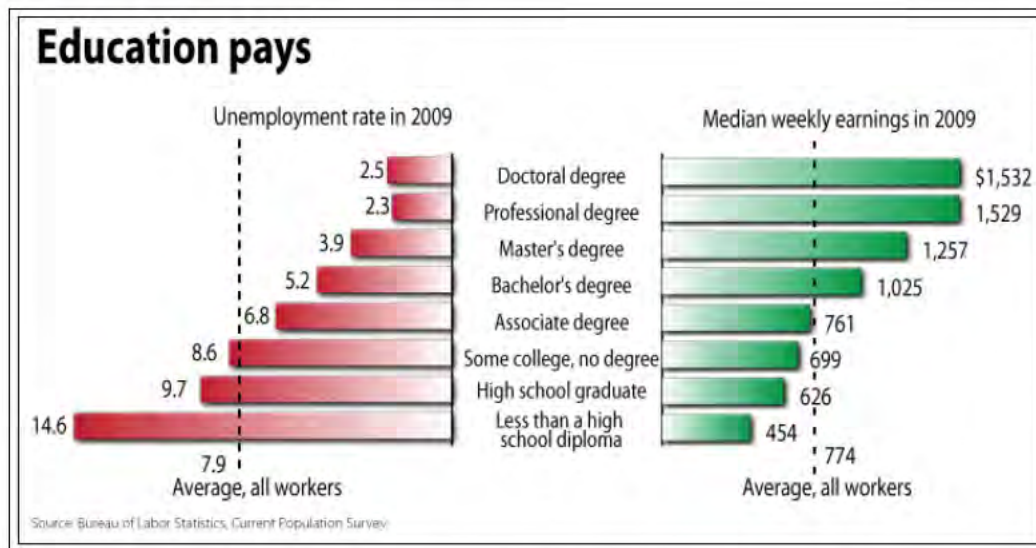


## Factors to Consider When Choosing a School

Using your GI Bill benefits successfully means more than just filling out a few forms. 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.

The following information will walk you through some of the basic information you should consider before you decide on a career, and by extension, a school.

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



As you can see from the chart above, the data show higher education has become a gatekeeper to prosperity in America, and without a degree it is easy to be left on the wrong side of the gate. 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 info on pay? Try going to [Payscale.com](http://Payscale.com).

### What are your interests?

Choosing the right career means considering many important factors. Fortunately, there is information available to assist you.

The Department of Labor has some very good information available on their website at <http://www.mynextmove.org/vets/> which you may find helpful. The [My Next Move for Vets](http://www.mynextmove.org/vets/) site is one of the nation's primary sources of occupational information. Central to the site is the ability to browse careers by industry database which contains information on hundreds of standardized and occupation-specific descriptors. The database, available to the public at no cost, is updated by surveying a broad range of workers from each occupation. The database also provides a search engine to find careers similar to

your military job and a set of valuable assessment instruments for workers and students looking to find or change careers. To access the My Next Move for Vets website click [here](#)

Another great source of information is the *Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook*. For hundreds of different types of jobs, the handbook provides information on the training and education needed, earnings, expected job prospects, what workers do on the job, and working conditions. The handbook can be found [here](#).

VA would also be pleased to assist with your decision by providing free counseling to:

- Facilitate career decision making for civilian or military occupations;
- Help choose an appropriate civilian occupation and develop a training program, or;
- Resolve barriers that impede success in training or employment;
- If you are interested in VA's assistance, you may contact us [here](#).

### **You've decided on a career, now what?**

*Choosing the right school* involves more than just completing the school's application process. The school you select is important, and is a decision not to be taken lightly. You should ensure the school meets *your* standards and expectations. You earned your college education and you will want to maximize your hard-earned investment. In the military, you demonstrated the commitment, courage, discipline and desire to succeed. Each of these qualities is highly sought after by colleges and universities. Leverage that. Don't settle on an institution that isn't right for you. Attend the school that can best provide what *you* need and maximizes your hard-earned investment.

There is a lot of information available to assist you. Although it can be time-consuming, take the time to gather all the information you need to make the best choice.

The Department of Education's *College Navigator* web portal is a great place to start. But before you access College Navigator, keep reading. The information available on College Navigator is important, but it's equally important to understand what the data means, as well as to identify questions you can ask potential schools so you understand what the information means to your specific situation. If you'd like to go directly to *College Navigator* click [here](#).

Below are sets of questions that will help you get answers about a school you are considering. These questions, and information provided, may not tell you everything you need to know, but. Understanding this information will give you a solid awareness of what to consider when selecting a school.

### **Question 1: Would my professional field respect a degree from the university or college I'm considering?**

The life lessons learned from going to college are important, but ultimately what's the point of a degree if it won'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. So choosing the right school for your particular discipline is crucial.

One thing employers look for is what kind of accreditations the school holds. The U.S. Department of Education maintains a database of accredited postsecondary institutions and programs, which can be found [here](#).

As stated by the U.S. Department of Education, the goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality. While this database does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education, it is useful to see which colleges and universities are legitimately accredited and which are not.

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 [here](#), and discover which schools make the grade.

## **Question 2: How well does the school support Veterans? Does it have a special support program for Veterans?**

We all know veterans are a microcosm of our society as a whole. Veterans come from the same towns and cities as everyone else. Their needs are as diverse as we are diverse as a nation.

A lot of schools claim they are "Military Friendly" or "Veteran Friendly". However, only a student veteran can decide whether that is true. Don't let the pretty recruitment material or other advertising be your only reference. And under no circumstances should you ever feel pressured, forced, misled, or otherwise coerced into attending a school. If you feel you are, we, at VA, want to know about it. You can make VA aware of these concerns by contacting the State Approving Agency (SAA) in your state. The State Approving Agencies are state employees who represent VA in these matters. You may find out how to contact your SAA by going to their website [here](#).

Be careful about "Friendly" claims and make sure your prospective school is friendly to *your* needs. There are objective sources to help you with that.

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 demonstrates the diversity of successful programs initiatives that are available. The following ideas are a sample of some ways institutions may be providing support but are not all-inclusive. Ask you prospective schools what services they have for veterans and how you can access them.

- Transfer of credits from other schools or for military training. It is important that your school recognizes your past coursework and transfers the credit. Not all credit will be accepted, but, finding an institution where this credit is best utilized towards degree requirements will help speed up the degree process.
- Campus and community services. Look for access to mental health and medical support, disability services, academic accommodations, and available career services.
- A strong Veteran voice. An administration that listens to and involves Veterans in Veteran programs will serve the Veteran better.
- Central point of contact. A central point of contact that provides hands-on, in-person assistance with navigating the educational process makes the academic journey much more manageable.
- 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 each have unique housing preferences and needs so a variety of options should be available.
- Campus life. Higher education involves more than just learning in a classroom. Look for a school that offers a dynamic campus life including co-curricular activities, clubs, and support that will help enhance the college or university experience.

More about the Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions and other ACE work to meet the needs of the veteran student can be found [here](#).

Another good source is *Servicemembers Opportunity College (SOC)*. While focused on education during active duty, SOC requires that participating schools meet criteria that may also be of value to veterans after they separate from service. There are approximately 1,750 colleges and Universities who are SOC members.

SOC, co-sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), functions in cooperation with thirteen other higher education associations, the Department of Defense, and Active and Reserve Components of the Armed Services to expand and improve voluntary postsecondary education opportunities for servicemembers worldwide.

A school becomes a SOC member by complying with SOC principles and criteria for services to servicemembers and by following operational guidelines.

SOC Principles are:

- In order to enhance their military effectiveness and to achieve their educational, vocational, and career goals, servicemembers should share in the postsecondary educational opportunities available to other citizens.

- Educational programs for servicemembers should rely primarily on programs, courses, and services provided by appropriately accredited institutions and organizations, including high schools, postsecondary vocational and technical schools, colleges, and universities.
- To enhance access to undergraduate educational opportunities for servicemembers, institutions should maintain a necessary flexibility of programs and procedures, particularly in admissions, credit transfer, and recognition of other applicable learning, including that gained in the military; in scheduling and format of courses; and in academic residency requirements to offset servicemembers' mobility, isolation from campuses, and part-time student status.

To see if the schools you're considering are SOC members, or to get more information on SOC principles, criteria, and operational guidelines go [here](#).

There may be no better way to find out how a school supports veterans than to ask a current veteran at that school. To get in contact with veterans at specific schools, contact your potential school's veteran's affairs office. You can also contact the Student Veterans of America (SVA). [SVA](#) is a national student organization ran by fellow student veterans. They have chapters on almost 300 campuses nationwide. Ask if they can put you in contact with a veteran student from the school you're considering. Ask about their experiences, the support they've received from the school, and what they're doing to maximize their college experience.

### **Question 3: Will I get credit for my military training?**

Policies concerning credit for military experience vary. Some colleges will award credit for military training courses but not for military occupational specialties (MOS). In some situations, it is even more complex. The American Council on Education has developed a guide to assist schools in ensuring they are granting all possible applicable credit for military training. Ask your school if they follow the ACE guide. The ACE guide can be found [here](#).

### **Question 4: If I transfer to another school later, will the credits I receive from my first school be accepted at the new school?**

This is a critically important issue and one in which the answer varies greatly. Remember, you have 36 months of GI Bill benefits. That equals four academic years of nine months each. Once it's gone, it's gone for good. In order to graduate, you cannot afford to take classes that don't end up counting toward your degree.

When transferring from one school to another, students often find that they don't receive as many credits for a previous course as expected. This is especially common when a student is enrolling in a program of study at the new school that is different from what they were previously pursuing. It is also very common when attempting to transfer courses taken on-line. Many schools simply do not accept transfer credit from another school's on-line programs. The type and amount of credit awarded by the new school

will depend on the receiving institution's transfer policies and the specifics of the courses being transferred as well as the institution from which the credits are potentially being transferred.

If you are considering enrolling in a particular school, but feel you may need or want to transfer to another school later, think this through carefully. It is important to ask any schools you may transfer to if they accept credits from the school you are currently considering.

An option to consider if you are in this situation is attending a community college. A community college is exactly what it says – a college in your community. They offer smaller classes and more opportunities to interact with teachers, and counselors, which may be helpful as you transition back to civilian life.

If you do attend a community college, be sure to check out the school's articulation agreement. Articulation agreements are formal understandings that four-year colleges have with local community colleges. The agreements basically say, "Yes, we will give the student full credit in this program of study for these specific courses that they take at your community college."

### **Question 5: What is the school's graduation rate and are graduation rates important?**

Graduation rates vary greatly. They also represent many complex factors. Don't discount them. However, you should also not assume they are the most important factor.

Statistics commonly referred to as graduation rates are calculated by determining the percentage of first-time students who attend school full-time, never withdraw from school, never transfer to another school, and graduate within 6 years. These figures are calculated by the Department of Education for three broad categories of schools; Public schools, Private For-Profit schools, and Private Non-Profit schools. The overall graduation rates for each of these categories are:

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Graduation Rate</b>
Private non-profit	67%
Public	57%
Private for-profit	28%

*Source: National Center for Educational Statistics*

At first glance, "graduation rates" would appear a pretty straightforward indicator of students' success at a school. However, graduation rates, as with many things, are more complex than they initially appear. Also, like any data set, the rates can be manipulated.

Areas within control of the school that can impact graduation rates can include: the admissions standards for the school, difficulty of the programs offered, and the services a school provides to help students stay in school. How can these items impact graduation rates? If a school is extremely selective about who they admit they can take only those students who are very likely to graduate. If, on the other hand, a school is "open enrollment" and allows all applicants to attend regardless of demonstrated ability, there may be more students that are less likely to graduate. Both approaches have positives and negatives. Open enrollment may result in a lower graduation rate, but it also offers college opportunities that may not otherwise exist for some students.

The difficulty of programs offered by a school also can impact graduation rates. If a program is not properly challenging to students, students may graduate but may not be prepared with the skills needed to succeed in the job market.

The resources a school makes available to ensure students succeed also may impact graduation rates. As mentioned earlier, the availability of services that meet the needs of veterans should be an important factor in selecting a school you wish to attend.

Areas under less control of the school may include such items as the mission of the school. For example, if a school's primary mission is to be a feeder school to other schools, students may not "graduate" but still receive what they desired. For example, students often start college at a local community college or via an on-line school. They will then transfer to a four-year school to finish their degree. Keep in mind the earlier discussion about transfer credit.

### **Question 6: What is the school's retention rate and are they important?**

Retention rates are a measure of students who first attend a school and then continue attendance during following semesters. Perhaps more than graduation rates, retention rates can demonstrate student satisfaction with their experiences at a school. A lot has been written about retention rates. As with graduation rates, factors that impact retention rates can be complex. According to the ACT, a nonprofit organization that is known for administering a college entrance exam that is an alternative to the SAT, the following factors can have a positive impact on school retention rates:

- Strong academic advising programs
- Special orientation programs
- Establishment of early warning systems to identify struggling students
- Innovative programs of education that meet the needs of students
- Freshman seminar/university intro course for credit
- Tutoring programs
- Advising interventions with selected student populations
- Mandated course placement testing programs
- Comprehensive learning assistance center/lab

In short, both graduation rates and retention rates are factors to consider. However, ensure these factors are taken into consideration with all information you have developed about your potential schools. For more information on graduation rates and retention rates, see the Department of Education data [here](#). For more on the ACT information about retention rates, click [here](#).

### **We've covered a lot of Ground!**

Your education is important to you, it's important to those you care about, it's important to those that care about you and it's important to us at VA. Choosing the right school is the first step to not just 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.

### **Make it count, and good luck!**