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

**P10 – Paula Brown**

*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?
  + I am not currently – but I have used them in the past. Planning to use them in the future. I would like to start using them next semester.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using? Post 9/11 GI Bill. I can’t remember which chapter that is.
    - Was that benefit yours or was it transferred to you? My benefit.
    - 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 had attended a school before and I’m trying to decide if I want to go back to that school or choose another one.
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? No, I didn’t even know that existed.
  + 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?
  + I’m looking at going back into the workforce, but I want to get a job where I can work from home. To do that, I would want to get a different degree from what I currently have – so I have to go back to school.
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + That they have online classes and that they have…I want a school that has a satellite office nearby. Every once in a while I like to go in to the office and talk to people face to face. There are some classes I would like to converse with a teacher just because of the difficulty for me. Some things I’m very good at doing online and other types of things, I might need a teacher to walk me through it, depending on the class level or topic.
  + I have done research – I have reached out to two different schools and they’ve agreed to review my transcript, but they don’t have a satellite campus near me. So that’s kind of put them out of the running for me. The big deal for me...there was one school I started to attend and they lost they’re accreditation and that was devastating for me…and that put me back (ITT Tech). And ITT Tech was around for so long and those credits didn’t transfer to many schools. And that’s why I’m considering going back to Strayer because they did agree to take those credits. I also have approval with my post 9/11 to go there, so everything is already set and it would be really easy to go there, but I’m not happy with the selection of degrees at this satellite campus. Not all of the degrees are offered at this location.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
    - I go online and I always make sure the colleges are accredited. I look at what schools are local or which ones have a local campus. And I look at their degree plan to see if there’s anything I’m interested in or if it will go along with what I currently have. Then I’ll see if they’ll take my credits – and that wittles things down pretty narrowly. It gets very very small, very quick.
    - A lot of the time, it takes a lot of effort for schools to say if they will take credits from ITT tech. A lot of them will tell me they will review any colleges that were accredited, but ITT Tech has been difficult. Anything I had then is difficult to get approved. Even though they were accredited at the time, all the time I spent there…almost any other school hasn’t accepted it. It’s almost been a waste of time and money. That’s been my biggest frustration.
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find?
* If you've started school, is there anything you know now about the school that you wish you had known earlier?
* 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?
  + Opened Cumulative service and changed to 70%, in person and online, typed strayer, selected Huntsville location.
  + Oh…I find it interesting that is says how many people are going here that are GI Bill students. That just caught my eye. I would have thought it would have been more. I remember when I was taking classes, my entire class was full. This would know better than I. That just jumped out to me. I like that it gives other locations, like if I moved, where else I could go. That’s a concern for me – obviously.
  + I think that told me everything that I needed to know.
  + What would you do next? I think the next thing I would look at and I would put online only and see if it would change my housing allowance – and she refreshed the page. If it changed it, I would definitely take in-person classes . Keeps hitting refresh to “activate” filters – but it just keeps resetting military details
  + Prompted to open Strayer – Huntsville
  + I see it breaks down your tuition, your housing, your book stipend. The first thing that I notice is that it shows you the estimated housing allowance compared to all the other locations for Strayer. Gives you the contact details – for the physical address. Whether it’s accredited – because that’s a big deal for me obviously. They give credit for military training – that’s good. Veteran tuition policy…oh that’s good. Let’s see (clicked it…and Page Not Found). Some colleges will make you pay even if the…I’ve had this problem with my daughter. Colleges will make you pay if they didn’t either have the right paperwork in time, but would reimburse you after they got the money from the VA. It was a really irritating process – I mostly had that issue with my daughter’s [school]. Not really with Veterans, but mostly with dependents. I like that you can review the school’s policy…though I guess you can’t read that page right now. If you can review it right here and they say if you don’t have the paperwork, you have to pay and we’ll reimburse you, that’s good to know.
  + A phone number [would be helpful]. There’s an address…most people don’t physically go there. I do see the link (website), but a phone number or an email would be more helpful. People don’t just walk in doors anymore – especially with COVID. Usually when there’s a dot (you are here dot) – usually that’s a link. I don’t know if that’s something you’re considering. Normally that’s a link to like a map. It’s good to know it’s a for profit school and not a public, because that does make people…it’s a decision factor for some people. Opened scholarships and other VA funding…so I see what you’re doing here. Clicked Yes on kicker bonus. So when I did my GI Bill, I did buy into the kicker. You understand when you buy into a kicker, then you get an additional amount of money each month. If you push that button, it allows you to put that into your calculations. Does it put it in your housing allowance…I don’t really see where it went .. If I push No…where did it go? Ok yes, housing allowance. Figured it out. I see now. I thought that’s where it went. That’s fun.
  + Ok so, one thing I know about this location is that there is little to no transportation, no dormitories, no locations for food. You have to travel to get anything to eat. I don’t know how all inclusive you’re trying to get, but if you’re helping a student decide if they’re trying to go to school here. A lot of people who have never gone to this location and not able to access a map, you wouldn’t be able to know its in an industrial park area, so you wouldn’t know that it’s secluded. This location wouldn’t be friendly to someone who didn’t have their own transportation, place to live, food…not a location that would be friendly to someone who wasn’t established.
  + This location – being in the military you have a lot of satellite learning locations throughout the bases you’ve been on – you’ve seen a lot of satellite colleges. This satellite location has a library – that is not on this page. I say that because it’s something a student might want to know. The satellite I went to at ITT Tech didn’t have one, but they had a computer lab. Those kinds of things – the student likes to know. Does the college have these types of amenities. These are all important to the student. Satellite colleges come in such a wide variety of flavors – you can get just bare bones that its rooms and free floating teachers or so involved that you have every amenity possible (library, cafeteria, etc.). You just never know until you get there. I started going to satellite schools in 1998…I’ve lost count of the number of satellite schools I’ve been to. I’ve gone all the way through masters level classes. You get every flavor in between of satellite colleges. Some will even have almost a full cafeteria. Like Priceline – what amenities does this hotel have. It has this or it has that. Does it have a lending closet? ITT Tech had a computer lending closet – if you didn’t have a computer, you could lend one.
  + How were you finding out if schools were accredited?
    - I would ask the colleges – used to have to look them up in books, or ask them in their offices. Ask which agency are you accredited to – and you look up online at the agency. Particularly after ITT I would go and check since I’d been burned.
  + When you’re trying to find out if schools will accept credits, talk me through that process.
    - I would initially start talking to a school counselor or liaison and start an email conversation and talk about the idea of transferring credits and they would usually send me a form asking me to sign something to review. And then I would send them my transcripts. Usually I just talk to someone in admissions – they tell me it doesn’t have to be a Veteran liaison. That comes in with financial aid.

Search Results page:

* What do you think of the search results?
  + 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?
  + 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.
  + 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!