APPLYING TO COLLEGE 101
... AS A 20 SOMETHING

Applying to college can be a difficult task. There are many different sources of information regarding how to do so. We have composed step-by-step guidelines for applying to schools.

BY RYAN CONNOLLY

1. PICKING YOUR SCHOOLS
   It is important to pick several schools. You should pick a reach school that you really want to go to, a few match schools that you feel you will fit well and a couple of safety schools just in case you do not get into the other choices. Keep in mind location, academic prestige, majors and amount of work you want to put in.

2. AM I A TRANSFER STUDENT OR A FRESHMAN?
   As a veteran you should be a transfer student. All of the five services will put together a military transcript for their veterans in order to translate time in service into academic credits. Even boot camp counts, so regardless of how long you were in or how much specialization you did, you should receive some credits.

3. TRANSCRIPTS
   The schools you apply to will most likely want your transcript directly from the source. When you submit the paperwork you will have to include what schools you want the transcripts sent to.
   If you are an active duty member, Reserve member, Guard member or veteran of the Coast Guard, Army, Navy or Marine Corps, you can request a transcript at jst.doded.mil/smart/signln.do.
   If you are active duty, Reserve, Guard or a veteran of the Air Force, you must write a request including your full name, last four digits of your SSN, your date of birth, a physical signature and where you want the transcript sent to:
   CCAF/DESS  
   100 South Turner Blvd.  
   Maxwell AFB Gunter Annex, AL 36114

   Have transcripts sent to all schools you apply to.

4. APPLICATION DEADLINES
   Application deadlines vary for every school, but we have included typical deadlines. Please do not assume your school uses these same dates; we are giving them in order to give you an estimate of when to be ready. Deadlines given are in order to apply for the fall semester. We are including all deadlines, although most of us should be applying as a transfer.
   • EARLY APPLICATION (WHEN APPLICABLE):  
     Nov. 1 or Nov. 15
   • REGULAR APPLICATION:  
     BETWEEN JAN. 1 AND FEB. 1
   • TRANSFER APPLICATION: MAY 1
   • ROLLING ADMISSION:  
     ALTHOUGH ROLLING ADMISSIONS ACCEPT APPLICATIONS UNTIL ALL SLOTS ARE FILLED, MOST SCHOOLS RECOMMEND YOU APPLY BY MAY 1

If you can't find a specific deadline for your school on its website, then simply call the admissions office and ask.
5. SHOULD I APPLY ONLINE OR BY SNAIL MAIL?
We highly recommend you apply online. Not only is it quicker and easier for you, the school will receive the application immediately. Applying online will also prevent the admissions office from having to decipher poor handwriting.

6. ESSAY
Here's your chance to stand out! Standing out in the military may be a negative experience, but in a college application it is your way to acceptance. You want the admissions personnel to walk away remembering you.

Essays are not all about writing abilities. Content is important! Some schools will give a very broad topic (a favorite is something along the lines of “How do you feel you have overcome struggles to be where you are now?”) Sometimes there is no topic given. Our advice is to somehow include your experience in the military. Schools want veterans and Reservists on campus.

Writing about your service will also stick out in the minds of your readers, who are reading over and over about high school students and how they managed to get good grades while being on the football team.

Proofread! Edit! Ask someone else to edit it for you. It is so easy to finish an essay and want to walk away from it forever. Instead of sending it right away, though, walk away. Take a break, then return and read through it. Little mistakes will make a big difference to the admissions department.

7. FAFSA
This form will allow you to request financial aid: fafsa.ed.gov. This will help cover the cost of whatever the GI Bill does not cover. If the GI Bill is covering your entire cost, then any aid money you receive will show up in your account as an overage.

There are two things to keep in mind as a veteran using the FAFSA. First, as a veteran you are considered an independent student, so you may skip the section that asks how much your parents make. Second, in order to qualify for student aid, if you are male, you must be registered for the selective service. As veterans, we are not. Do not worry, because on the application after you select “No, I am not registered for selective service,” you will be asked if you are a veteran.

8. ORIENTATION
Keep an eye on your mailbox and e-mail for letters. Once accepted, make sure you attend orientation, meet with your advisor and finish applying for financial aid. The GI Bill can be confusing, so for tips on how to use it see page 86.

Remember that these are guidelines and every school is different. Using these steps as a reference compiled with any information your schools give to you will put you in a good place when it comes time to apply.
WHY ACCREDITATION MATTERS

Don't waste your time and money. If that degree isn't from an accredited school, potential employers won't care that you have it.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

1. Some accrediting organizations review colleges and universities; others examine specific academic programs such as law, medicine and engineering.

2. An accreditation evaluation includes an in-depth self-review by the school or program against a set of standards in areas such as faculty, student support services, finances, facilities, curricula and student learning outcomes.

3. In addition, an evaluation team of peer experts does an on-site evaluation of the institution.

4. To retain accredited status, this review is repeated every three to 10 years.

REGIONAL AGENCIES

In the United States, there are six regional accrediting agencies, each covering a different section of the country:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Individual programs or departments may be accredited by specialized — or program-based — accrediting organizations.
WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

You can’t get federal grants, loans or other federal funds unless your college, university or program is accredited.

Many employers simply won’t hire workers from non-accredited schools.

Also, many employers will only provide tuition assistance to employees for continuing education if the school or program is accredited.

Credits or degrees from non-accredited programs often are not transferable to an accredited institution.

A SCHOOL’S ACCREDITED STATUS SHOULD BE AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MAKING A DECISION TO ATTEND A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY. A DEGREE FROM A NON-ACCREDITED INSTITUTION MAY BE CONSIDERED WORTHLESS BY PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYERS AND WORK DONE AT THE NON-ACCREDITED INSTITUTION MAY NOT BE ACCEPTED IF THE STUDENT WISHES TO TRANSFER TO AN ACCREDITED COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY.”

– TIM WILLARD
Director of communications for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

National accreditation is done by career-related organizations and credit transferability is not guaranteed.

Regional accrediting agencies are generally thought to be the most reliable and accredit schools that offer a broad range of programs.

Degrees from regionally accredited schools will always be accepted everywhere.

UNDERSTAND YOUR GI BILL BENEFITS

The Post-9/11 GI Bill factors in accreditation.

You can use your benefits at any "approved" institute of higher learning.

Typically, accreditation is a major factor that determines whether a school or program receives VA approval.
Those who have served in the military know that the easiest and quickest road to a destination may not always be the best path to follow. The same is true when it comes to higher education.

There are numerous factors to consider when choosing a college and determining what type of degree to pursue. While exploring colleges, it may be more tempting to enroll in the institution that offers you the most credits for your military training and experience. But while that may look good on paper, it may not be the smartest route.

"You have to ask yourself what are your goals. If the credits are towards a degree that you don't want or aren't going to be able to use, that may not be the best decision for you," says David Chase, who recently retired as assistant vice president, site operations and military distance learning for Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va.

Chase recommends determining what kind of degree is needed to pursue your career goals, what types of educational venues are available and realistic for your skills and needs, what support systems are in place to ensure student success, and the reputation and accreditation of the college or university.

1) WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?
What is motivating you to go back to school? What is the best way to meet those goals? Make sure the degree that you decide to pursue is the one that can help you reach your goals and objectives.

2) WHAT ARE YOUR SKILLS AND ABILITIES?
If you need support services to get you up to par academically, make sure the college has the services that you need.

3) WHAT IS THE BEST AVENUE OF LEARNING FOR YOU?
"There are many online programs and while many people perceive that as being easier, that may not be the best mode of education for everyone. Some people need the classroom support and other support services to succeed," Chase said.

4) WHAT ACCREDITATION DOES THE COLLEGE HAVE?
At the very least, students should make sure the institution has regional and degree-specific accreditation. All colleges should be willing to share that information with students. Do research online to compare college choices.

5) WHO WILL BE YOUR ADVISOR?
It is important to know your point of contact early on, Chase said. Use that person to answer questions, help with your course of study and find additional support services if necessary.
THE PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE DEGREES

Are online degrees are every bit as good as traditional ones? Is there any difference in earning potential between the two? Here are some answers to these questions from corporate job recruiters who weigh the pros and cons of online degrees.

THE PROS

You can move at your own pace
Online education is a definite plus in helping an employee move up the corporate ladder. "We reimburse employees for continuing their education, but don't want them to take off from work to attend regular classes on a campus," says Kenya Pulliam, former manager of talent acquisition at UBS Federal Services. "So online is the ideal way for the employee to move ahead on his own time. If he succeeds in getting, say, an MBA, then we'll move him up into another department in the company."

Online degrees have high value, as long as they're accredited
Evan Guzman, head of Verizon's Military Programs and Veteran Affairs - Global Talent Acquisition, says. "Years before I started here, Verizon targeted core schools, and online education has brought some change. But an online degree is as valued as a traditional one, provided that the school is accredited or recognized. This isn't to say that we wouldn't look at a degree from a not-well-known online school. From a hiring perspective, we look at everything, and try to be flexible and accommodating, especially for veterans. As far as pay goes, someone hired with an online degree is not going to have his earnings potential limited."

Online degrees are made for the military
William Gideon, Ph.D., DSN (Ret.), assistant professor and associate director of military distance learning at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., says many key engineering courses are offered on CD-ROMS and DVDs, ideal for those still in the military who don't have access to the Internet, such as personnel in submarines. "In about 2002 we were asked by the Navy to provide graduate education for nuclear submarine officers," Gideon says. This resulted in a program which has allowed more than 900 of these officers to earn a Master of Engineering. The courses were provided at no cost to the officers.

Companies hire people with online degrees
The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) surveys its members each year on a variety of topics, including the perception of online degrees. In the study titled "Hiring Practices and Attitudes: Traditional vs. Online Degree Credentials," one-third of those surveyed said they view those who had obtained their degrees online as favorably as those who had obtained them through a traditional program. However, 79 percent said their company had hired someone with an online degree in the last 12 months.
"AN ONLINE DEGREE IS AS VALUED AS A TRADITIONAL ONE, PROVIDED THAT THE SCHOOLS IS ACCREDITED OR RECOGNIZED."

- Evan Guzman
  Head of Military Programs and Veteran Affairs
  Global Talent Acquisition
  Verizon

THE CONS

- Online degrees may have a higher dropout rate
  In terms of drawbacks, Guzman says he has heard that online students sometimes tend to drop out more frequently than other students since they don’t have the social support of other students as on a campus, though some online schools compensate for this through stimulating online interaction between students and faculty. But, he adds, "For many veterans, the earning of the degree is much more important than the socialization process. It really varies."

- Some people are just starting to view online degrees favorably
  Although some employers still view online degrees less favorably than those from a traditional school, that view is shifting as more brick-and-mortar schools implement online programs, according to Mark Schmit, director of research at SHRM. "As traditional schools continue to open online programs and online schools improve their reputations, we will see an increasing acceptance of online degrees in the workplace. The majority of surveyed HR professionals said they think online degrees are viewed more favorably today than five years ago, and a growing number see individual courses taken online as equally credible to courses taken at traditional universities."