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

**P5 – Matthew Carrillo (Bene)**

*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 currently using a Veteran’s benefits. I’m a child (of a Veteran). GI Bill – don’t know which one off the top of my head. I’m currently using it.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using?
    - Was that benefit yours or was it transferred to you?
    - When did you start school?
      * Fall of 2018, started using at that time
      * I’m currently at tail end of 3rd year getting ready to go to Senior year. Looking to get into career instead of more school.
      * Tracking the benefit? My mom and I knew it would cover me for my undergrad so we haven’t been tracking it. I’m taking also a Winter semester – so no, we haven’t really been tracking it.
      * Fall of 2018 was right out of high school. Mom is the Veteran.
  + 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?
* 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?
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + So going back then, my mom….we spent most of our time in Virginia and her last time was in Alabama. So one of the things that was important to me was coming back to Virginia. It felt the most like home. I applied to about 5 colleges in Virginia. I guess that was what I was most interested in.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
    - So the high school I was attending they did a decent job making sure we knew how to scout for colleges. How to do some applying. I can’t remember the website, but there was a site we used to see how our scores stood up. How our SAT scores stood up to the existing student body.
    - I had been from northern Virginia – so I looked around those locations. From there, I looked at Tech. Obviously at Radford, where I’m at now. And seeing how I stacked up with the rest of the student body.
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
    - I had applied to Tech and I didn’t get in. I kind of feel like setting expectations before you get in wasn’t good, but it all worked out.
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find?
    - I think being able to kind of understand the departments better. I knew I wanted to go into Computer Science. But there wasn’t anything for me to learn more about the departments without me going to the schools. I’d been looking at George Mason, but I didn’t have the tools to really look and understand the different departments.
    - What information would have helped you understand the departments better? Knew Radford had a department, but didn’t realize how good it was – where students are going afterward. Being able to see that more clearly. Different certifications the departments offer. I thought it was just CompSci
    - Knowing the professors and their backgrounds might have helped. Once you’re on campus for a while you eventually get the campus culture, but you really have to get in it to understand it.
* 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?
  + So unfortunately I haven’t been able to connect to those groups. I’ve seen stuff in my emails. I guess they can see that you’re using the GI Bill. I personally haven’t reached out and attended those events.
  + I think something at the time…the full benefits of being able to be considered in-state. We assumed we wouldn’t get those since we had cut ties…once we got deeper into it, we realized that we would be able to get the full benefits.

**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?
  + I’d put in Radford…the different statuses, I would say Child. I would go ahead and look at the different benefits, I assume the Post9/11. Type of institutions would be schools. Let’s do in-person and online.

Search Results page:

* What do you think of the search results?
  + I see Radford University and others that are similar searches. The tuition and all of that is important. I’m assuming this is what I would get. Not sure about the 80% (tuition - that was benefit level he selected)
  + 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?
  + My estimated benefits would be very important. Let’s see if I change some stuff over here (cumulative numbers). I’d seen that there were different percentages – and I’m interested to see if it would calculate a different percentage. I see I can look at scholarships. He added a scholarship…ok, yeah I see. Clicked online and updated…did you see anything change? I don’t think I did…redid it and noticed the change. It’s definitely helpful seeing how it affects the benefits you’re receiving. Clicked Learn more about online learning. And I think having this explain it all is helpful.
  + Veteran programs – I’m assuming these are the different programs at the school. I can see all the different child sites and how much cost is.
  + Student feedback – I assume this is where I want to put good or bad reviews. Cautionary, so I guess more bad. Certifying officials…I’m assuming these are the people I can contact. I know Gail, she helps whenever we’re getting tuition paid. Additional information…oh okay that’s interesting, you can see how many other people are receiving benefits at this school.
  + The estimate your benefits section – I think that’s cool. To be able to tinker with it. If you’re between Tech and Radford and you can see you get more benefits at one school. I think it’s cool to be able to see how many other students are currently receiving benefits. Other than that – you don’t really get to see anything here (student complaints)
  + Something else that would be interesting. Going back if I could do it…I might tab over to see the school’s diversity. They’re standardized test scores, what you need to get in. If I was going back, this was a tool I would enjoy to you and would have actively seeked out.
  + Diversity – So maybe if there was another link. One of the many factors students look into is diversity – different ethnicities of those attending. An all white school or if there’s a good range of diversity. I think that’s something students would be actively seeking.
  + Yellow ribbon – I hadn’t heard about it personally. No one here at Radford is really receiving it.
  + Learned eligible for in-state benefits: They were moving back to in-state and when they learned the requirements, it was up in the air about whether he would be eligible. Interacting with the resources they found out that he would be able to get in-state.
  + 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.
  + So I think it starts with high school counselors, conversations with family. When I was looking at colleges, it was assumed I would be going. I wanted to go. My parents knew I wanted to go. They both had military backgrounds. So if you met the requirements, you were going to military school. There’s a little more involved with a civilian school.
  + More involved with civilian school? Short on time? Parents talked to a recruiter. With her experience applying to different colleges, she doesn’t have the same experience. You have to do the leg work. Filling out applications and essays. We knew about it, but didn’t fully understand all it would take.
  + What type of information about a school would be critical to know?
    - In hindsight, seeing the results of prior students – graduation rates. Getting to see where students are going afterwards. One of the things I was most looking at – test scores, making sure I’m in the range. Having been in school for a while, I’m more interested in grad rates and where they went.
    - Improvements? Looking at it right now, I think it’s a great tool where there’s a lot of ways to look at more of what you’re looking at. Maybe one other thing is being able to favorite some schools. Instead of having to tab over, maybe favorite it and I can see the schools I favorited from my profile instead of having to look for it again.
  + 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!