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

**P4 – Tessa Snodgrass**

*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 haven’t, but currently in the process of trying to go in the Spring. My husband has used them. I’m a Veteran and a dependent so we’re trying to work through the best way to use it. Mine has a longer expiration since I was in later, so if we can save it for one of my kids. I got the full Post 9/11, he got partial. That calculation is a bit daunting. That’s the main status for where we’re at. My husband did the transfer when he got, just a couple of months. He’s in the limbo where the expiration got extended, but when we go in there, it’s showing expired. The VA is trying to determine if its expired or not. The act that just passed was supposed to extend it. But there was a two month window where it wasn’t working.
  + 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?
      * So there’s a couple of options. I’ve been looking at online options or there’s one of the tech state extensions is nearby in Mclean in Fort Hood. So I’m looking at that program for advanced education. The biggest thing is trying to figure out credit from classes I took in the military. Some colleges will recognize so I’m in that process trying to get all that translated through the education office. So that matters if one college will say “oh you’ve got this”. Then that’s advantageous. I had a lot of education in the military and go from there!
      * Military classes or accredited university? It was a mix. It was a DoD program that was through an accredited university and the certification expired and wasn’t renewed. It kind of came out that I got the certificate from DoD and I got credit with them, but not the diploma per se. Or the transcript.
* 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?
  + I retired six years ago and then kind of focused on being a stay at home mom. All of my kids are in school for the first time, so it’s time to move on to the next step…you know, what do I want to do with the rest of your life?
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + Accessibility – being within 30-45 minute drive or remote is very important. That’s probably the most important, I would say. As much as I would like to branch out…more schools not that much further. But it doesn’t make sense to commute an hour and half each day.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
    - I’ve had a little bit of trouble, getting the right POC. Or they don’t have a person or the website isn’t routing the right way. Like I call and ask and get crickets…we don’t even do the GI Bill. That junction between the GI Bill and the civilian knowledge I guess
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find?
    - Yeah, several times we’ve tried to look up technical programs that would be covered under the GI program and we’ve never been able to get information on who’s over it and really any info on the program. It’s been a couple different programs – the first one is the Trade Schools for welding because my husband was very interested in that. There were several schools that had that, but it was like they didn’t want to do it. Or they didn’t want to bridge that knowledge gap. Other time – I had read about a computer programming for myself and I don’t know it was just hard to track down information on what school was doing it, was it online. They sound interesting and a great way to use your GI Bill, but in actuality, it’s hard to nail down details. It was being offered by VA. Especially with my husband it’s frustrating – if we don’t get it extended, then it expires while he’s applying. It’s a waste and it’s a shame.
    - I was working through the local rep. They kept categorizing us under the Austin education department and he was just not user friendly and it’s been horrible for many years to do anything with him. And I appealed to the regional manager to have us transferred to McLean and they finally did that in the last month.
* 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.

I’ve used disability and health care on a regular basis. I haven’t been on…I’ve checked my GI Bill to see if it properly transferred to my kids. So I did verify that and I guess that’s about it.

Landing page:

* What would you do on this first page?
  + Let’s see…when I look through it has Veteran status and 9/11 bill..that’s the first thing I checked. 36 months.

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?
  + Now when I first started looking through I was trying to find out what do I have, how much? So I figured out all that and I’m past that….other than that would click the Learn more. Typed Texas A&M…scrolled down and dropdown disappeared...went back to dropdown…so I think this is the one that’s near me (EXT SV EMCY MED SRV…that says college station so I’m not sure on that. I thought it was, but it does say college station…scrolled down to school location. So it doesn’t list the extension by me here…so I see there’s 3 more…so no, it doesn’t show it. It’s in Killeen or Parker Heights. That does give some interesting options. The other thing I would be interested in is if I can search by zip code. Returned to Landing page. So I’ll put “Georgetown, tx”…oh boy. All the Georgetowns…oh, too funny. Hmm….I don’t see what I’m looking for. Changed to Killeen, and clicked enter. Lots of central Texas college (does not look at second page). Typed Harker Heights. 5 results. Prompted to try Killeen, and go to 2nd page. Oh there we go…I think that’s the one that I was thinking about.

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?
  + Opened T&M…it’s good to see tuition and fees, what’s paid. I’m just nosey so I’ll just start (Opened schools costs and calendar). So that tells me that they have other programs that might help. The Yellow Ribbon and I don’t know what the others are. I know Yellow Ribbon can help with uncovered costs. To learn more – I would click on it and see. Opened Yellow ribbon – so looks like it’s more for private school or higher degrees. Yeah, so I may not be eligible for that. I thought it was disabled veterans but now it says Purple Heart.
  + How find out if eligible? First thing is look at fact sheet and kind of go from there. So there’s eligibility…so it’s who MAY be eligible. It’s possible. I like how it shows the different schools and where they are at and the different estimated housing. Just to compare cost of living – where are you going to get the most bang for your buck. Some of these schools I didn’t even know were there. So I’m going down…it shows POCs, but it doesn’t show any contact information which would be nice. Though I know those things change regularly. So they do offer credit for military training and independent study.
  + Most helpful – I guess first and foremost, what’s covered and knowing if you’re going to have any out of pocket expenses. With all the horror stories out there, making sure its not a scam situation. No student complaints. It’s affiliated with a big school.
  + Info you would like to see? Maybe a link to their military person or to their GI bill…sometimes you have to apply through the school…so I’ve been told, I don’t know if that’s changed.

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 if I was looking at a wide range of schools, I would put in my local area and then kind of go from there (Selected Texas from State). I guess the first thing I would do is compare cost of school and what’s covered. Some of this it’s completely covered. Some of it is a portion. The only thing that might be neat about the process…like in Best Buy and there is a box where you say compare and you see them side by side and everything is lined up. I know some schools will accept military credit…I might add that here (Programs). That might be another thing that’s important.
  + Any of those items important? Not for me personally. For my husband, this OJT/apprenticeship might be important. For me, it’s important that it’s covered and it’ll be a good program for a career in the future.
  + How to tell if it’s a good program? I would go in and see…this one doesn’t pay anything in tuition, but they’ll pay housing and books. I wonder why that is. Who knows what their tuition is…well interesting. I don’t know if that’s something with the school or why this info is missing. Oh this is the sheriff’s office, that’s why.
  + What info would you want to compare? Tuition, housing, books, # of GI Bill students, # of complaints – those would be key. Since some of them go on a separate page, maybe expand it and see more details
  + Good program? I would look through all GI Bill stuff, then I would go to their website and start nosing around to see what their curriculum looks like, their program, staff etc. I would be looking for…if they have a GI Bill link, some of them do. I know it seems odd in this day and age, but in some places, it’s a negative feeling for Vets. Like hostile. So if you just have that little bit, it helps.
  + 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!