**School Ratings Discussion Guide**

*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 would be looking at the Comparison Tool and talking about ratings and what information is helpful for Veterans when determining if a particular school is a good fit for them.  
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 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 my screen and 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 (Optional) - 5 minutes**

Let’s start with a few warm-up questions.

* Have you ever used the GI Bill Comparison Tool before? I have. I have. [been using it for 5 years]

-you’ve seen it evolve quite a bit

It always seems the same, but yeah. It may have.

-ok, fair enough.

* + If yes, what did you use it for?
* Are you currently using or have you ever used your education benefits? Yes, I have. I think I still have about 9 months left. I think I figured it out if I time it just right, I should be able to squeeze my way into a second master’s degree.
  + If yes, which benefit are you using? I’ve used post-9/11
    - When did you start school? Where did you go? I did north Carolina state and then George Washington university. Is this going in the end product?

-oh, ok.

Wait, is this going in the end product?

-not specifically. We won’t say participant 2, this is his whole history. We won’t be able to trace you.

* + If no, do you plan on using your benefits in the near future?
    - Which benefit?
    - Where are you in the school selection process?
* When you were trying to pick a school, what were you looking for in a school? for undergrad, I was one of those high achievers that came into the army because I got bored literally after 4 years of college, so came in with like 110 credits. For undergrad, it was path of least resistance. For grad, I was looking more at programs, but also because I wanted to make sure in the dc metro, because of the cost of everything is outrageous, including schools, I wanted to make sure that, should the cost go over, that the yellow ribbon program, that it would be a complete fit.

-it sounds like you have a pretty good handle in how to handle your benefits.

Yeah, full disclosure, I’ve done work in veterans policy. I hope that’s not a…

-not a disqualifier. It might even be helpful.

* + How would you determine if it was a good fit for you?
* If you knew a fellow Veteran who'd attended a school you were interested in, what would you most want to know from them? This is a really open ended question which I’m sure is the point. Can you nudge me in a direction one way or another? I guess my first question is, what are the good restaurants in the area? Haha

-so culture, local culture.

Yeah. I hate to be that guy, but I, and this is a larger issue in higher education, but I would kind of be curious what the return on investment is, the va return on investment, then otherwise then program-specific information. courses you recommend. programs you recommend, yeah, that, in this hypothetical, would be my first.

-ok, that gives us a good frame of reference. I think it’s honest. Sometimes people think they have to say something, but…the surroundings, what the school experience is is also important.

Yeah. Anything that I’ve done, and then whatever I use the last 9 months of gi bill, will be much more specific and targeted as opposed to check the box and get a degree. I don’t know if that’s the most usual, but I could be wrong.

-at this point, we’re interested in you being authentic to yourself and your experience

Yeah. If that doesn’t work, I’m being straight to the hip.

**First Task: Initial Look at Ratings - 5 minutes**

Let's say you received a scholarship for **Insert school** and are curious if the Comparison Tool has any information on that school. How would you go about finding **Insert school** on the Comparison Tool? [a said tell me when you see it]

It’s there [had clicked search field].

-what would your next step be?

I don’t think I can adjust anything else.

-are there other things you’d want to adjust here?

I’d want to see what the options are for gi bill benefit. i know I’m 9/11. Personally, I’d be more interested in in person and online, but if that’s not the point of the exercise, we can drive forward.

-just quickly, why in person and online?

Well, there’s a pandemic right now! but then also that it’s good to have the flexibility. I think anything that I’m doing now, I know I’m in a different boat, I’d be interested in evenings, weekend and online at this point. Anyway, so uh, moving forward.

-one quick question. Do you think checking in person/online would change the schools that you saw?

I have no idea. A form was put in front of me and I was filling it out as accurately as possible for myself.

-perfect. You want to hit that search button?

alright

[ran search]

-talk to me about what you’re seeing here [srp]

Everything that I should be seeing. Rated by 155 veterans. Interesting. I generally don’t look for other veterans’ opinions [as he’s scrolling down filter column] because they’re usually split into two groups. They’re really on top of it and informed or they’re utter mouth breathers. [scrolled up to card] Alright, so we’re looking, have the school, have the bah. It’s not bah anymore. Whatever they’re calling it now. Alright. [went down to filters] and I can check to see if there’s a student veteran organization, I can check to see if there’s yellow ribbon, principles of excellence. I always see that. I don’t really know what that is. 8 keys to vet success. I don’t know that. The stem scholarship. That’s helpful. But I know that because I advocated for that policy. I don’t know that some veteran who’s attempted a stem degree and is concerned about it taking 5 years as they often do, would know that. Priority enrollment, that’s important. Independent study. ok. Gender, still a thing in college, isn’t that? And Specialized mission, hbcu… are there other specialized missions, wouldn’t gender be that? And religious affiliation below, wouldn’t that all be specialized mission? Ok. [make gender under specialized mission]

-[brought him back to task] who do you think are providing the ratings?

As is often the case, people who had a great experience, who had a horrible experience, or who had too much time on their hands.

-alright, we ask for your candid feedback, and we are getting it. I think that is great.

I hope it’s not too brutal. I’m sorry.

-For the task of finding this information, how do you think that went?

It was certainly fine. Oh, and number of gi bill students, that’s also good to have. Right. I forgot about that.

-what does that tell you?

That I have a quick reference to, when you’re at the bar with other students, it’s a quick reference to when they argue over how many gi bills there are. That’s actually how I discovered the gi bill comparison tool.

-good to know. Word of mouth kind of approach to it.

No, it was just through google so I could win an argument at a bar with other student veterans. How many gi bill students do we have on campus?

-fascinating. I don’t think we’ve tried to optimize for that use case in particular, but good one to keep in mind.

I think that the biggest…again, I kind of already…this wasn’t as much of a factor with either school because in both cases, at least with north Carolina state, I knew there was going to be an issue with 100% coverage of tuition…I mean, the biggest thing was the bah rate. Even that, ever since the two-three times they’ve [?] the gi bill, once it started becoming a prorate, you can’t really plan a budget on that. And now that we went from being, if you have one brick and mortar class, the rest of yours can be online. Your bah, too, also slashing the bah unless you’re basically on campus. if you will that’s kind of less relevant to me. I think for GW, for my grad work, I think I actually reached out to their certifying officer, va certifying person to ask about yellow ribbon. I don’t think I used the tool for that. I might have used it to verify, but that’s about it.

-ok. Ok, great.

I guess I could see if I was going for something more nontraditional or more specialized, like a vocational thing or flight school. I can see how this would be a lot more useful for those sorts of folks. For me, I mostly already know this. Alright, it verifies.

-so the information you’re seeing here? You think you have a good handle on it?

Yeah.

-ok, great.

Things to watch for:

* Does the user notice the ratings on the school cards?
* Does the user interact with any of the filters?

Upon completion of task:

* How did you think that went?
* What do you think of school card?
* What do you think that rating shows you?

Research questions:

* What do users think of the star ratings?
* Who do users think are providing the ratings?

**Second Task - Detailed Ratings - 15 minutes**

You've heard great things about the Veteran experience at **Insert school**, but are curious about the quality of education you would receive there. How would you use this Comparison Tool to see if **Insert school** would meet your needs?

[a asked him to click view details]

The benefits breakdown is interesting. I guess I know what my tuition was for my grad program because it was utterly obscenely outrageous and I’m beyond thankful that they used the yellow ribbon program. When I finished up at nc state, I didn’t care what the tuition was.I couldn’t tell you what the tuition was, which is probably the most horrible, entitled thing someone can say. Anyway, so we’re scrolling down from there. oh, school costs and calendar. so, yellow ribbon, student, veteran military tuition assistance, that’s a good thing to highlight. I didn’t see that on the last page. That’s a good thing to highlight especially for our guard and reserve folks that might try to dip into that. Cautionary information, right. That makes sense with the for-profit issue. So with the ratings, are these all-time ratings or, you know what I mean, [accordion] is this going back to whenever the gi bill calculator tool started?

-that’s a great question. What would your expectation be?

That it probably is. I guess, a thought would be that that’s certainly a good thing to have, big picture, and definitely on your end, but we’re looking at higher education, so you’re looking at 2-4 year intervals for most folks aside your Ph.Ds. My thought is that if uc davis was 4.8 stars, was 5 stars in 2015, but maybe it’s 4.8 now because in two years, it’s dropped. You know what I mean? If that makes sense, I would think that more recent information would be more relevant there. otherwise, physical address. Well, having the certifying officials listed, I can see that being helpful. I would hope that the school would have that out there. in my experience, they have. It’s probably a lot of work on the va’s end, but it’d be super cool if it linked to their email address or if it provided some kind of contact info. Accredited, yes. Non-accredited schools should not be eligible for gi bill. Traditional schools not, obviously. Vocationals are something different, type of accreditation…We should only be sending our veterans to regionally accredited universities. Link to veterans tuition policy. Credit for military training? No?! then uc davis wouldn’t be a place for me. yeah, otherwise this is all straightforward.

-let’s scroll up a little bit and zero in on that ratings area and take a look at that. Can you talk about what you’re seeing here and what this means to you?

I think that things like gi bill support, that’s very good to have and rate that. Marketing practices, that’s actually interesting also, although I find it interesting that marketing practices only gets a 4.5 while job preparation gets a 5.0, gets a full 5 stars. Maybe they undersold them? veteran community, that can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. if that was up to me and that were based on my experience, if you’re 45 miles from fort brag, 90 miles from camp lejeune, miles from Seymour johnson air force base in a state that has one of the highest veteran populations, and it didn’t have an on campus veteran center, rather it did by the time I left, but that was something we really had to work for, just to have your own quiet space on campus where you could do the things you needed to do. Gw was kind of like that to a lesser extend. Well, no. it had a veteran location on campus. I just didn’t like anyone there. I don’t know if there’s something that could be parsed a little bit. Service facilities available for veteran community. When I read veteran community, I think of the other people, more of that and less of, is there a vets-only sort of place I can go to on campus, use a printer and a phone, you know, in relative peace and quiet.

-how do you think you could find out more about what is covered by the term veteran community?

Oh, it’s right there [clicked plus sign]. I just needed to click on it. Oh, there is a thing where I can click on all of these [all plus signs]. Oh, one at a time. [had opened gi bill support] alright, gi bill support. Alright. I think also my not clicking was more us in a virtual environment as opposed to me looking at it myself. Alright. I’m just reading through each of these, if that’s ok. [opened overall experience, quality of classes, online instruction, job preparation] the job preparation one, I would add to that I know that that is a complicated subject. Do we have higher education so that we can broaden our horizons, become more well-rounded humans and citizens, which makes one presumably, a better employee and manager, or do we have higher education to get a degree and get a better job. Which I grew up with being told, you need to go to college, you need to get a degree so you can get a good job. so I got a master’s degree from a very good college, and until quite recently, was a classically underpaid over-employed veteran. At least I’m aptly employed now, still a touch underpaid, but there’s a clear career path that I know now. I know that’s a tough subject because then once we start modifying higher education, what’s my return on investment on this degree that uncle sam spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on? That’s also a slippery slope. I have no intention of ever pursuing a doctorate of education, and wrestling with that issue.

-Are there any categories that would be valuable here that you’re not seeing?

Yeah, the veteran community one again, something about facilities and services for veterans if that makes sense. That’s just such a broad category. “the school supports or engages veterans” well, yeah, it’s pr suicide not to. Otherwise, it’s fine. Online instruction, that’s a good one.

Things to watch for:

* How does the user select the school (School name or View Details)?
* Where does the user initially look for information?
* Does the user go to the ratings accordion without a prompt?

Upon completion of task:

* How did you think that went?
* What do you think of the school now that you've seen the ratings?

Research questions:

* Are users interested in the different rating categories or just the overall score?
* Which categories are valuable to users? Are there any categories that aren't valuable? Are there any additional categories they would like to see?
* What do users think the different categories mean?
* How do users think the rating scores are determined (average of submitted scores, calculated value, etc.)?
* How trustworthy are the ratings? I’m probably a cynic. I know that I can’t say, as we learned today, I sure do love to give my opinion on things, and I take any opportunity to do that. If at any point my opinions were solicited for ratings, I don’t even know where that [ratings] comes from or how to do it myself. Like I was saying earlier, ratings over time vs. rating over the past, throwing a number out, the past 3 or 4 graduating classes. School rankings always fluctuate. I would think that experience would fluctuate over time. I would think the most recent, 3-5 years over time. When asking veterans I know that there’s a significant population where veterans transfer or spouses. Not to be a total cynic, you’ve got some of the most thoughtful high performers out there or utter rock-chewing, mouth breathers. Always a 50/50.
  + If you were curious how ratings are collected, how would you find out about that?

[started reading About Ratings, “we reach out to veterans…” ] When did that happen because I surely would have rated. And I know I have a spam filter.

-this is all right now. It’s all hypothetical at this point. It’s good to know you’re eager to use this tool. Hopefully we get this out while you’re in that window so you can rate it.

* How do users think ratings are collected?
* What level of privacy do users expect if they would provide a rating? That makes complete sense now. Yikes. Ok, so “we reach out to veterans” I assume vba [kept reading statement]. I assume that it would be something from vba. Just looking at this, I assume it’s going to be just click the stars and probably not much qualitative going into it? I assume there’s not going to be much written reviews?

-not those. just ratings for now.

If the vba reaches out and says, you go ahead and rate this, and we’re not going to share your individual ratings, we’re not going to share your data. We’re just going to pipe them into the website, I have no reason not to believe, I have no reason not to do that. If I was predisposed to not believe that sort of thing, I suppose I should be in a compound with a tinfoil hat wrapped around my head. If I think about all the data breaches we’ve had in the past 10 years. I don’t have much to lose… if it comes out that I said that the veteran community at GW was 3 stars instead of 4, I’ll put my name on that.

-how do you think the process of getting information from this ratings area went for you?

It was fine. It was fine. I guess it’s one metric to take in when looking at everything else. When I was looking at [?], I was looking at GW, American, Georgetown, and George Mason. I generally knew what I was going to be doing, something in the general realm of policy. So I looked at several of the programs that all four of those universities had. Their policies schools, government, all that stuff. If I were looking at them, I went with gw because I wanted the program particularly. I suppose if they had equal programs or all had the exact program or all had relateively equal ratings, if I happened to think to come to the gi bill comparison tool and saw this, that it would be a foot into that general, I guess it would be more of a red flag if something was, one of those 4 schools was just 1 star, but otherwise, if they’re all 3.5 and above. Well.

-that’s a great Segway. [had him switch to other prototype]

* Do users think the ratings are useful?

**Third Task - Comparing Various Rating Aspects - 10 minutes**

Let's say you want to attend the **University of California** and are trying to decide on the campus where you'll take classes. You plan on living on-campus and all the schools offer the classes you want to take. Walk me through how you'd use the Comparison Tool to help you decide which campus you'd attend.

[from landing clicked into srp page] Right, so. Berkeley, not rated because they’re obviously a bunch of lazy hippies there! haha. I’m sorry. Fairfield looks like it must suck because it’s 2.1, but it’s also rated by 10 veterans. That’s not enough, so it could be, 10 very spiteful, like I mentioned before, rock-chewing, mouth breathing veterans. That’s not enough to make a good assessment. The ones over 100 are certainly fine. The ones that don’t have a rating, I don’t think it’s a tipping point. It is a segway for me to dig further and do my own research. Like this one, 244. Rated by 28. 1.2. then there was a question about living on campus which is something that I would have never remotely considered because I was happily married, same person. Even if I wasn’t, I’ve already gone on campus once. I was 30 when I got out of the army, so that wouldn’t be a thing for me.

-any schools on this page that you’d rule out immediately?

B, But that’s not what you’re looking for in your research. Unless I was looking for a law school, that’s right. Oh, lakewood springs. School is facing a potential lapse in program approval, and yet it’s rated very highly by 102 veterans. Again, you’d do research on your own. Otherwise, there’s a catholic school, there’s hbcu. Right right right. I mean, nice still, but if my heart is set on the school itself or the program, that really wouldn’t matter. Was there another part to that question?

-no, that was it. how do you think that process went?

It was fine.

-ok, great.

Things to watch for:

* Does the user look at the overall rating or delve into the detailed ratings?
* Does the user pause or read the caution flag?

Upon completion of task:

* How did you think that went?
* What made you decide to pick that particular campus?

Research questions:

* Would ratings affect the school selection process?
* How does the number of ratings weigh into a user's perception of a particular school?
* Do users think the ratings are useful?

**Post-Task Interview - 5 minutes**

* Do you have general thoughts or feedback on the Comparison Tool that you’d like to share?
* Any questions for me?
* I want to give a chance for the other people on the line to ask a question.

-c: who should provide ratings? Was conflicted. Said 10-15% of beneficiaries are other than veterans.

**Thank-You and Closing - 3 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, thanks so much and enjoy the rest of your day!