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

**SCO 4 – Dustin Pearson**

*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?
  + I’m actually the manager – I run this department at the university, but I still certify students. We’re here to ensure a smooth transition to an institution of higher learning. Explaining how to get benefits and using the Comparison Tool. We have about 700 Veterans annually and we have 11 campuses and we do all of them. And we’re an office of 2. We now have two; we had just one for the longest time.
* How many GI Bill students are at your school?
* Does your school have a Veteran center?
  + If so, how large is it?
  + If not, is there additional staff that supports military-connected students and processes certifications?
* Have you used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? Used it about 30 min ago

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

* What kind of questions do you typically field from Veterans? From other beneficiaries such as spouses or dependents?
  + The majority of what we do is benefits – how do I get started on benefits, what’s my first step, how does the book stipend work, how does the housing allowance work, why was it prorated this month. How to get certain documents – like if we have Vets that come in and they need their COE, we now use VA.gov is the easier way to do that. DD214 for those post 9/11 era. We use ebenefits and before that we use the national archives. Our older Veterans – Vietnam, WWII - the only way to get it is through the National Archives.
  + What do they ask about the most?
  + What do they ask about your school?
    - We’re always asked if we have a Student Vet association, Yellow Ribbon school. What kind of degrees do we have. Are all our programs approved. Are they fully funded. Things of that nature. A little bit of both – prospective and current. Mainly when they’re shopping and trying to find out what a university can offer. Right now we’re getting a lot of questions on COVID. What if they require internships.
    - Veteran services – we reach out to different entities. We attend many many junior college transfer affairs. We’re close to Dallas – lots of students come from there. We can talk to transition. We also have website like TechVet. We have our own area/site of course and believe it or not, word of mouth. We also coordinate with Texas Energy Commission.
    - Since we’re not really allowed when Vets go through their process, they get information that was wrong. When they exit when contractors are telling them stuff. Incorrect info – a lot of it is “I was told I’ll get a kicker”. I lot of times they’ll tell us BAH amounts that are incorrect. Hazelwood is a large state exemption. Claim TX as home state and you exhaust Post 9/11, you can move into Hazelwood. Or benefit can choose to transfer it to a child. Any university that is a public institution has a Hazelwood exemption. We have to recognize them as a resident of TX. If they moved out and established residency elsewhere, there are complications. That’s one good thing about TX is Hazelwood. There’s so many different aspects of Hazelwood with spouse, can you use it with CH30, 33. There are different qualifications for Hazelwood.
    - Yellow Ribbon – we do not participate in Yellow Ribbon. This is how we explain it - you will not exceed the amount that GI Bill allots. Essentially you don’t need it – if you’re 100% Post 9/11.
    - How long in role? 6 years
    - Sometimes I do have to do a refresher – especially with COVID and the Colmery Act. Usually every Oct I have to look at the new housing allowance for the year.
    - Luckily we’re on a listserv for all TX universities and all A&M system schools and TX veterans commission too. We’re getting info sessions and alerts. Coming from the state. The state is good about keeping us informed. We also get it from the VA – and it’s more complicated because they also go to the students. From the federal side when the VA sends an automated message to multiple students and states, I see that it is kind of complicated to read. That’s something we take pride in is that we make it easy for our students to understand. I know with ebenefits, those were a little bit confusing. There’s more that I had to walk them through it because I myself used ebenefits through practice. So that’s good. And that’s the preference – Veterans helping other Veterans.
    - Historical information – would like to know where the historical information is coming from so they can compare their data.
    - So there a goal? I mean I’m a big fan of it. I like the simplicity of it. Veterans enjoy it. They’re more of a checklist mentality. That you’re picking things and getting answers on the right (eyb). I do like how accurate it is. When Vets get on other sites, they can get lost in information that is not up- to-date,
  + Are there any pain points?
  + Is there anything you aren't able to help them with?
  + 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?
  + 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?
* 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.

* First heard about it? No, I don’t know. 3 years, 4 years ago? How long has it been out? [10 years] Oh wow…probably 4-5 years. Still working with ebenefits. You get a lot of opinions when you do a broad search. GI Bill Comparison Tool is on our Veteran webpage – we link right to it. I’m a personal fan.
* Tasks? A visual – I can show the Veteran this is what you can plan on receiving. I can tell them how the book stipend works, even down to the number. Ok we have some students for spring/fall semester 12 hours is full time – I can show them that if they take 2 classes for 6 hours, you’re still going to get tuition and books, but you aren’t going to get your housing. They can see it.
* Are you going to implement the STEM scholarship information on here? (Dustin asking).
* We always start here at this block, the first part, that’s pretty easy. The GI Bill benefit – this is where we have to explain a little bit. What goes in there is a lot of factors because of Hazelwood. If we have someone using Post 9/11 and only 90%, we can cover the rest with Hazelwood. Then also when we use the Montgomery GI bill – if they have that, it then becomes a pencil or paper deal. I don’t make that decision for them. That way they can financially get ready – a lot of Veterans want to use the 30 option with Hazelwood. And Veteran Readiness and Employment is Voc Rehab and that’s largely out of our hands – that goes to another group.
* The good part about our school is that it’s always going to be semesters. If they take less than half time. We also use this tool if they need to apply for benefits – so we highlight that area when we send it out to the email. Everything to the right (eyb) – is just a visual. I do like that you’ve added our extensions. It shows that there will be a difference (in housing).
* I remember when this complaint came in. The student was upset with the professor. It would be nice to have more information. I know we had – we can’t give out too much info on student and teacher. It was something out of our control. At the bottom, I like to see our accreditors. To let our students know we are accredited. The students get the run-around for these for-profit schools. So when they come here we can show them that we are accredited. We can show them that their degree holds weight. I just saw this one: Protection against late VA payments. We don’t punish them because the VA may be certifying. This is what I was asking about STEM scholarship – we do accept them.
* The historical information – how accurate do you think that is? I know around FY19 we were around 3 million. Do you get that report from VA-ONCE. We talked about that at our A&M system monthly meeting that we didn’t think it was accurate. I don’t have my data right in front of me. We usually contact our ELR and they’re the ones that are supposed to report this information even though they are well understaffed. I never have students who complain about the GI Bill Comparison Tool.
* Make updates? – Yes, I would want it to be research based. Maybe I would like to add where contact details are – add an email address. It gets back to the whole visual thing. They just want to get right to the representative of the university. Another thing would be, to be able to change one of your employees. Sometimes there’s a lot of turnaround – and just be able to update. Maybe at the bottom – something about work study. Put a checkmark there if the institution hires VA work study students. For our campus, they would work in my office and we would use them for benefits and programming. We have VA hospitals and they’ll take work-study too.
* How often do you visit the tool?
* How did you originally hear about the Comparison Tool?
* Did you receive any training on the Comparison Tool?
  + 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!