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

*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? No, I fit into that category of looking to start using them in the near future. Within the next few months. Quarantine offers a good opportunity for that. I had started doing a program through American public university. I’m coast guard. They have a program called Coast guard tuition assistance. I got a quarter of the way done and I ended up doing a coast guard grad program and I was able to get a degree, but now I’m looking to go back and finish what I started with my first degree. Unfortunately, that tuition assistance is no longer there, so I’m looking to use \_\_ as a funding option.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using? [would like to use] the post 9/11 gi bill.
    - 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? I’d be interested in using them again. If I could find a school, a more prestigious school, that I could transfer any of those credits that I have to keep a degree, have a leg up in finishing another degree, I’d be interested.
    - How would you find a school that’s more prestigious? I forget the company that does the school rankings. I would use google and look for a program I’m interested in doing. I’m looking for a master’s in management program. I’m looking to changing that ton an MBA.
    - If you were doing a google search, how might you be thinking about executing that? I’d probably start with a topic, mba online programs. I’d definitely be interested in selective duty. Being able to do that remotely in my free time is critical.
* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? No.
  + 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? the coast guard really values continued education. It’s a big part of our promotion process. I’m trying to make a career out of being in the coast guard. I have 14 years of service. The goal is to get to 20, and having degrees every so often shows that you’re involved in self-development. It’s very helpful in getting promoted to the next rank. I think an mba would help me. I live in the dc area and that degree would be applicable.
* You’re in the coast guard but you can still qualify for gi bill benefits? Yeah. I can be active duty and qualify for those benefits [?]
* What was most important to you when you were looking for potential schools? Probably the price would be most important. How much I’m going to have to pay out of pocket when I get my degree…what’s the bottom line going to be for me?
  + What resources did you use to research schools? Online search engines. No specific tool. I think it’d probably be beneficial for me to research through the VA. I am somewhat familiar, I believe, it’s the yellow ribbon program where some schools are more advantageous for gi bill students so I’d be interested in finding a list of those programs.
  + Are there certain sites that you know of, that you trust? US News and also the Princeton Review
  + How do you feel about those two sites vs. other sites that might come up in the general online search that you do? The name Princeton review sounds biased to me. I’d feel pretty confident in those. I’d probably look for a few others just to make sure. One that the va offers I would definitely be interested in.
  + What was the most difficult part about picking a school? at the time, I’d taken the GRE, and my goal at the time was to find a master’s program I could do without having to take that exam. And they were tailored to the me and they aligned their costs with tuition assistance. It just seemed like a logical choice at the time.
  + Was there any information you wanted to have, but couldn't find? It’s difficult to recall because it was 7 years ago.
* If you've started school, is there anything you know now about the school that you wish you had known earlier? I remember it being a lot of work, much more than I expected. I was only taking one class at a time, and the program I was taking had me writing 6 page papers every weekend for a year, which was a lot of work for a probably not so prestigious degree, probably more than you’d get at a place like Harvard.
* 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? [how would you want to interact with this information? are there dropdowns you’d want to change?] first one makes sense [first dropdown] I’d expect there to be dropdowns. The second one…just to make sure I’m eligible [had clicked learn more for it]…if there was some sort of tracker that could pull up your eligibility would be great to know. The next dropdown, ok, would be the 36-month plus. Fairly self-explanatory. The type of institutions, so. I might be interested in, maybe not me personally, but for type of institution, maybe I’m interested in if that were separated into bachelor’s degree and master’s degree and the schools were sorted into that, as well. Down on the next section, I think that’s fairly self-explanatory. I’d only be interested in the online only. The in person and online I’d also be interested in if I could find a program where I’d only need to go once a week or a couple of weekends, that has a minimal in person requirement that could be more consistent in my local area.
* Are you familiar with how housing allowance is calculated? Would you be eligible for housing allowance as a member of the coast guard at this point? I would not be eligible for housing allowance because I’m already getting one. The housing allowance is equal to an e-5?
* Let’s say you want to do a search for a school. what would you put here? Maybe the name of the school, [program, too?] maybe you could put the type of degree, too. This seems much more generic. If you searched employer name, like deloitte, if it comes up with…I don’t know what I’d expect to come up.
* Let’s go with a school since that’s the path you’re on right now. [he asked to search for Georgetown. A did so] [on srp, narrowed to state- district of Columbia]. [he didn’t see a choice for mba in filters] I did see at the bottom there was a choice for yellow ribbon.
* So I went ahead and selected it. What do you anticipate will happen now? I would expect that if they didn’t have some yellow ribbon, that the school wouldn’t populate.
* Shall we take a look at the Georgetown profile? Sure. I have one quick ask. The warnings and school closings, due to the coronavirus, that might be something that would interest me. if people were being forced to take classes online, if they didn’t want to, I wouldn’t know what to expect. [he was interested in the learn more] ok, so it’s more of a [?]
* Anything else on this page? No, I don’t think so.
* [a opened Georgetown u profile] so this seems like it’s tailored to a bachelor’s degree. It says a 4 year program. I wouldn’t believe the information I’m seeing on the right hand side about the cost of the school, etc. I’d probably go to the previous page and try one of those other Georgetown schools. I guess I’d try the last one [school for continuing education] and it didn’t get me much further. At this point, I’d go to the Georgetown website, and see if they have an mba. Which is probably research I should have done before using this.
* So let’s hop back [a went to Georgetown u profile] what I’d like to do is get your thoughts on the other information here.

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? On the side, I did a quick search [?]

I’d choose part time. [for enrolled, wasn’t sure which option to pick. A picked ½ time] [asked to switch to online] [a asked if he noticed anything change] I didn’t notice anything. I’d search in google this school to see if they offer an online option. I’d click on the next tab to see… I’m seeing that I’d have 30k out of pocket tuition, so I’d see if there were other opportunities for scholarships available, so I’d click on that learn more for sure. Ok [didn’t think learn more was helpful as it seemed he wanted info on getting scholarships]

[A asked if he was interested in Yellow Ribbon] [mentioned he’d probably want to do it] I don’t know what a kicker bonus is. [does anyone ever? Not one person has known in past testing] I’m not DOD, so I probably wouldn’t be eligible for that.

[a suggested scrolling down the page] we have veteran programs listed. P: I see the checkmark so they probably have it on their site.

A: one question on the veteran programs. Would this be things you’d be interested in? yeah

A: would you be interested in the student vet groups? honestly, not really [interested]. From my experience, I went to George Washington university, and they were known to have one of the best veteran groups in the country, and I really didn’t find myself engaged with them. It really wasn’t my interest.

* + What stands out to you?
  + What do you think of the information you see? [?] Accredited, that’s important….maybe someone could help me walk through the yellow ribbon or someone who’s used it before. Obviously there’s no complaints so it seems to be going well.
  + 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 - interested
* STEM Scholarship [not asked]
* Yellow Ribbon [not asked]
* 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.
  + How could the comparison tool help you do that? Are there things that would help you as you’re making the selection in looking for schools? For comparison, the out of pocket costs. If you were able to compare the schools across the board. If I selected American university in dc, George Washington, and Georgetown. If I could select all 3 schools across the board and compare those costs, which one is participating in yellow ribbon and which one is not, side by side. If you were cross comparing items, like on amazon, if it has this feature, and if it does not, if it has an x or something to that effect. [mentioned ranking would be helpful]
  + 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?
* when you clicked on the scholarships learn more, what were you expecting to see? list or way to search for other scholarships as a member of the military. military specific scholarships. or a link to military specific scholarships.

**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!