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

**P8 – Chris Huey**

*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 Post 9/11 GI Bill. It is mine. I started using the GI Bill in 2018. August 2018. I was using tuition assistance prior to that when I was in the military.
  + 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? Yes I have. I use it to compare BAH rates between schools in the area. Heard about it – TRS – Trasition Rate…I heard about it then.
* I was pretty wide open. I knew I was moving to Fayetteville so I used that to figure out…I was going to community college first to get my feet wet. And then I went looking for a 4 year degree.
  + 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 had friends that had gotten out and they all went to school. And I thought it was awesome that they would pay me for 3 years to go to school. I’ve got the rest of my life to work.
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools?
  + That it was going to be paid for – like 100%. They were Yellow Ribbon schools and for a couple of them, it didn’t cover 100% of the costs. So making sure that it covered everything was important to me.
  + I know there’s information about it on the Comparison Tool. I can’t remember if I found it all there or if I did it through a Yellow Ribbon website. I don’t remember what it was actually there. I know on the Comparison Tool it talks about what the Yellow Ribbon covers. That was really it for me (in researching schools). I decided to stay in the Maryland area when I was looking and there’s only like 5 schools in the greater Baltimore area.
  + What resources did you use to research schools?
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school?
    - For me, it was getting my credits in to schools to see if it would accept my credits. So the military credits were a big one – some schools were accepting all of them and some were only taking some. And the transfer credits from when I was on tuition assistance. The school I’m at now took all of them. That was a huge deciding factor for me. I remember looking at it during TA because I don’t think it really had any effect on it, but I remember using it (CT) to look at schools. TA had an office on base and it was the easiest one to get to.
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find?
    - I think…not that I can think of…to see if you have. Like most schools have a Veteran center chapter. Almost every school I looked at, it’s almost impossible to find that…it’s in the corner of sites. That’s what coming out of the military. I kind of knew the direction I needed to go, but I needed help to get the ball rolling.
    - How did you end up getting connected to Veteran center? What do you want to know about the Veteran Center? – Served with husband in first school. Second school – roommate is somewhat involved. Free printing and you just start talking and eating together.
    - If they had one – having a number of active members/Veterans at the school. There’s no shot I know 671 Veterans at the school. Page – who they are, what they do.
* If you've started school, is there anything you know now about the school that you wish you had known earlier?
  + I am – I graduate next December, so almost a Junior. Analytics and Project Management. I don’t think so (answer to question).
* Are there any specific programs that you as a military-connected student are interested in?
  + The only thing I’ve used or participated in is the student Veteran’s association. That’s the only thing I’m involved in. I was the president at the last school I was in. It’s a good support network for Veterans – everyone is a little older, more mature.

**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?
  + Typed towson…and selected option. So, first thing I looked at was to make sure tuition was at 100%. Housing allowance is important because they tell you you should be able to live off your GI Bill. Schools outside the city pay about half. So that’s important for me and my roommate. And books get very expensive. And the number of GI Bill students – knowing there are other guys and girls who have had similar experiences to us.
  + What number looking for? I think if it was around 200-300….I think after doing research I found out this was one of the top military friendly universities. But like this other school with 14…I might have shied away from that.
  + It’s good to know that if there’s a good Veteran program, then they know what they’re doing. At a school, we lost all the Veterans at once – like everyone and their spouses was PCSed.
  + For just looking at the school, I think that’s it for what I was looking for.
  + Opened school
  + Ok so, looking at this, I would see…the numbers are good for me. I don’t know anyone who wants to get out and then pay for school. So that 0 out of pocket is important to me. I think that’s the biggest thing for me. I think if I was using the Montgomery, those numbers would be a lot more important. I just don’t think they’re as important for what I’m doing. Other than that…it’s definitely good to have the information though for people who want to see it. Is there anything I should be looking for? (Prompted by Amy to continue downward)…ok here we go, so Yellow Ribbon…if I wasn’t getting full GI bill, that would be important. Priority enrollment, that’s key. I think that’s a pretty big factor for people even if they don’t know about it when they get in. Being able to sign up before the rest of the population is a big deal. 0 student complaints in the last 24 months…it would be nice if they had some sort of other contact information other than an address for SCO. Maybe she is the lady we talk to at the school. It would be nice if their info was on this. Their numbers are the ones I had a really hard time finding when I was switching schools. This isn’t just a random website, anyone who comes here is coming for a reason. No one is going to send them a piece of mail with questions on it. It does say on here that they give you military credit for training. So it says they don’t have the STEM scholarship. It’s nice that there’s a single point of contact for Veterans – because there’s one person you have to talk to. It makes it easier. The way I found her – I just went to the office and started asking questions. It also helped that my roommate started going there the semester before I did – kind of got the lay of the land.
  + The only things I would add is the contact details – I think you can have a more specific physical address. If you show up on this address, then you’ll be walking around the whole campus trying to find it. And then a phone or email to contact people.

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.
  + The process of going in and finding a school easier? I think when…I don’t think it was hard to select a community college because that was a stepping stone. They’re all accredited the same throughout Maryland. The hardest thing for 4 year was getting all the info. Like hey – is my tuition going to be paid for at this school? Are my credits going to be accepted at this school? Trying to get that info was the hardest thing – was redirected many times. The communication with people at the school when you aren’t a student there.
  + SCO single point of contact – the way I talked to her the first time was I walked into the Veteran Center. I was talking to four colleges, and Towson was the closest one and I actually walked in and sat down and talked with them. Towson wasn’t my first choice. My first choice told me that they weren’t accepting my credits and I went into Towson the next day and they answered all my questions.
  + Any financial surprises? A couple surprises – parking is almost 400 a year. No huge surprises about the school.
  + 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?
    - When I got out of the military, I had a hard time finding the comparison tool if I didn’t have the name “GI Bill Comparison Tool” trying to figure out which website to get to the tool. If someone knows what they want to do, I think it will help people. I know it helped me.
    - Google? Probably something along the lines of GI Bill BAH rates. Something trying to figure out if I could survive on it. I was doing a lot of Google searching trying to find it. I think it was pretty focused on BAH. I couldn’t tell you if I put in anything about education.
    - Montgomery – if they tell me I owe $8000 and they call me. VA physically pays the school and I don’t see any of that. The most important things to me was the Yellow ribbon and priority enrollment. And the contact information at the bottom was most important to me. It would have been a huge time saver for me to have all that information here.
  + 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!