

Veterans: Five Steps to Prepare for College

Are you leaving military service and wanting to restart your college education? Or are you thinking about going to college for the first time? To answer these questions, reference the five steps outlined below as you consider the types of employment and educational opportunities that fit your skills, talents, and aspirations.

With 1.4 million service members set to leave the Armed Forces in the next few years, it is imperative that veterans and their spouses make a seamless transition from military to civilian life. In July 2012, President Obama announced a major overhaul to the transition assistance program that helps service members and spouses reintegrate into their communities. He also signed into law the Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) to Hire Heroes Act, which provides additional education and training opportunities for veterans, as well as financial incentives for businesses that choose to hire former service members: <http://benefits.va.gov/vow/index.htm>. Additional information on the transition assistance program can be accessed at: http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/tap/tap_fs.htm.

Expanding your knowledge and skills through education or training will help you and your family to increase your income. Compared to someone with only a high school diploma, data show that you could earn:

- Over \$300 more a month if you have some college but no degree;
- Over \$500 more a month if you have an associate's (two-year) degree; and
- Over \$1,500 more a month if you have a bachelor's (four-year) degree.⁴

In addition to enabling you to earn a higher salary, postsecondary education and training also can help you learn new skills, have exciting new experiences, build a career, and play a stronger role in your family and community.

However, preparing to attend college for the first time—or going back to a college program that you left—can be challenging. There are many resources available, though, to help you and your spouse access the education and training you need to meet your goals.

Don Parks's Path to College

Don Parks, a master sergeant in the Air Force Reserves for 26 years, recently completed a tour of duty in Iraq. Though he faced serious challenges at the time of his retirement, including knee injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, Parks wanted to use his GI Bill benefits to return to college and earn a degree. In the summer of 2011, he enrolled in a Veterans Upward Bound program to work on his computer and English skills and get ready for college. That fall he enrolled in college full time—after being out of school for 40 years. He is still enrolled in his program and working hard to earn his college degree.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2012. *Education Pays*. Washington, DC: Author. Accessed on May 21, 2012. http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm.

This handout describes five steps to help you get ready to begin this process.

Step 1: Get help from websites and groups in your community.

Step 2: Create a college and career plan.

Step 3: Earn your high school credential.

Step 4: Choose and enroll in a college program.

Step 5: Apply for financial aid.

This handout is designed to be flexible enough for a wide variety of veterans and their spouses. For instance, if you already have your high school credential or are returning to college, you may be able to skip some of these steps.

STEP
1

Get Help from Websites and Groups in Your Community

In addition to the resources included in the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) *Adult College Completion Tool Kit*, there are many resources available especially to help veterans and their spouses. A good place to start is the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) *eBenefits* website, which helps veterans, service members and their families access and manage their military and veteran benefits. It offers information on education benefits, career planning, the GI Bill, scholarships, and financial aid. To learn more, go to: <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/ebenefits.portal>.

Another great place to find information on benefits for veterans and families is VA's *VetSuccess* website, which provides an interactive map to link veterans with valuable services for making the transition to civilian life: <http://www.vetsuccess.gov/>. The Vet Center is another VA service for veterans that helps service members and their families deal with the challenges of making the change from military to civilian life. More information is available at: http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/Vet_Center_Services.asp.

ED is also very committed to providing the support that veterans and their families need to succeed in college and obtain their degree. More information on all of the services and resources available for military families through ED is available at: <http://www.ed.gov/veterans-and-military-families/information#benefits>.

There are also many local organizations across the country that can help you and your spouse prepare for postsecondary opportunities. Many of them offer college and career counseling in addition to services such as transportation, childcare, and financial aid.

- **Adult education programs:** These programs can help you or your spouse improve key skills that will enable you to succeed in postsecondary education, such as reading, writing, math, and English skills. Adult education programs can also help you or your spouse obtain a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) diploma. To find a program near you, go to: <http://www.literacydirectory.org/>. Enter your Zip Code or city and state. Then, choose the type of help you need. You will get a list of adult education programs and information for getting in touch with them.
- **Community colleges:** Community colleges are two-year postsecondary institutions that can also help prepare you to succeed on college-level course work, attain a GED, a certificate, or associate's degree. To find a college near you, go to: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/pages/ccfinder.aspx>. Then, enter your Zip Code or city.
- **One-Stop Career Centers:** These centers can assist you in locating an education or training program in your area as well as finding and applying for open jobs. These centers also provide assistance with writing an effective resume and preparing for interviews. To find a center near you, go to: <http://www.servicelocator.org>. Enter your Zip Code or city and state. You will get a list of centers and information for getting in touch with them.
- **TRIO Programs:** These programs help individuals with low incomes or disabilities go to college. They also provide services to aid first-generation college students in succeeding academically, including:
 - Educational Opportunity Centers, which offer advice and information on applying to and paying for college.
 - Student Support Services Programs, which provide mentors, education programs, counseling, and other services to help students do well in college and prepare for a job.
 - Veterans Upward Bound, which helps students who served in the military develop the skills they will need to succeed in college. You can find more information at: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/triovub/index.html>.

To find a program near you, contact your local community college, a local One-Stop Career Center, or an adult education center. Be sure to ask them about any Veterans Upward Bound programs in your area.

- **Community groups:** There are many other community organizations available to provide assistance with jobs, education, training, counseling, housing, healthcare, and more. For a list of groups near you, go to: <http://www.211.org>. Enter your Zip Code or city and state. Then, choose the type of help or program you need.

STEP
2**Create a College and Career Plan**

What do you want to learn in college? What kind of job or profession are you interested in? The *eBenefits* website, in addition to your local adult education program and community college, can help you determine what kinds of career opportunities are available. They also can assist you in creating and carrying out a plan to complete college and build your career. Other helpful resources are:

- ***My Next Move for Veterans***: This website can help you find a job that matches your interests and training. Go to: <http://www.mynextmove.org/vets/>. Then, you can search for jobs by key words, industry, or your military classification.
- ***Key to Career Success***: This website connects veterans and service members with career planning, training, and job search resources at local One-Stop Career Centers. Go to: <http://www.careeronestop.org/MilitaryTransition/>.
- ***mySkills myFuture***: On this website, you can search for jobs that utilize the skills you have already developed. The site also provides information on potential earnings and any education or training you may need. Go to: <http://www.myskillsmyfuture.org/>. Enter your current or past job. You will get a list of jobs using the skills you already have and names and contact information for employers.
- ***My Next Move***: This website can help you find a job that matches your interests and training. Go to: <http://www.mynextmove.org/>. Then, you can search for jobs by industry or key words (for example, build houses or computers).
- ***College for Adults***: This website can help you plan your career, choose and apply to a college, and get financial aid: <http://www.collegeforadults.org>.
- ***The Occupational Outlook Handbook***: This website offers comprehensive information on thousands of careers, such as required education, expected salary levels, working conditions, and employment projections. To access the handbook, which is updated every two years, go to: <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>. Then, search for jobs by job type, earnings, or required education and training.

STEP
3**Earn Your High School Diploma**

As most military members will already possess a high school diploma, this step will likely not be necessary for you. However, this step may be appropriate for spouses or other family members. A local adult education program or community college can assist them in preparing for the GED test or obtaining an adult high school diploma. Adult students who need to obtain a high school credential will likely need to take an exam upon entering the program to determine which skills they still need to develop. Several different types of preparatory classes are available depending on the skill level of the student:

- **Adult basic education (ABE):** These classes help adults with basic skills, such as reading, writing, math, solving problems, and using a computer.
- **Adult secondary education (ASE):** These classes help adults to take the GED test or earn an adult high school diploma.
- **English literacy:** These classes help adults with speaking, reading, and writing in English. They also can help immigrant adults become U.S. citizens.

STEP

4

Choose and Enroll in a College Program

There are many types of postsecondary training and education programs. You will want to consider your career goals carefully in order to determine the program that is best for you. You can work with a college and career counselor to learn more about the various postsecondary options:

- **Career and technical education (CTE) programs:** These programs prepare students for certain careers, such as those in many healthcare or mechanical fields. CTE programs often mix classroom learning with hands-on training, culminating in a formal certificate of completion. In addition, there are other training programs, such as apprenticeships, vocational rehabilitation programs, and Job Corps, which provide work-related skills and knowledge aimed at certain professions.
- **Two-year academic programs:** Academic programs at two-year institutions, which usually culminate in a two-year associate's degree, generally prepare students to transfer to a four-year institution for the purpose of obtaining a bachelor's degree.
- **Four-year academic programs:** Four-year academic institutions offer a range of undergraduate programs of study, which lead to a bachelor's degree. Many four-year institutions also offer graduate and professional programs for students interested in pursuing advanced degrees.

Most four-year academic programs require potential students to submit formal applications and take an admissions test, like the SAT or ACT. The application process can often be challenging and time-consuming, so it is important to plan ahead to give yourself enough time to complete all of the application requirements. The Department of Defense has a number of useful resources available online to help current and former members of the military search for colleges, understand the application requirements, and prepare for admissions tests. If you or your spouse would like assistance with this process, go to: <http://www.nelnetsolutions.com/dod/>.

You can also access the *College Navigator* at: <http://collegenavigator.ed.gov>, which enables you to quickly locate educational programs near you and access critical information on each of them. The College Affordability and Transparency Center, available at: <http://collegecost.ed.gov/catc/>, also provides a tool for quickly comparing colleges by tuition level and total net cost.

It is key that you talk with your counselor before beginning any postsecondary education or training program to determine how much credit you may be able to receive for your military training and experience. The Department of Defense recently established a military credentialing and licensing task force to help veterans get credit for the knowledge and skills they already developed during their service. More information on this initiative is available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/31/president-obama-calls-congress-act-veterans-job-corps-do-list-and-launch>.

You may need to take an exam to get credit for your military experiences. In most cases you will also be required to submit a transcript from your military branch documenting your training and experience. To obtain this transcript and to learn more about receiving college credit for your past training and experience, go to:

- Sailor/Marine American Council on Education Registry Transcript at: <https://smart.navy.mil/smart/welcome.do>.
- Army/American Council on Education Registry Transcript System at: <http://aarts.army.mil/>.
- Community College of the Air Force Transcripts at: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/ccaf/transcripts.asp>.
- Coast Guard Official Transcript at: http://www.uscg.mil/hq/cgi/active_duty/go_to_college/official_transcript.asp.

STEP

5

Apply for Financial Aid

Veterans are eligible for several types of financial aid, including many federal grants, loans and scholarships. The education benefits available through the VA, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, provide valuable financial support solely to veterans and their family members to go to college or take another type of postsecondary training program. For more information on VA's education benefits, go to: <http://www.gibill.va.gov/>. The college you want to attend may also participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program, which provides additional financial assistance to veterans. For more information on the Yellow Ribbon Program and to find a list of participating colleges, go to: http://www.gibill.va.gov/benefits/post_911_gibill/yellow_ribbon_program.html.

The Federal Student Aid website has additional information on the different types of loans and grants available to all types of postsecondary students. There is also a separate page outlining the unique financial aid resources for veterans and military families at: <http://studentaid.ed.gov/types/grants-scholarships/military>.

In order to access federal financial aid, however, you and your spouse will need to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Many states and postsecondary institutions also use the FAFSA to determine which other types of financial aid you may be



eligible for, so it is necessary to complete this step. For more information on the FAFSA or to start a new application, go to: <http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>.

In addition to loans and grants, there are also many scholarships available for veterans and their spouses. For a list of scholarships available specifically for student veterans, go to: https://mymilitaryeducation.org/app/answers/detail/a_id/1257.

Additional Support for College Students

The U.S. Department of Education has assisted several colleges in establishing Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success (CVESS). These offices provide a variety of additional services on campus to help student veterans succeed in their life after the military. ED has an interactive map of all the colleges that have CVESS programs: <http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=en&msa=0&z=4&msid=100225427964936134608.000491cf67e5f1342b238>. Be sure to check with your college to see if they have a Center of Excellence for Veteran Student Success or any other special programs or services for veteran students.

Many colleges also have student organizations on campus just for veterans. For example, Student Veterans of America (SVA) is an organization located at many colleges that provides extra resources and support services for military members and their families. You can find a map of all the colleges with SVA chapters on the organization's website: <http://www.studentveterans.org/>.

Be Aware...

Some education programs, colleges, and companies are trying to take advantage of your military and veteran education benefits. President Barack Obama issued an Executive Order in April 2012 to ensure veterans and their families have the information they need to avoid these scams. Do your research carefully before applying for an educational program or financial aid. For more information about what to research when applying for college, go to http://www.gibill.va.gov/documents/factsheets/Choosing_a_School.pdf.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) also helps veterans who are being targeted by companies, colleges or individuals trying to take advantage of their veteran education benefits. To report a scam, please contact the CFPB at <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/complaint/>.