

# APPENDIX B

## Higher education: going about it

### Choosing a Field of Study and a School



ften, people find both of these tasks so overwhelming that they hardly know where to start. If that describes you right now, here's something to remember: many college students change their majors at least once before graduation. So, even if you've yet to choose yours, it's not such a bad idea to enroll somewhere anyway. That way, you can begin to satisfy the required courses and, at the same time, consider possible options for your eventual major. In a college career-planning course or with a career counselor, you can explore fields of study, majors, and types of work—and how they relate.

If you know that you want to study in your current geographic area, contact the colleges and universities in that area by calling their admission offices. Ask for three documents, which they can send or you can pick up in person. These days many schools offer this information and forms on-line. Check the college or

university's website for more information.

■ **College catalogue.** This comprehensive document describes the school's mission, policies, faculty, services, tuition and fees, and general courses of study.

■ **Schedule of classes.** The schedule will give you a sense of what classes the school offers, as well as when and where. Sometimes schools with large adult-student populations offer classes outside the campus, in areas more convenient to workers.

"Distance learning" is available at many schools now. This means that students don't necessarily have to be on campus to attend classes. Students may be able to access a class through a computer network or closed-circuit television system in their area. Check out the possibilities if you are interested in this method of instruction.

■ **Application for admission.** By looking through this multi-page form, you'll see what you must do in order to apply to that particular school. One section of the form will no doubt call for you to write a Statement of Purpose. In Appendix B you'll find a section that deals with this. (The same advice applies to most narrative or autobiographical information requested at the undergraduate level.)

These documents will begin to give you an idea of what the university offers formally.

You should also check out the school informally in at least two ways. First, if you can, go to the campus you would be attending and get

a sense of the place. Hang out for a while. Sit in on a class if possible. Spend some time in the library, residence halls, student union, and the student activities center. Use the transportation system you would use to travel to school. Do you like what you see? Why? Why not?

Second, speak to professors and students in the area of study you are considering. Ask them about the classes they teach/attend and about how they spend their time on campus. If you will be working while you go to school, try to find out what kind of support the school has for adults. Is day care available, for example? Are late-afternoon or evening classes available? Do the library and career center remain open some evenings? This informal "inspection" of the campus will occur more formally if you apply to the school. Just try to get a sense of the campus.

Through these methods, identify no fewer than five and no more than ten schools that interest you. This is your "short list," a group of schools you need to investigate thoroughly by:

- Acquiring from each (and reading!) the three documents described earlier.
- Visiting the campuses formally and getting answers to any questions you have about each school and its programs.
- Talking with students such as yourself; for example, a conversation with an eighteen-year-old freshman who lives on campus may be considerably less helpful than one with a forty-five-year-old single mother who works full-time and attends—or will attend—classes part-time and only at night.

If you cannot visit far-away schools on your short list, ask about the availability of "home pages" for schools on the World Wide Web. You may be able to "visit" schools through their technology.

If you already know what you want to study but not where, you may want to begin your research with the *Peterson's Guides* series (see bibliography on page 87); the *Guides* series is available by subject area. If you are open to attending school in any location, you might want to use one of the career-planning software programs—DISCOVER or SIGIPLUS—to narrow down your choices. Such software is available at many high schools and community colleges, and at some public libraries.

### Applying for Admission

Every school has an admission office where you can inquire about fees, policies, programs of study, etc. You submit applications for admission to the school here. Even though these applications take a lot of time, avoid the temptation to hurry through. Be as thorough, concise, and neat as you can. If you have access to a computer, check to see whether the applications can be completed on computers. If so, you'll save time on revisions (which you will probably do several times before submitting the application).

Many colleges require completion of a standardized admission test as part of the admission process. Two standardized tests are common—the American College Testing exam (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

ACT  
(319) 337-1000  
[www.act.org](http://www.act.org)

SAT  
(609) 771-7600  
[www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)

If you have already completed some college courses and want to return to the same school, you may have to go through the admission process again. Ask. If you left school because of poor grades and/or disciplinary problems, ask an admission officer what you have to do to re-enroll. Don't assume that previous problems mean you can never return to school. Almost all schools will give you at least one more chance. Try.

### Applying for Financial Aid

These days nearly everyone needs some financial assistance to attend school. Your AmeriCorps educational award will help. You have up to seven years from the time you complete your term of service to use the award. If you will not be using it right away, ask your AmeriCorps leader or supervisor who you'll need to contact to redeem the award in the future. Don't miss the opportunity to use your educational award!

If your AmeriCorps educational award is not enough to cover everything, check out additional financial aid possibilities by contacting the financial aid office of the college(s) you hope to attend. There are several types of financial aid: loans have to be paid back after you leave or complete school; grants do not.

Scholarships, which are awarded through a competitive process, also don't have to be paid back. Work-study arrangements allow qualified students to work while they attend school, and an increasing amount of that work is in service organizations in the community. Each school may offer a somewhat different financial aid "package" so be sure to learn about all of your options.

### Using Academic Advisors

Advisors help students select courses to fit their current knowledge, skills, and areas of interest. Yours, for example, could help you choose your major and then sort out which classes will satisfy the requirements for your major and for your degree.

You may be assigned an academic advisor as soon as you are admitted to a school. If not, ask for one. Then make a visit with your advisor a top priority. He or she can be the most important person at school for you. Ask for help whenever you need it, or even before you need it.

### Getting A Degree

To get a degree, students must do two things, the first of which is to earn enough academic credits to graduate. Each class you take will be worth a certain number of academic credits, usually three. An associate degree usually requires 60 semester credit hours of study, a bachelor's, 120 hours.

The second requirement is to complete specific courses of study. For example, most

schools require everyone to take certain courses ("basic requirements"). Additionally, each student must complete all courses required for a particular major. In other words, someone who has earned 130 semester credit hours might still be ineligible for graduation without enough credit in the right categories.

The requirement for a specific course of study is what makes academic advisors so important. They can guide you through the maze of courses in such a way that you gain the knowledge and skills you want and also satisfy the requirements for graduation.

### Obtaining Academic Credit

These days people gain credit in several ways. This section will discuss both "traditional" and "nontraditional" avenues for AmeriCorps members to explore.

✦ **Traditional Routes.** Today, as in the past, two principal ways people get academic credit are by attending and passing classes and by transferring academic credits from other schools. Try to transfer whatever credits you have earned over the years. (Your academic advisor or admission officer should be able to answer questions about the transfer process.) If your school refuses some of your credits, don't just give them up. See what you need to do to appeal, and then do it. You might gain back at least some of the rejected credit hours.

✦ **Nontraditional Routes.** You may be able to receive academic credit in nontradi-

tional, sometimes faster and less expensive, ways. Many colleges and universities offer programs that award credit for learning gained outside the formal classroom. Be careful not to equate learning gained outside the formal classroom with experience, however. Experience cannot translate to academic credit; only the *learning* acquired through experience can. Here are non-traditional methods in current use:

✦ **Credit-by-Exam.** If you have expertise in a certain subject area or areas that you acquired through means other than formal classroom settings, you may be able to take an exam in your subject area(s). If you pass the exam, you may be able to waive required courses and/or get credit for the knowledge you have. CLEP (College-Level Examination Program), ACT-PEP (American College Testing Proficiency Examination Program), and DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-traditional Educational Support) are common credit-by-examination programs.

✦ **Credit through Formal Recommendations.** Much of the formal adult education and training in the United States takes place in courses sponsored by the military, corporations and unions, and by government agencies. If you have taken such courses, your learning may be appropriate for college credit (L. Lamdin, *Earn College Credit for What You Know*, 2nd Edition, Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 1992, p. 78).

Some kinds of training have been pre-approved for academic credit by the New York State Regents National Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI) and the American Council on Education (ACE) College Recommendation Service. Nearly 900 cooperating colleges and universities award credit based on PONSI recommendations. Nearly 6,000 training courses are approved for credit by ACE. Most institutions of higher education belong to ACE and are, therefore, receptive to ACE's recommendations. Ask local colleges or universities to discuss the possibility of credit hours through PONSI or ACE recommendations.

The American Council on Education publishes directories of training and other programs recommended for college-level academic credit. The *National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs* and *A Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services* are available from Oryx Press at 800-279-6799. The PONSI guide, published every other year, is *College Credit Recommendations: The Directory of the New York Regents National Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction*. To request the current guide, write to the University of the State of New York, PONSI, Cultural Education Center, Room 5A25, Albany, N.Y. 12230.

☛ **Prior-Learning Assessment.** A third common way to acquire academic credit for what you have learned outside for-

mal classroom instruction is through prior-learning assessment by a school. Many schools offer a course through which students write a portfolio or narrative about what they have learned outside of school, and provide appropriate documentation. That portfolio or narrative is then assessed by faculty members. If the learning is deemed appropriate at the college level, academic credit may be awarded.

Former AmeriCorps members may try to get academic credit for the learning acquired during AmeriCorps service. Undergraduate programs are likely to offer this opportunity, which is an excellent way for adults to get academic credit for learning. You may need to document your AmeriCorps training and experience. Work with your supervisors and program leaders to determine what documentation you might use.

A definitive guide to the nontraditional processes of earning academic credit was published in 1992 by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 243 South Wabash Avenue, Suite 800, Chicago, Ill. 60604. Telephone: 312-922-5909, [www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org). CAEL publications can be ordered by calling 800-228-0810. The guide, by Lois Lamdin, is titled *Earn College Credit for What You Know* (2nd edition).

### Getting the Most Out of School

Some students view school as a stage to be endured, something to finish quickly with as

little effort as possible. Adult students like you, however, tend to be more committed and practical. In choosing the subjects they will study, these students make sure they acquire the knowledge and/or potential for later employment. Adult students tend to be less intimidated by school in general.

Following are some hints to help you get the most out of your next foray into a higher-education setting.

☛ **Set goals and focus on them.** Know what you want to get out of school before you start, or at least explore the possibilities early on. Taking a career-exploration class in your first year of higher education is a good idea.

☛ **Go to class, do the suggested reading and research, listen to your professors.** Get involved with your school work. Your commitment to your work will reward you with good grades and an increasing confidence in your knowledge and abilities.

☛ **Get acquainted with your professors.** They can help you make sense of the material in class, choose an internship, and get into graduate school or find a job after you graduate. They are interested in your success as a student. Ask for their help when (or even before) you need it.

☛ **Make use of your academic advisor.** Every student in higher education is assigned an academic advisor. Ask for an advisor who knows your subject area well, one who can verify that you're on

the path you want to follow. Get your advisor's best advice about classes and teachers who will be most helpful to you. If you are not satisfied with your academic advisor, talk about your concerns. Ask for a new advisor if necessary.

☛ **Take advantage of the Career Center.** Most institutions of higher learning will have some sort of Career Center. Making sense of what is available there will require time and patience. These will be rewarded, however, because you should be able to find information about majors, employment prospects, types of employment, and ways to merge your skills, values, and interests with a course of study and/or a type of work.

☛ **Get experience.** Arrange for an internship or other work opportunity in your chosen field(s) of study. There is no better way to see how your studies relate to the world of work. If you are having trouble choosing between majors, arrange an internship in each area. Your academic advisor, as well as career counselors, professors, service-learning/volunteer office staff, and/or the cooperative education office may be able to help you find an internship. To a prospective employer, the combination of degree and work experience speaks much louder than a degree alone.

☛ **Enjoy social time (if you can).** For some, the demands of work, family, and school are too heavy to permit school-related socializing. If you can, however, do so, for hanging out with fellow stu-

dents can be a rewarding and learning experience. Sometimes people forge lifelong friendships with people they get to know in college. You'll be able to meet people from cultures and regions to which you have never been exposed. Moreover, the student "grapevine" offers new information (and gossip!) that may help you choose classes and professors. Also, you may be able to join a study group to get through a tough class.

(See Appendix D for more sources of information about higher education.)

If you go on to higher education after AmeriCorps, you'll have a chance to prepare yourself for a satisfying work life. You'll find that the more you put into your next learning experience, the more you'll gain from it. Put another way, "What goes around comes around." Good luck!