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

**SCO 5 – Matthew Barber**

*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?
  + So I am the SCO, the lead SCO here at University of Idaho, so I start them through the whole process from applying to the school or getting transcripts. My job is to help them get their funding, their housing stipend and take care of any fires that come up. Really just helping those that use GI Bill benefits. There are 2 other SCOs – my supervisor whose is more of a backup, backup. And then there’s an advisor who helps me. So there’s just 3 of us who are SCOs.
* How many GI Bill students are at your school? On average, we’re at 300 certified per semester.
* 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?

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

* What kind of questions do you typically field from Veterans? From other beneficiaries such as spouses or dependents?
  + Probably the two I hear the most
  + 1. How do I get started with my benefits? So I’ll walk them through how to get their benefits on VA.gov
  + 2. Where’s my money? I haven’t received my money
  + 3. With the CT, with some of the changes that have happened over the past few months and it’s changed – and I’ll have to explain to them what happened and why that change happened.
  + Are there any questions that stump you? If there are, I tell them I’ll call the VA and get back to them. Most of the time it’s because they haven’t been paid and they didn’t turn in paperwork. I guess the other one would be the debt letters they receive – they ask why they received a debt letter.
  + I do have the CT pulled up and one thing I get caught – what GI Bill benefits do you need to use? They don’t know CH33 or 1606. And there’s another question…I don’t know if it’s “What benefit do you want to give up?”…hold on….so what GI Bill benefit do you want to use….it might have changed. It might have asked at one point, what benefit you want to give up.
  + Don’t know which benefit? Refer to when they apply or don’t know which one they have? That’s it – when they’re applying for VA benefits. When I show them the CT, they don’t remember what I applied for. The majority of them says they’ll go with the Post 9/11 and 9/10 times I’m correct.
  + Changes in GI Bill – hear about? Typically VA will have a webinar on it with any kind of changes that are going through. I’ll also get a newsletter through the VA saying these changes have happened. So two newsletters and the webinar. We actually have a weekly newsletter we send out to people using educational benefits. We’ll send things out to them that they need to know. When things were changing in VA and here in Idaho, we posted on website, social media and email. We don’t want to miss getting that info out to us. So if a student says, “I never received that” and we can be like “Is this your email”, did. You check the website, or FB? And they’ll be like “Oh, no”
  + 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?
  + 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.

I probably say – starting two to three weeks prior to the semester starting (Aug first to end of Sept), probably every single day. After that, maybe once a week. Typically if I use it after that, I’ll have students asking about their BAH and monthly stipend and I’ll be looking at it and contacting the VA to see what the difference is. Usually the first two months of every semesters I use it daily.

One of the first questions I ask is if they’re a Veteran. If no, then active duty or a dependent. Usually 90% of students are Veterans. Ask how long they’ve been discharged from the military. Every once in a while we’ll get CH31 the VRE. I show them all the other percentages and explain that’s why you only get this amount of money. I tell them to always do inperson and online. There isn’t a lot of difference. I know there are differences with the BAH. Type in University of Idaho and I click on both options and they’re absolutely the same. Why aren’t our extension campuses coming up here? So when I get to this page – I tell them we’ll be at the top. Before going into the profile, I make sure that we have all the right information. Leave that on schools only and depending on if they’re in-state or out of state, we’ll go into Yellow Ribbon. We do have two students who are Roger STEM recipients, but normally it’s down the road – and it narrows that field (options) down. The Yellow Ribbon is the only one I really use – and I tell them that we are a Yellow Ribbon school and it could possibly change things. The tuition is 100% in-state. And I just want them to know that they are a Yellow Ribbon school. And we click that to see if there’s any difference. I’ve learned that the more I can give them, the better. It puts them at ease. I’ll go into View details and scroll down and this is where it gets fun.

I usually glance at military details. If they’re a new student, it’s No. If old, it’s yes if it’s before Jan 2019. I’ll sometimes hit that if they’re a returning student and have to check if they started before 2019. I really stress that this is an estimated amount – that it could change. It’s supposed to be accurate, depending on when Idaho decides if they’re going to change tuition. Sometimes that’s 8304 – they’ll be like is that per semester? And I’m like No, each year. And then I explain housing allowance – and I’ll explain this is for the Moscow area. And it could be higher or lower based on other locations. I scroll down to school locations and show them what different locations will pay. If you’re going to be in Boise…if you’re in Courerdalene. I really stress that part to them – that the housing allowance can change based on location. I also let them know that BAH online is half the national average. I stress that point too. If you’re going to be strictly online, it’s half the national average. That’s one thing we like to see on here – if its possible to say, that if you’re online, it’s half the national average. It would be nice to have something on this page – that online is half the national average. Haven’t played in other areas. Last time I had this open was like 3 weeks ago. I’ll have to go in and play around with it some. And that’s what I noticed the last time I was here – that the page was different. I want to educate them on it so they can do it from home.

Just the other day is when I started scrolling down and looking through this. The SCO – Jason is actually the secondary and I’m the primary. So Jason is our Veterans director and myself here is the primary. The other thing – since we moved, we have a different mail stop. I did send something to our SAA.

Anything you would like to update – contact details and SCOs, to have an Edit button. It would be nice to have an Edit button – that we could just go in there and change it – and take it off your rollers. And here, to have a phone number and email. We have a physical address, but it would be a lot easier for them to contact us with phone and email.

Any other updates? Honestly I can’t think of anything. Additional information – I like the information. It has the historical information. The institution codes, I don’t know if they would even know what that is. SCOs should have that already. I don’t know why a student would want to see that information. Typically – we are going to have this info. I like the institution summary. So that’s about it on this page.

Almost no questions on Student Vet Group

Tuition Assistance – weekly question. Want to know how they can use their benefits the best they can. Using various benefits in conjunction with one another. Some students will plan out their full education journey.

Not a lot of questions about Yellow Ribbon. We’ll open the Learn more and let them read it.

It just flows – it’s laid out great. It tells you exactly what you need to know. I wouldn’t change much other than the things I mentioned. I would say make it super evident to them about the online housing. Just something to stand out so they can see that. Also the book stipend – and I go down here and say $500 a semester, but it depends on the credits. It’s how much it is per credit. I think it’s like $41.62 per credit for the book stipend. It would be nice here or in Learn more stating it per credit. So that typically it’s 500 per semester, but if it’s 18 credits, it’s that math.

Very few students have heard of it. I wish I had better numbers…over 1000, I maybe had 50 tell me about it. Not a great number. I wish there was a way to better spread the news. Maybe change my tactics when they come in – “entrance interview” when they come in. I just thought of that and I’m like why haven’t I been doing this? I think I need to incorporate them when I sit them down and give them a spiel.

A lot of them were like “I didn’t quite understand it” when they went to TAPS

* 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!