

# Factors to Consider When Choosing a School: A guide before using the GI Bill®

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# Choosing a School that is Right for You

As an eligible Servicemember, Veteran, dependent, Guard member or Reservist planning to use the GI Bill, you are a consumer about to make one of the most important decisions of your life. Would you buy a car before considering your needs or before checking available resources for ratings and prices? That's why you owe it to yourself to thoroughly consider your needs before choosing a school or program.

Making informed decisions about how to use your benefits and how they can best meet your needs means doing a little homework before classes start. This guide presents six important factors you should consider towards becoming an informed consumer of the GI Bill.

## i. What are your interests? How do you want to make a living?

Choosing the right career means considering many important factors. The Department of Labor's (DOL) career search tool [My Next Move for Vets](#) is one of the nation's primary sources of occupational information. You can review information about careers for hundreds of standardized and industry-specific descriptors such as "Retail" and "Manufacturing". DOL updates the tool by surveying a broad range of workers from each occupation. There is also a search engine to find careers similar to your military job and has assessment instruments for workers and students looking to find or change careers.

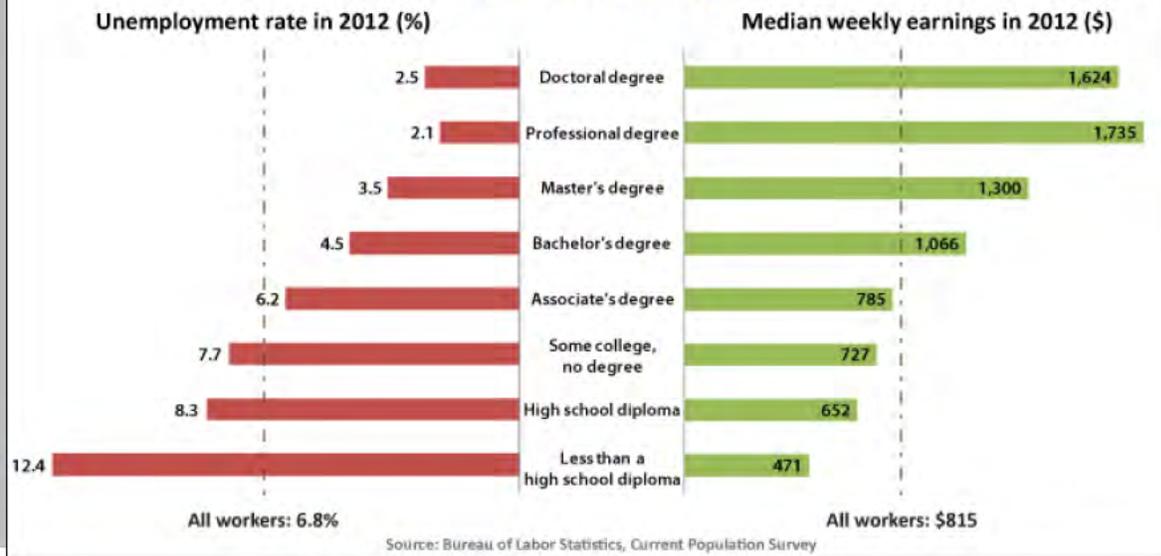
You might also want to research the projected demand for career fields. The [Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) provides information on the expected job prospects for different types of jobs, the education needed, earnings, what workers do on the job and working conditions.

For assessment, counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and some academic instruction in pursuit of postsecondary education, check out the Department of [Education's Veterans Upward Bound Program](#).

## ii. How much will I earn with a degree?

Reviewing the chart below, the data shows that people who graduate with a bachelor's degree on average earn about \$500 more per week and are significantly more likely to be employed than someone with a high school diploma. Want more information on potential earnings? Take a look at [Payscale.com](#).

## Education Pays



### iii. You've thought about a career, now what?

Choosing the right school involves more than just completing the school's application process. Make sure the school you attend meets your standards and expectations. In the military, you demonstrated the commitment, discipline and desire to succeed. These qualities are highly sought after by colleges and universities. Leverage those qualities and attend the school that best provides what you need and maximizes your investment.

The Department of Education's *College Navigator* is a great place to start researching schools. It's a free tool for consumers to search and compare schools based on key indicators such as degree or institution type.

### iv. Would my professional field respect a degree from the university or college I'm considering?

What's the point of a degree if it doesn't lead to employment? Employers have a good idea about which colleges and universities have good standing in their professional field and which don't. Choosing the right school for your particular discipline is crucial.

One thing employers look for is what kind of accreditations your school holds. The U.S. Department of Education maintains a [database](#) of accredited postsecondary institutions and programs. Accreditation is a recognized credential for schools and some programs.



As stated by the U.S. Department of Education, the goal of accreditation is to ensure that the education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.

Another helpful way to discover the respectability of a degree is to check the national ranking of the school and the program you're considering. Visit the website for [US News and World Report](#), one of the leading college and program ranking sources, and discover which schools make the grade.

## v. **How well does the school support Veterans? Does it have a dedicated program?**

Be careful about “Military/Veteran Friendly” claims and make sure your prospective school is friendly to *your* needs. There are objective sources to help you determine those needs.

The [American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#) has developed a [toolkit](#) for how schools can create or enhance policies and programs to better serve Veterans. It has examples of many successful programs that are available to you.

Other things to check for:

- *Transfer of credits from other schools or for military training* - Your school should recognize your past coursework/training and accept your transferred credit. Be vigilant in understanding whether your coursework will transfer to a new school, for example, when you transfer from an online institution to a public in-state school. Not all credit will be accepted, but finding an institution where this credit is best utilized towards degree requirements will help you make the most of your benefits. Check out the [ACE Military Guide](#) to find out what kind of credit you may receive for your military experience.
- *Campus and community service* - Look for access to mental health and medical support, disability services, academic accommodations, and available career services.
- *A strong Veteran voice* - Find an administration that listens to and involves Veterans in Veteran programs such as a school with a [Student Veterans of America](#) organization.
- *Central point of contact* - Hands-on, in-person assistance with navigating the educational process makes the academic journey much more manageable. Schools that agree to VA's [Principles of Excellence](#) are obligated to have such a person for Veterans.
- *Veteran specific space* - A designated location for student Veterans offers a dependable and supportive environment where trust, support, and camaraderie can be found and fostered in an academic environment.

- *Expanded housing options* - Student Veterans sometimes have unique housing preferences and needs - options should be explored.
- *Principles of Excellence participant* – Be sure to review VA’s list of schools that agree to participate in the President’s *Principles of Excellence Program*.

## vi. **Financing Your Education**

Given your GI Bill education benefit level and choice of school, you may not need student loans. Depending upon your eligibility tier for GI Bill education benefits, your tuition and fees charges could be completely or mostly covered, depending upon your choice of a school or program. If you do take out any loans, make sure you fully understand capitalized interest and the repayment terms or you may become heavily indebted. Other questions to ask yourself:

- What is a reasonable amount to pay for my degree?
- What is my interest rate and when do I have to start paying the loan back?
- Will I make enough money to repay my student loan debt?

According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) and the U.S. Department of Education, there are currently more than 38 million student loan borrowers with over \$1.1 trillion in outstanding debt, surpassing credit card debt. If you assume a large amount of student loan debt you may not qualify for home or auto loans and may have to delay saving for retirement, starting a family, or starting a business. The authoritative guide to help you determine how much college will cost and help you through the application process is CFPB’s *Paying for College* tool.

If you must take out loans to help pay for school, consider a *Federal Direct Loan* from the U.S. Department of Education as repayment terms are generally more flexible and there are greater consumer protections. Check the online tools available through the Department of Education at [studentaid.ed.gov](http://studentaid.ed.gov) and the Department of Education’s *Financial Aid Shopping Sheet*.

## vii. **Make it count and good luck!**

Choosing the right school is the first step in not only readjusting to civilian life, but to succeeding in civilian life. The GI Bill is a great program and you’ve already earned it. Use your benefits wisely, finish school, and become the leader in the civilian world you have already demonstrated you can be in the military.