of it. I. have 14 years of service and would like to make it to 20. Degrees and programs show that you are engaged in self-development. I want to prepare myself for the time after the military. I think the MBA would help. I live in the DC area and I think that degree would be applicable.
  + We can activate the Post 9/11 benefits while still on Active Duty as I understand it. I don’t know if all branches of service can do that. Maybe I’m wrong.
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + I think probably the price. How much am I going to have to pay out of pocket. What’s the difference in what the school is charging and what the VA will cover. What’s the bottom line going to be for me.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
    - Online search engines – no specific tool. I think it would be beneficial for me to research through the VA and I’m somewhat familiar with the Yellow Ribbon program where some schools are more advantageous for military members. So I would be interested in finding a list of schools that participated in that program.
    - The one I used in the past was US News and also Princeton Review. Princeton review sounds biased to me, but I would feel pretty confident in those. I might look at a few for comparison. One that the VA offered, I would be interested in. I would be interested to see how easy it was for them to get funding and how supportive the school was of Veterans. Without doing a lot of digging, they are working out of Princeton…if they are consistently putting themselves at the top, then there’s some bias there.
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
    - So it was a while ago, I would say the difficulty at the time. I hadn’t taken the GRE and I wanted to take a Masters program without having to take that exam. Obviously they aligned their costs with military assistance. It just seemed like a logical choice to get a degree done.
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find?
    - I’m not sure…it’s kind of difficult to recall since it was like 7 years ago.
* If you've started school, is there anything you know now about the school that you wish you had known earlier?
  + I remember it being a lot of work…much more than I expected. And I was only taking one class. The class I was taking was having me write 6 page papers every week and it was a lot more work for a not very prestigious degree. Not compared to Harvard. I got good at cranking out papers.
* Are there any specific programs that you as a military-connected student are interested in?

**Second Topic: Comparison Tool - 15 minutes**

*Facilitator brings up CT* I'm going to bring up the GI Bill Comparison Tool so we can walk through it together. As we go through it, let me know what catches your eye or what information you think is valuable.

Landing page:

* What would you do on this first page?
  + So first drop down makes sense. The second one, I would definitely want to click on the Learn more…I’m pretty sure its the Post 9/11, just to make sure I was eligible. If there was a way to check your status (education benefits eligibility), I don’t know if there’s a way to do that. Type in your DoD number from your CAC, I think that would be great to know. The next dropdown…okay yeah, I would be the 36 month+. Type of institution…I might be interested…well not me personally…maybe I’m interested in uh…if that was separated into bachelor’s degree, masters degree and schools were sorted according to that. Maybe selecting Masters degree would eliminate schools that do not offer that. Down on the next section I think that’s self-explanatory. I would be interested in online only. Maybe online and in person if I found a program that met my needs if I only needed to go for a couple weekends or a couple times a year. Or something if it was in my local area. I hadn’t considered that previously.
  + Housing allowance – as active duty, I don’t believe I would be eligible for housing allowance since I’m already receiving one.
  + So obviously a school, location or employer name. I would also want an option to search for degree type, like if you know what degree you wanted. Like MBA in my case. This seems much more generic. If you searched employer name, I don’t know…Deloyte? I don’t know what I would expect to come up.
  + School – since we have in person online. I might search Georgetown.

Search Results page:

* What do you think of the search results?
  + I see you can narrow it down on the left hand side to state and country. I can see I probably want the first one, but to be sure. (Amy selected District of Columbia). I might find out here that Georgetown doesn’t have a business school. Or maybe they don’t separate it. I would probably go with the first choice. At the bottom I saw a way to select Yellow Ribbon
  + Amy selected – I would expect if they didn’t have the program for it to not populate.
  + So I have one quick add – the warnings and school closings. Due to corona, that might be something that interested me if I was going to go in person. I don’t even know if that’s an option. If people were forced to take classes online if they didn’t want to. I’m not sure what that will do.
  + I would probably just trial and error (clicking it)…or click the Learn more. So it’s not related to the corona as I expected.
  + Do you see the school you're looking for?
  + What do you think of the information you see?

School profile:

* What do you think of what you're seeing?
  + This seems like its tailored toward a Bachelor’s degree. I’m looking where it says 4 year program so I don’t know if I would. I wouldn’t believe the information I’m seeing on the right hand side for the cost of the school. So I would ummm…I would probably go to the previous page and go to one of the other Georgetown schools. I guess I would try the last one. The one for professional education and it didn’t get me much further. So I think maybe at this point I would go straight to the Georgetown website to see if they even offer an MBA. Which is probably research I would have done before coming to this site.
  + Amy pops back to original, prompts for more info on this – I would click on those pluses further down (EYB). Opened Enrolled…maybe switch to Part time…not sure what I would do. Maybe half or less. Learning format and education…okay so it’s in-person online. Can I switch that to Online only? Or maybe they don’t offer online classes? I didn’t notice a change. So I would research the school to see if they offer an online option. I would click on the next tab to see...so I see I would have$30,000 in tuition. So I would look for additional scholarships. I would click Learn more on scholarships…okay. Not helpful. I don’t know that that told me anything.
  + I would definitely want to do Yellow ribbon program. Not sure if eligible. So not sure. Clicked Learn more. From what I saw there I would probably want to do it. I don’t know what a kicker bonus is. Click Learn more. So I don’t think I’m eligible for that.
  + I see checkmarks and I assume that means they participate in Yellow Ribbon and do have Student Veteran groups.
  + Interested in learning more about them? I would want to know how they participate in the Yellow ribbon program. How are they participating? What level?
  + Student Vet Group? Honestly, not really. They’re from my experience. I went to George Washington and are known to have one of the best Veteran groups and I didn’t find myself very engaged with them. It wasn’t important to me.
  + So that looks good that there haven’t been any student complaints. I assume that’s just students who are utilizing GI Bill.
  + The accreditation is important – particularly if I was looking for a degree. I would want an accredited school – it proves that degree is worthwhile. Interested in the fact that they give credit for military training.
  + What stands out to you?
  + What do you think of the information you see?
  + From what you see here, what information would be most helpful to you?
  + What information is NOT important to you?
  + Is there anything else you would like to see here?

Are you familiar with any of the following programs:

* Student Vet Groups
* STEM Scholarship
* Yellow Ribbon
* Would you be interested in learning more about these programs?

**Final Topic: Making It Easier - 5 minutes**

We've talked about researching and picking a school and also the Comparison Tool.

* If you could make the process of selecting a school simple and easy, talk me through what the ideal process would look like.
  + For a comparison, I think the out of pocket costs across the board. Say I selected Georgetown, University of Maryland and select all of those schools and see the cost breakdown. Granted you could do that yourself and compare it. Sort of like you were cost-comparing items on Amazon.
  + I don’t know if VA would be putting in a ranking structure? I don’t know if that’s a place VA wants to do. Given they process so many students, I think they could provide input. I don’t know if the government could do that
  + What criteria might you think they would use? – So many different criteria, each criteria could have its own rankings. Georgetown ranks 2nd for overall processing of VA funding or rank 10th for application of Yellow Ribbon program. They rank 20th for best MBA in the country. I don’t think there could be an overall ranking because people are looking for so many things.
  + You talked about being able to find schools based on type of degree (masters)? Are there any other ways you would want to find/filter down schools?
    - I would want the ability to go to another dropdown and select type of Masters. Some of the more common ones. Help narrow down search who isn’t going somewhere else
  + Scholarships – looking for? It looks like a way to just input scholarship money I’ve already received. Was looking more for potential scholarships
  + What type of information about a school would be critical to know?
  + What people or websites would you talk to to help make a decision?
  + Are there any parts of the Comparison Tool that you would change?
  + Are there any parts of the Comparison Tool you would keep the same?

**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!