HOW TO GET COLLEGE CREDIT FOR MILITARY EXPERIENCE

BY MARTY LEVINE

Many veterans heading to school can get college credit for their military training and experience, including leadership development courses. Coupled with classes they may have completed during active duty, this could give some student veterans a big head start on their post-military education.

Credit transfer policies vary widely by state and institution, so it is critical that service members planning to attend college when they separate start the process early. Transitioners must understand the credit transfer policy at the schools they are considering and should ask the schools to review their transcripts.

Three organizations offer assistance to service members pursuing a degree during and after their service:

1. The American Council on Education (ACE) evaluates how much and what kind of credit to award for military training and occupations. acenet.edu

2. Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges consortium (SOC) awards credits for military training and academic testing. soc.aascu.org

3. Defense Activities for Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES) manages the work of the SOC and offers several specialty education programs. dantes.doded.mil

HOW TO GET ACCESS TO YOUR TRANSCRIPTS

The Army, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Navy are now producing a Joint Services Transcript (JST). You can access the JST at: jst.doded.mil/smart/signIn.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:
"One of the biggest challenges is for the service member to understand credit transfer policies at an institution," says Michele S. Spire, ACE’s director of military programs and an Air Force spouse. "It’s a whole different language." Spire is the lead member of an ACE team that evaluates military courses and occupations for a match in civilian higher education.

Take a current service member whose MOS is in the engineering field, Spire says. Given this experience, he may want to add an engineering degree to his résumé. Some institutions of higher education will carefully evaluate the soldier’s specific military training and MOS and find the matching credits in their engineering curriculum. Others may not allow any ACE credit recommendations to count toward an engineering degree. Instead, the institution may sweep them into the general education category.

Thus, while this service member may believe he is eligible for a certain number of engineering credits – turning his military experience into completed courses in his major – some universities may not allow that to happen. See the “ACE Checklist” to make certain the credit transfer process is clear from its earliest stages.

ACE publishes A Transfer Guide: Understanding Your Military Transcripts and ACE Credit Recommendations (acenet.edu/militaryprograms/transferguide).

Spire notes that university officials can counsel and advise service members to determine where their transcript will take them – how to leverage their existing MOS and credits.

It’s uncertain how many veterans fail to take advantage of their ACE credit recommendations. In talks with service members, Spire’s ACE team found that some were able to apply their ACE credits successfully; others could not, but were not seeking a degree that related directly to their MOS; and yet others felt that their university or other higher education institution didn’t do a good job of matching service to college.

In the end, making sure credit is awarded properly will always be up to the individual student. "There’s still a need to communicate to veterans and service members the value of their military transcripts," Spire says.

ACE CHECKLIST

What’s the best way to make certain you get the educational credits you deserve? The American Council on Education offers this handy checklist:

- Do your research: Make sure the school you choose to attend gives you the maximum credit for nontraditional learning methods.
- Every school is different: Learn how they handle credit transfers before you ask them to handle yours.
- Check your military transcript: early and often online.
- Ask your school to review your official transcripts (including those from other schools) as early as possible.
- Avoid unnecessary classes by consulting with an academic adviser early on. Be sure to have a copy of your transcripts and your DD-214.
- Take charge: follow up with all the academic departments handling your credit transfers.

SAVE TIME & $$$

The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) offer standardized tests that allow service members and veterans to receive college credit for what they already know. The tests, which are available in 33 areas such as math, science, English, foreign language and history, can save time and money.

For information on tests administered by DANTES, visit dantes.doded.mil.

5 STEPS TO CLEP®

1) Find out if your college accepts CLEP.
   Use the CLEP college search and talk to your admissions office, test center or academic advisor.
2) Read descriptions of all 33 exams.
   Decide which one to take.
3) Register to take your exam(s).
   Contact a CLEP test center and make an appointment.
4) Start studying.
   Get a college textbook and review sample questions.
5) Take your test!
LEARNING COLLEGE TERMINOLOGY CAN BE CONFUSING. HERE'S A DOWN AND DIRTY BREAKDOWN OF SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW.

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

▸ Yellow Ribbon: School participates in the Yellow Ribbon program, which allows schools to waive a portion of the tuition that exceeds what the GI Bill covers (public in-state tuition). The VA will match the school's contribution.

▸ Military Scholarships: School offers scholarships, in addition to GI Bill benefits, to active duty military, Guard and Reserve members and military veterans.

▸ Military Discounts: School offers discounts on tuition and/or fees in addition to GI Bill benefits, for active duty military, Guard and Reserve members and military veterans.

▸ In-State Tuition for Active Duty Non-Residents: School offers in-state tuition rate to military students and their legal dependents.

▸ Credits for Military Service & Training: School awards military students credit toward a degree based on training, coursework and occupational specialty.

SUPPORT

▸ No Penalty for Deployed Military Students: School assists students who are called to active military duty (and take a leave of absence) during the school year.

▸ Full-time VA Counselor on Staff: School has personnel on staff who assist veterans in their transition to campus and academic life.

▸ Veteran Clubs/Groups: School has professional and recreational clubs and associations specifically for military and veteran students.

▸ SVA Chapter on Campus: School has a chapter of the Student Veterans of America on campus.

DEGREES OFFERED

▸ Doctoral: School offers an academic or professional degree that in most countries refers to a class of degrees which qualify the holder to teach in a specific field (e.g. Ph.D).

▸ Professional: College degree in a profession that often requires licensing in order to practice as a professional in the field, such as law, nursing and architecture. Skills and practical analysis are emphasized over theory and research. Definition varies by school.

▸ Master: School grants an academic degree to individuals who have undergone study demonstrating a mastery of a specific field of study or area of professional practice.

▸ Bachelor: School offers academic degree awarded for an undergraduate course of study that generally takes about four years.

▸ Associate: School offers academic degrees awarded upon completion of a course of study that usually lasts two years.

▸ Certification: School offers certificate, which signifies a student has reached a standard of knowledge of a certain vocational subject. Certificate programs can be completed even faster than associate degree programs, and may or may not include language arts, mathematics or social science requirements.

ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is recognition that an educational institution has a certain standard of quality that other reputable organizations will honor. There are two kinds of accreditation. Institutional refers to the entire school. Specialized, or programmatic, refers to specific programs within an institution.

INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

▸ Regional: Accreditation typically granted to public and private, mainly nonprofit and degree-granting, two- and four-year institutions.

▸ National: Accreditation usually granted to for-profit, career-based, single-purpose institutions, both degree and non-degree.

▸ Hybrid: Accreditation of both specialized programs at larger institutions and freestanding institutions.

SPECIALIZED OR PROGRAMMATIC ACCREDITATION

▸ Programmatic: Accreditation for specific programs, professions and freestanding schools, e.g., law, medicine, engineering and health professions. ☀