

GETTING STARTED

IMPORTANT!! -- Read this before enrolling in ANY school or requesting TA

The question I hear asked most often by people who want to start on their way to a college degree is, "What do I do now?" My answer to that question is: "Follow the steps below."

There's nothing to prevent you from just diving in and registering at any accredited school for whatever course strikes your fancy. But ask yourself a few questions first:

- "What course am I going to take after I finish this one? And the next one? And the one after that?"
- "Am I planning to get a degree from this school?"
- If not, "Are the credits I earn at this school going to be transferable to the school I want to get my degree from?"

Just as it's a good idea to have a map before starting out on a long trip, it's a good idea to have a well-thought-out plan for getting your degree. The steps below might add another month to your decision to start taking courses, but spending that time now will help you avoid a lot of wasted time and effort down the road.

NOTE: Of course, if you've already done what's indicated in any of the steps below you should skip it and go to the next one.

STEP #1 – Figure out what you want a degree for.

STEP #2 – Determine what you want to major in.

STEP #3 – Find colleges/universities which offer degrees in your desired major.

STEP #4 – Submit a request for an education assessment and to have official transcripts of your assessment sent to colleges you identified in step #3.

STEP #5 – Pick your first course

GETTING STARTED – STEP 1

Figure out what you want a degree for.

To do this, you'll first need to decide what kind of work you want to do once you leave the Coast Guard. Keep in mind that to be successful in many fields you don't have to have a degree. For example, does an interior designer need to have a degree? Or a master welder? Or a home health care worker? I don't know the answers to these questions. The point is, work backwards from your goal.

- Type of work you want to do
- Education/training requirements to do that kind of work
- Schools which provide that kind of training/education

This is much more productive than picking a major and degree and hoping it will help you get the kind of work you want to do or, conversely, that your preferred employer will find it useful.

How do you do this? Check out an underused tool: the federal Department of Labor's [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#). This on-line publication lists hundreds and hundreds of job titles and much useful information about each. For each job title, there's a separate article. All articles are organized the same way (see below), so you can easily compare jobs with different titles.

- Significant Points
- Nature of the Work
- Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement
- Employment
- Job Outlook
- Earnings
- Related Occupations
- Sources of Additional Information

The section on training includes education and should answer general questions about the type and amount of training and/or education employers want people who do the job to have.

GETTING STARTED – STEP 2

Determine what you want to [major](#) (hyper link to page 8)

With the help of either an interest or career assessment, or the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* or all of these, you should now have a pretty good idea what major will be a good fit with your interests.

When choosing a major, remember that the field you major in doesn't have to relate to the field you want to work in. Still, most people find that the field they want to major in strongly related to the field they want to work in.

This college-as-job-preparation perspective seems to have largely supplanted the traditional way of looking at college either as a providing time to "find oneself" (to use a dated phrase) before entering the world of work or as totally irrelevant to one's future career. Even so, many people still do get academic degrees, degrees in subjects such as history, English, geography, European or Asian or Latin American studies, or a particular language which may be only tangentially related to specific career fields.

Are you thinking about a business degree? [Make sure it suits your needs](#) before jumping into one.

You shouldn't feel pressured to pursue a major just because others are doing so or because you think you have to do so to find a decent job after college.

One useful tool for exploring what kinds of work might be available to you if you pursue a specific degree is [What Can I Do With a Major In . . .](#). This web site (from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington) provides information on the relationship between specific degree majors, career fields, and job titles.

Another excellent web site is the CollegeBoard's "[Majors & Career Central](#)".

If you're still not sure what you want to major in, consider a [general or liberal studies major](#)

GETTING STARTED – STEP 3

Find colleges/universities which offer degrees in your desired major.

Once you've determined that you'll need a degree (and what to major in), your next step is to find a school that provides that degree in that major.

Check out a couple other pages on this web site ("[Selected Colleges & Universities](#)" and "[Choosing a School](#)"). Note that at the bottom of the "Selected Colleges & Universities" page is a list of a few search engines you can use to find schools which meet your criteria.

Caution!

I can't tell you how many people I've talked with who have jumped into taking college courses based only on a TV commercial or ad in *Navy Times* or a magazine – and have later regretted it. Why? Because they dealt with sales people who call themselves “counselors”. And a sales person's main interest is usually not your education. They're mainly interested in getting you to pay the institution money. The fact that you're taking courses and not buying a stereo is irrelevant. Sales are sales and they get paid according to how much money they get you to spend with their company. (Don't forget that for-profit educational institutions are companies that sell education.)

ESOs, on the other hand, are prohibited from steering you toward or away from particular institutions. An ESO's job is to provide facts in as unbiased a way as we can. Who's more likely to tell you the truth: an ESO who has nothing to gain from your decision or a salesperson whose income depends on your decision?

Here are a few questions to get answers to before you pick a school.

- **Does the institution you're considering require you to sign a contract (perhaps called an “education agreement”) before you can take courses there?** If so, beware. You may commit yourself to taking a specific number of courses, to paying a withdrawal fee if you decide not to take a course – even if you haven't started the course – or other practices you'd find used in an appliance store rather than an institution of higher education.
- **Does the institution automatically sign you up for pre-selected courses, requiring you to withdraw from them or else pay for them (like a book or CD club)?**
- **Is it difficult to find basic information on its web site such as the type of accreditation, whether it runs on a semester or quarter system, and how much its per-credit tuition is?** Good schools aren't afraid to let students know this information.
- **Does the institution make it easier to find information on financing your education than on how much your education there would cost?**
- **Do you really need a degree or are you mostly interested in learning specific skills or acquiring specific information?** If you're getting a degree to prepare you for a specific career outside the Coast Guard, have you checked with potential employers in that field to see if they require applicants to have a degree?

For example, do you really need an associate's or bachelor's degree to become an illustrator, graphic designer, or video game designer or to start your own business? Don't assume employers want a degree; they might be looking for specific skills and knowledge instead. And you can often acquire such skills and knowledge by taking individual courses (without getting a degree) that might make you more desirable to employers than would a degree for which you have to take English, math, history, and other courses unrelated to your interests. These courses are available on-line, by other types of distance learning, or in class.

The bottom line is: be a smart consumer. You wouldn't buy a house or a car without first looking at and comparing a few. So why would you buy an education without using the same degree of care?

GETTING STARTED – STEP 4

Submit a request for an ["Application for Transcript"](#) from the Coast Guard Institute.

This form allows you to do any or all of the following:

- request an assessment of credits earned through Coast Guard service,
- update a previous assessment (e.g., when you've been advanced beyond E-6),
- request to have an official copy of your transcript sent to one or more colleges or universities.

If you request only an assessment or updated assessment, you will receive an unofficial transcript showing course names and the number of credits the American Council on Education has determined you would have earned if you had completed a college course which covered the material that was covered in your Coast Guard training course. This unofficial transcript is for your information only.

The Institute's staff will only assess courses you took as part of your Coast Guard service, taking this information from DirectAccess and any training completion certificates you might have that can't be entered into DirectAccess. As a result, before you submit this form to your ESO, ensure that all courses you've taken in the Coast Guard that can be put into DirectAccess are in DirectAccess.

Colleges/universities will not accept it as proof of credits you've earned while in the Coast Guard. To have an official transcript sent to one or more colleges/universities, you must also complete section 4 (and section 8, if you want transcripts sent to multiple institutions) on this form.

Be aware that just because you have a lot of courses and credits listed on your transcripts colleges and universities aren't required to accept those courses and credits toward their degree programs. Every institution of higher learning in the country determines for itself which courses and credits it will accept toward its degree programs.

To get a transcript of DoD service (if you served in one of the DoD services) you'll need to contact your previous service directly to get a [SMART](#) transcript (USN and USMC), [AARTS](#) transcript (USA), or [CCAF](#) transcript (USAF) sent to colleges/universities.

Degree Plans

The transcript you will receive is not a degree plan.

Degree plans list all courses

- needed to complete your desired degree,
- the school will consider completed (based on credit transferred from elsewhere), and
- you still need to earn your degree.

By knowing which courses you have to take and which you've already completed, you know which you still have to pass and, therefore, how far you are from

earning your degree. Comparing the degree plans you receive will help you determine which school is the best fit for you.

In mid-December 2009, the Coast Guard Institute stopped providing degree plans. As a result, you no longer have to provide copies of transcripts from colleges/universities you've previously attended.

Assuming you've arranged it ahead of time, counselors at schools which interest you may create degree plans from your Coast Guard transcript and any college/university and/or DoD service transcripts you also had sent to them.

GETTING STARTED – STEP 5

Pick the first course to take

There are ways of looking at this decision:

- take courses that are part of your [general education requirement](#), since they're the most easily transferable and allow you to explore your interests before deciding on a major *or*
- take courses you're interested in at the beginning of your college experience, to build on your initial enthusiasm.

Each of these has its merits. And, because no two people are alike, not all reasons for either choice apply to everyone. For example, you may well be interested in one or more courses that make up your general education requirement. This is likely because the courses in this requirement fall into so many different categories – math, science, humanities (art, music, literature), social sciences (history, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, anthropology, archaeology, geography, climatology, ecology), and English (grammar and composition). So, if possible, try to take a general education course that you also find interesting.

On the other hand, you may find that taking a course you really want to take makes you so excited about taking more such courses and eventually getting your degree that you find it easier to take the general education courses along with courses you really like.

WARNING: Whatever you do, don't wait until the end of your degree program to take all the courses you don't want to take. If you do, you may come to dread taking them so much you just give up and don't finish your their degree.

GLOSSARY OF COLLEGE TERMS

Audit – To take a course for non-credit purposes. Audit students do not take tests or write papers or receive a grade.

Continuing Education Units (CEUs) – Many colleges have a Continuing Education Division or a College of Extended Studies. It consists of coursework that meets community needs at times and locations convenient for working adults. They may or may not be for credit.

Subjects vary -- they can be leisure and recreational courses, such as square dancing, cooking, yoga, furniture making, genealogy, or photography. Or they can be courses that meet professional education needs, such as license renewal, a professional certificate or keeping up-to-date in a career field.

Noncredit courses are usually taught by experts in the subject matter, not faculty members. Upon completion, students are often awarded CEUs, based on the number of clock hours he/she attended class. Ten clock hours equal one CEU. CEUs do not equate to college credit nor can they be transferred into another college.

Credit Hour – A unit of measure representing an hour (50 minutes) of instruction over a 15-week period in a semester system or a 10-week period in a quarter system. It is applied toward the total number of hours required for a degree, diploma, or certificate.

Compressed Term – A normal semester term is about 15 weeks; a quarter term is 10 weeks. Some colleges (especially on-base schools) compress their terms into a shorter time frame, for example, 8 weeks or on weekends.

Degree Plan – A table that shows which courses and how many credits are required to earn a specific degree in a specific major, along with the courses you've already completed and credits you've already earned. Together, these show you how close you are to earning that specific degree in that specific major.

Electives – Electives are courses you choose based on your interests or to explore other avenues of study. Every degree program will allow you to choose some courses for yourself. Some electives have to be taken to satisfy particular topic areas, some are free – meaning you can take any course you want to fill it.

Full Course Load – A full-time student normally takes 15 to 17 semester credits a term. This equates to at least 5 courses. However, most colleges officially designate 12 or more credits during a semester term as full-time. The number of instructional periods corresponds to the number of credits awarded. If a course is 3 semester credits, it generally meets 3 times a week for an hour (or 50 minutes) each time.

General Education Requirement – General education courses are those everyone must take no matter what degree they are pursuing. Each school has its own list of core courses, but most require a mix of English, arts, humanities, social sciences, and physical or natural science courses. These courses are the most easily transferable.

Grade Point Average (GPA) – Each A is worth 4 grade points; B, three points; C, two points; and D, one point.

If you take a 3-credit-hour course in English Composition and make an A (4 grade points), you have earned 12 grade points. To determine your GPA for an entire term, divide the number of credits you took into the number of grade points you made.

Virtually all colleges require a GPA of at least 2.0 (C) for graduation. Virtually all graduate schools require a GPA of at least 3.0 (B).

NOTE: Grades of D or F are NOT usually transferable into another college or university.

Major – Your chosen field of study. For a bachelor’s degree, you focus on a discipline by taking between 10 and 20 required courses in that area, primarily in the last two years of a 4-year bachelor’s degree. The first two years are primarily general education.

Minor – Courses in an area of study which compliment your major. If you take enough of them, they may qualify you for a minor in that field. For instance, if you’re interested in going to medical school you may decide to major in biology and get a minor in chemistry. A minor represents from 5 to 12 courses in a specific subject.

Portfolio Assessment – Getting credit for what you already know. It’s often called “Credit for Prior Learning or Credit for Life Experience,” or something similar. You prepare, with the assistance of college staff, a portfolio that presents your experiences, learning that has resulted, and evidence or documentation that you’ve learned these things. Includes such things as work experience (paid or volunteer), community activities, hobbies, travel, independent study and formal training not taken in college.

Prerequisite – A course that prepares you for another course at a higher level. For example, you must take Accounting 101 before you can take Accounting 102.

Residency Requirement – The number of credits that must be taken with a particular college in order to receive a degree from that school. Some colleges require a year (30 semester credits or 10 courses), either on campus or through distance learning. Some just require 15 semester credits or 5 courses. Often this residency requirement must be taken in your senior year. Servicemembers Opportunities Colleges have less stringent residency requirements or none at all.

Rolling Enrollment – As opposed to semester, quarter, or trimester enrollment, rolling enrollment allows students to enroll at anytime and then work independently for a certain length of time to complete the material in the course.

Self-paced – A self-paced course or program has loosely-defined time frames for learners to complete their course work. Most have no fixed starting or ending dates, due dates for assignments, or exam dates. Most will not allow students to complete the course in less than a certain amount of time (typically six weeks) and do allow students to take as much as a year to do so.

Term-based – A course or program that starts and ends on fixed dates (typically five to fifteen weeks apart) during which there are fixed dates for assignments and tests.

Transcript – A permanent academic record of your courses and grades, with your term and cumulative GPA. Students request transcripts from their college,

either for themselves (unofficial) or for an official copy to be sent directly to another college. Colleges may charge a fee for each transcript sent. How do you get a transcript if your college no longer exists? Contact the State Department of Education (the state your college was in.)

NOTE: If you owe the college money, it will not issue a transcript until your "bill" is settled.

Undergraduate – a student who is working toward an associate's or bachelor's degree; an institution that awards associate's or bachelor's degrees; a program that leads to an associate's or bachelor's degree.