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

**P6 – Lisa Kinston**

*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?
  + Yes, I’m using my Vocational Rehabilitation. It’s mine [benefit]. Right I’m attending West Palm beach in Atlantic university. I started using them in January 2015 and I’ve been able to utilize work tolerance to extend it to get my degree. I started in Northern Virginia community college. And now I’m in Florida. I relocated.
  + 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?
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? I have. So a lot of times I’ve used it…usually it’s to compare my BAH. I wanted to go to a school that had a large income. Would also use it to figure out if the school had an advisory on campus. Most schools don’t have that. I think it’s called Vet Success and the website shares that information. I like that it shows the number of Veterans who go there. Someone told me about it, but I don’t remember who.
* Official program? No, if I had to guess, it was probably my counselor in Virginia who told me about it.
  + 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 when I was in the process of getting out I had gone to the education center on base and there was a woman helped me figure out what would be best. I knew I would be 80% disabled. She helped me sign up and when I moved to VA, I got a letter in the mail…it was just a matter of like, I knew I was 21 and I had taken a couple of classes and I felt getting an education was important.
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + I think it was just the amount of money I was getting and just the easy-ness of it. Having a lot of different campuses. Having like 4 in a 15 mile radius. It was important to have a good counselor in my new schooling. She provides a lot of tools for me that I didn’t know about. I think the transition can be hard...especially if someone has experienced trauma, PTSD. I was going to school full time and working full time and I would tell her about my issues and she would recommend different majors that would interest me, but wouldn’t overwhelm me.
  + It’s not normal to be honest. Most people don’t know about the benefits they are entitled to.
  + If not aware? I can’t say – the biggest one has been work tolerance. Here in Florida they don’t want you to have your benefits. They want you to get in and get out. People drop out because they feel they have to take the full time load. I imagine I would have just kept going to different people to get answers. A lot of Veterans just get tired and they stop trying.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
    - For me, it wasn’t about the major….because I just didn’t know what I wanted to do. Do I like this? Is this what I wanted to do? For me, it wasn’t difficult to choose…you knew what. When I moved to Florida, I wanted to go to a Christian university because I wanted to go into ministry. So I started going to this university but I found out they weren’t properly accredited. And I didn’t think they had what I needed – I didn’t know better. I think that was the hardest thing – moving to a new place and finding out that if I do get my degree here, it’s worth almost nothing. I think you need to be educated in what you’re supposed to look for. I think better education in what I need to do to be what I need to be. I feel like I’ve been winging it. If they want to start a business and they get a degree in business, do they know how to do accounting and do what they need to do? I think maybe having an internship. I feel like in VA they were good in this, sometimes they send you jobs or internships so you can experience things. Ultimately I’m responsible, but I served my time, so I have these benefits. Sending out these programs and internships…they do want you to succeed, that’s their job.
  + 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?
  + I think I wish – Virginia is super diverse and I had an amazing college and high school experience. The school I go to now is predominantly Caucasian. I think it would have been better to go to school that was more diverse. I think the teachers you can see their perspectives in their teaching and I understand that happens. I went to an orientation or a pre-orientation so I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting into.
* 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?
  + I really love this tool. It’s super easy to understand. It has all the options. I’m looking for mine (benefit). I don’t see mine. I’m looking for Voc Rehab. I would have been looking for Voc Rehab. Selected Service-Connected Discharge.
  + One thing I think a lot of people don’t understand. If you take one class inperson you get a better rate. It is good to have that information here (Learn more) Education knowledge, just knowing what you’re entitled to. Typed Palm beach and clicked option. I always look at paid. Books, it’s not $1000 its everything. A lot of times, the housing number isn’t correct. I think it’s been increased at this point. That’s one thing I’ve noticed that it isn’t normally correct.
  + Right away I like to see that there’s a lot of GI. Bill students. The other school I went to had issues. A large number tells me that they know what they’re doing. So now I’m looking to the estimated benefits, what I have to come out of pocket. I don’t know who all of this is for…I know I wouldn’t have out of pocket tuition, so I never look at this information. I’m looking at this – the bread and butter – how much I’m getting paid. There are so many schools and they all align to a degree, I’d see which school gives the best money. I don’t think Veterans really worry about the best education. They say they have a Veteran group, but they really don’t…Principles of Excellence…I like that its here…I’m not going to read it. Oh I really love this part. They have a campus in Orlando…I would have thought I would have seen this on the first page. I think I would have liked to have seen that on the first page…so I’m looking at this school. And I really like that you have the price right here since I’m trying to get the biggest paycheck. What if I want to be by Disney world? I don’t know where I can actually submit a complaint. When I went to my other school I would get a letter in the mail asking about the school…but I don’t get those letters anymore now that I’m in Florida. So it would be nice…how would I give feedback? If you could put that action in there, that would be nice. I would really like a number – like an admissions number or if there’s a counselor assigned to the school. I know Al, but I don’t know these other people. I would love to have their emails or numbers. The names are great, but I can’t do anything with that. It’s so hard to get in contact with them. Ok yeah, so they’re regionally accredited…let’s look at that. So people are lazy readers. Maybe have an asterisk…90% is high. I really love that you guys have that. Protection against late VA payments…I don’t believe this. School can’t prevent? I don’t like how that’s written…oh I understand. I thought something different, but that makes sense. I like that this was here. I thought it was something else. I thought it was talking about VA paying the Veteran. My VA payments usually are late. I think that’s more based on the counselor. Single point of contact for Veterans, clicked on it….ok, so who is it? It does me no good to have no number or email. Other than that, I really like it.

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.

I think this tool actually does it and doing the side by side comparison. 124 GI Bill students. See housing allowance. Yellow Ribbon. Numbers – like numbers for certifying official. I think that would make it easy. Going to school when you’re older, is different when you’re just out of high school. (Found complaint to Feedback system)

What do you want to know from other Veterans?

Accommodating to veterans, bookstore, parking, veteran lounge, how are the professors, how hard is the school, how are school counselors, are students snobby or cool, is there a football team, what programs are they really well known for.

How find out it was accredited? Brother asked if it was accredited. And I looked and found out that it wasn’t.

Every chapter has different protocols and I won’t know the difference. Taking one class to get full time. I like that when you start typing it comes up – I’m not the best speller. I think both campuses should be spelled out (appear on search results).

Institution categories – opened it…oh, that’s nice! I know with private, they’re more expensive. Most Veterans if it comes out of pocket, they’ll go to a different school. Most don’t know about Yellow ribbon or Principles of Excellence. My roommate’s brother just got out and he’s so confused.

I do have a comment…oh dang, that’s amazing. I really like that it’s 100% in-state. Most Veterans are 100% in-state. I remember I had just moved to VA and I was able to get in-state tuition….I was freaking out that they pay 100% in-state, but I don’t know if I’m in-state. I think it’s easier to know what is coming out of pocket since there’s no numbers (tuition).

On left side, I love the right side…this is in bold, the city is in bold and I don’t look (left) because nothing is in bold. If something was in bold, then I might use it. If I was like Oh no, I want to change the university, I would go back to the GI Bill comparison tool to do that. Another thing, to my understanding, there is different articles or rules and regulations for each chapter. Sometimes they’re hard to find and your goal is to help people make good use of your benefits. It’s all about what you know you’re entitled to. If there’s any place to put down articles and rules and regulations to see what they’re entitled to. Not all counselors are made equal. I don’t know if the VA would actually like that because people would know what they’re entitled to. The counselors are just…I’ve just heard so many stories, it’s crazy.

* 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!