**Discussion Guide for Comparison Tool Redesign (School Certifying Officials)**

**SCO – Stacy Shattuck**

*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 the Comparison Tool.

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.

* Briefly, what is your role, how long have you been a SCO or School administrator, and how do you interact with service-connected students?
  + Worked in higher eds for 5 years. Located at Scranton campus at Penn state
  + I am primary admission liason. Anyone using benefits of any capacity.. She’ll walk them through the admissions process. Anything involved in their transition to the university. Anything involved in benefits, scholarships is handled by me.
  + I love our students.
* How many GI Bill students are at your school? Including the few not using benefits? 55-60
* Does your school have a Veteran center? We have a Vet lounge, but it’s more of a social space for students.
  + If so, how large is it?
  + If not, is there additional staff that supports military-connected students and processes certifications? We have a secondary person, but I really take full responsibility for it as much as I can. She has other responsibilities beside that.
* Have you used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? Yeah, I’ve gone through it a couple times for prospective students shopping for schools.

**First Topic: Handling Questions - 10 minutes**

* What kind of questions do you typically field from Veterans? From other beneficiaries such as spouses or dependents?
  + It really varies by the students. I worked a student through medical benefits. She never did her VA paperwork. Typically it is my payment came in late, why? I’m concerned about whether I’m going to get my full housing payments because of a change in modes due to a pandemic. Those kinds of things. Usually it’s a back and forth in getting military credit. Added education for their time in the military. We do offer that. We have an office of prior learning that is expanding the benefits offered for that – outside of health and benefits offered for BASIC.
  + What do they ask about the most?
  + What do they ask about your school?
  + Are there any pain points?
  + Is there anything you aren't able to help them with?
    - I like to think not often. There’s the occasional student who had extenuating circumstances and didn’t have a lot of documentation due to a house fire. It took some work and some letter writing, but we were able to get the benefits he needed. We work hard to be as accommodating as possible. It’s hard getting credit for military experience. How do you quantify that? It’s something the university has been working through – and with the pandemic holding lots of things up has an impact on that. I would have liked to have seen that more expediently. Someone who has 15 years of experience and then we want them to take a basic speech comm class. Yes you can speak to 150 of your troops, but we want you to take this class. It’s not a fun conversation.
    - Spouses/beneficiaries: Not that I can say I’ve had in the last few years. Nothing I haven’t been able to handle expediently.
  + How much interest is there from your GI Bill students for the Yellow Ribbon program?
* If you have questions about education benefits, how do you go about finding the answer?
  + The VA’s benefit website is like my best friend. We have a lot of sites linked right on their site. I didn’t like the idea of writing my own verbiage. I’ll use things like the Certifying official handbook. I myself was not a member of the military. There are some things from a jargon standpoint and the VA’s benefit section is usually pretty thorough.
  + What types of questions do you normally have?
  + How do you learn about new benefits or changes with the GI Bill?
  + How do you pass that information to students?
    - If I have a student I know is lost or overwhelmed – or just getting benefits from parents. I’ll try and get them on the phone and talk through it. Some that are more well-versed, I’ll email them links to the specific information they’re looking for.
    - New SCO site: I’ve seen it. I haven’t used it much. I just haven’t had a chance to utilize it much.
* Do you reference VA sites for your work?
  + If yes, which ones?
  + How often do you visit these sites?
  + What information are you looking for?
  + Do you use non-VA, third party sites for your work?

**Second Topic: Usage of the Comparison Tool - 20 minutes**

You said you had used the Comparison Tool before.

* How often do you visit the tool?
  + Probably more often…maybe once or twice a semester. If they aren’t sure about Penn State and direct them here if they aren’t sure where they want to go. I didn’t have any students really shopping this fall. I may see this around Thanksgiving. People making New Years resolution.
* How did you originally hear about the Comparison Tool?
* Did you receive any training on the Comparison Tool? No. If it’s a student, I would put them in a Zoom room and show them how to do it. Have them open their benefit options and look for schools in the Scranton area. If it’s someone fairly local, it shows them options in the area.
* The prices on this are almost to the dollar exact – which is nice. I did it for someone in National Guard or DEA benefits. I would talk to them about their options and various scholarships available. There are maybe half a dozen that we have just at our campus. The ones at our campus, a student does not have to apply for. If it’s on their application or they tell me, I sit on the committee. Most of our scholarships have a financial need component. They don’t have to do anything to apply for them. And there is a lot of students that come in and don’t realize they can apply for federal financial aid…but are also 100% eligible for Pell grants. It’s additional money for them to put into savings or somewhere else.
* Typically – my main job is with admissions. Any time we have an admission event. Any online or in-person events, we may sure all staff have the links for that. We tell people to also consider financial aid options. Maybe just a note to say to consider financial aid options. You could certainly put a link directly to FAFSA for students to look at options. We try our best to keep all of their options open.
* Ever had the experience where information was not accurate? Not that I can think of, no
* Find out about changes/updates to CT? Probably via email through monthly VSO emails is probably the first place I would see it.
* Other information in those emails – it depends. When they passed the extension on the rule to Dec of 21 or changes to the handbook. Any of that kind of thing. Any significant legislature.
* Help you in your role? Keeping in mind, my not super vast experience, I like that I can compare schools based on my benefit levels. Can I compare benefit options? Maybe I’m being discharged and I don’t know what benefit I’ll get. (Comparing CH33 vs CH30). I get calls from people about to leave the military and I don’t know which benefit is better. My dad has Post 9/11 – do I want to use that or DEA? Something where you can do a side-by-side comparison, but maybe being able to see options for CH33 and then also select CH30 and see benefits side by side. I have a lot of those conversations – particularly with reservists. Figuring out which direction they need to go. And incorporating that into the CT. My most often conversation is “I’m a reservist”. I asked my brother about what I should know and he said that I should know my benefits. He didn’t know his options and I have a great relationship with the national guard in the area, but they can’t reach everyone. And sometimes people listen and sometimes they don’t.
* Allowing schools to manage data on their profiles? Any data you would like to manage? Let me see…umm…I don’t think so. The information that’s here is pretty basic. The costs are really up to date. We’ve had a tuition freeze the past 3 years. No, I don’t think so. Based on what’s here, I think it’s fine.
  + Do you train others in how to use it?
  + How long did it take you to feel comfortable using the tool?
* What common tasks are you typically trying to accomplish on the tool?
  + What kind of information are you typically looking at?
  + The tool is geared towards Veterans, but is there any information that is helpful for you?
    - Is there any additional information or functionality that you would like to see?
  + How accurate is the information on your school?
    - If information on your school isn't accurate, what do you do?
    - How long does it take for information to be fixed?
  + How do you find out about changes/updates to the Comparison Tool?
  + Are there any other sites that you use to perform similar tasks?

**Final Topic: Making It Easier - 5 minutes**

We've talked about the Comparison Tool and finding out information on education benefits.

* If you could change the Comparison Tool to meet your needs as a SCO, talk me through what the tool would look like.
  + What would it do?
  + What would you change?
  + What would you keep the same?

*Consider asking about Yellow Ribbon program again*

**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!