

The five steps for going to college with the right mindset

Step 01.

Understand the primary purpose of your GI Bill® entitlement and make sure you're eligible.

The GI Bill® is a wonderful and generous benefit; however, there are two strong messages that need to be at front of mind when thinking of using your benefit.

- #1 Understand that the primary purpose of your GI Bill® benefit is to earn a degree and become credentialed in an industry you seek to gain employment. In other words, you should have a good idea of what specific industry you seek to enter and a handful of job roles that seem appealing before you commit to getting a college degree.
- #2 Once you have some idea of what industry and roles you seek, make sure you have the most efficient plan to get that degree so you don't have to have it take more time and spend money out of your own pocket.

Once you have these two areas covered, check out your GI Bill® benefits and start learning what specific entitlements you'll have depending on your pathway.

- #1 Make an appointment with your local VA representative.
- #2 Look at the GI Bill® comparison tool to get an idea of the different institutions.

As soon as you've checked out the GI Bill® benefit, make sure you're eligible for the entitlement by applying for your certificate of eligibility from the VA.

Step 02.

Understand that private sector employers are seeking a specialist.

One of the biggest challenges you'll face as a transitioning military member are the stark differences between the public and private sectors.

- The military public sector is taxpayer-funded in perpetuity – which means it's essentially mandated to exist and has no competitors to worry about.
- Private sector companies do not have the luxury to exist with no competitors and instead have to compete against other companies to sell their products to customers who voluntarily pay for them; this creates a lot of uncertainty within the company, which means the company has to ensure they have the right people in the right roles to address the market need. Private sector companies are seeking a credentialed individual with a specific skill set to fill a specific role.
- This specificity is what will be a big change for you – but if you do it, getting that degree to fill that specific role will set you up for success.
- Your college degree is critical because it will be your credential – and more and more companies are requiring college degrees to break into that next tier of employment that pays better and provides upward mobility. This is also how job boards are set up.
- Having this “insider info” will help you adjust your mindset to properly leverage your GI Bill® and create a more successful outcome.

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Step 03.

Choose a primary and secondary career sector and determine what credentialing is needed.

- Now that you know getting your college degree is an integral part of the process because of the credentialing process, the next step is to choose a primary and secondary career sector.
- You are likely thinking, “I want to do something completely different than what I did in the military.” While this thought is fine and good, remember that a job in the private sector will be very different from your job in the military. If you haven’t worked in the private sector before, you may not be sure how these jobs operate. The best way you bridge this gap is to do informational interviews with individuals in those positions of interest in the private sector.
- Primary career sector: We recommend you consider keeping your primary career sector close to what you did in the military. This is an area where you have extensive experience and some initial credentials (certifications, etc.), so this is where you likely have the largest earning potential.
- Secondary career sector: If you feel you’d like to explore a potential second career sector, take an inventory of other passions you have and map those to specific degrees — and more importantly, which jobs these credentials will open the door to that well-paying job in the industry you want to be in.

Step 04.

Make a list of colleges that provide that specific credential.

- Once you’ve identified your primary and secondary career of interest, it’s time to make a list of the top 10 colleges that provide that specific credential.
- Did you know that most, if not all, colleges have local veteran admission specialists that can help you?
- Added bonus: if you’ve done the work up front that we’ve talked about in this checklist, you’ll have a leg up, and the conversation with the specialist will be very useful to help you make the best decision possible.
- Refine your list based on what you’ve learned and pare it down to the top five.

Step 05.

Make your decision.

- Now that you’ve methodically pared it down to the top five schools that provide the specific credential to get you a well-paying job you’re seeking in your industry of choice, it’s time to make a choice and begin the application process.
- It’s time to use the GI Bill® comparison tool to see the differences between your top five colleges of choice and begin the application process.
- Remember, you can always get help from your local veteran admission specialist who’s connected to your university of interest.