



SERVICE TO SCHOOL

THE S2S UNDERGRADUATE APPLICATION GUIDEBOOK

*The quintessential guide for veterans applying to
undergraduate programs*

OUR MISSION

To help every military veteran transitioning to school win admission to the very best graduate or undergraduate institution possible.



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ABOUT SERVICE 2 SCHOOL

Life in the military is challenging, but transitioning after service can be the toughest challenge of all. We help make the transition smoother by providing *free advice* on the application process. All we expect in return is that you become a Service to School (S2S) ambassador by paying it forward once you're settled in school and helping other veterans who are going through the application process.

Our mission is to help every military veteran transitioning to school win admission to the very best graduate or undergraduate institution possible. To win you must **TRAIN**, so we provide:

T	R	A	I	N
TEST PREP	RESUME REVIEW	APPLICATION AND ESSAY REVIEW	INTERVIEW PREPARATION	NETWORK ASSISTANCE

Here are a few schools we have helped veterans win admission into:

Undergrad: Columbia School of General Studies, Wesleyan University, Iowa University, and Stanford Summer Session

Graduate Schools: Notre Dame (Mendoza), UPenn (Wharton), Columbia (GSB), MIT (Sloan), NYU (Stern), Temple (Fox), Northwestern (Kellogg), Stanford (GSB), Texas A&M (Mays), Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, Yale Law School, Vanderbilt Law School



INTRODUCTION: FINDING YOURSELF IN COLLEGE

“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.” - Maya Angelou

This free undergraduate guidebook for veterans was made with you in mind. In 2013, when my coauthors and I were applying to college, admissions advice was exclusively directed at traditional students. What we found for veterans was G.I. Bill information – helpful, but not for increasing our chances at attending a good college. Good admissions advice for nontraditional students was and still is frustratingly hard to find. After two of us were accepted at Stanford and one at Yale, we joined Service to School to try and address this need.

We want you to do more than survive; we want you to thrive. This guidebook is a product of love, created by veterans and our supporters so you can gain admission to the best colleges possible. Within these pages you’ll get creative writing advice from a Stanford professor, an insider view from a Yale admissions officer, and excellent tips from well-renowned admissions consultant Anna Ivey. This is the guidebook we wanted when we were in your boots.

The most important advice we can give you is that the brain is like a muscle. You have to work your brain in order to get smarter. It may take time, but anyone can successfully complete college. It takes the same focus and effort as it does to become a Soldier, an Airman, a Sailor, or a Marine. And the rewards are worth it: higher income, more job opportunities, and personal growth and satisfaction.

If so many veterans can do it, then so can you. College is easy compared to the military. Often it can be downright fun. And this is coming from someone who barely passed the standard in high school.

Lastly, we want to emphasize that this guidebook is FREE to download. NO ONE should be paying for this. And free to download does not mean free to sell, either. This guidebook is the property of Service to School. Questions, suggestions, or concerns can be directed to the email below my signature block.

You have earned the right to go to college. So give yourself a chance and better your chances for success by reading this guidebook. It was made for you.

Best Regards,

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CHAPTER 1: CHOOSING A COLLEGE

Not all schools are equal, and that's an understatement. Graduate from a place like Yale University and you'll leave with little to no debt -- thanks to excellent financial aid -- and a variety of job options after graduation. On the other hand, attending an *online* or *for-profit college* will likely saddle you with tremendous debt, while granting a degree or certificate that is worth about as much as the paper it is printed on. That is the unfortunate and devastating reality many, many vets have learned, who wasted their time (usually years), money and G.I. Bill to pursue an "easy" path to higher education. This section will explain how to choose college wisely so you can better advance your career.

1.1 A COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF SCHOOLS

The quality of an institution is very much related to its purpose. **For-profit schools**, such as University of Phoenix, DeVry's and Kaplan University, accept just about anyone, but charge an arm and a leg in order to increase profit margins. They masquerade as "*universities*" and "*colleges*" to make money off of students: educating those same students is not a priority. Students who attend for-profit institutions are more likely to be unemployed, have higher debt, earn less, and are even more likely to default on their student loans, in comparison to students at non-profit schools.¹ For-profit schools even set their students up for failure starting day one. For example, the graduation rate for University of Phoenix is below 20%. That means more than four out of every five students who start at Phoenix will not complete a four-year program by the six-year mark. Compare that statistic to University of Pennsylvania's, where 96% of students graduate. Clearly, one of these schools is more concerned with providing a good education. Thus, for-profit schools are often called *predatory schools* because what they promise in their optimistic commercials with smiling, seemingly successful students does not match up to the reality that they are the *blue falcons* (like a barrack's thief) of higher education.

Among the non-profit options are both private and public schools. State-run (public) schools are divided into **community colleges** and **public universities**. Generally, public colleges will give you the most bang for your buck -- certainly when compared to for-profit schools. Such schools' primary mission is to educate students while abiding by state, national and local guidelines. Anyone can start at a community college, which is great for Veterans who didn't do so well in high school or those without a recent academic record. Community college is also a cheap and oftentimes free way to test the academic waters and find your interests. Compared to community college, though, public, four-year universities provide more support and a greater variety of classes. Well known public schools include UCLA, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Texas at Austin.

Lastly, there are **non-profit, private universities**, such as Stanford, Harvard, MIT, Georgetown, etc. The primary goal of these institutions is to teach undergraduates and support high-level graduate departments, while abiding by federal guidelines. Most prestigious universities are private non-profits, and while they are

¹ <http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/forprofitpaper.pdf>



generally hardest to get into, such schools *give a lot of weight to military experience*. Top non-profit universities tend to offer the best financial aid too, so while the “sticker price” may seem higher than average, the actual cost can be free. (A note on lingo: typically a school is referred to as a “college” if it offers undergraduate education only and has no graduate programs; a “university” offers undergraduate as well as graduate degrees.)

COMPARISON CHART

Type of College	<u>For-Profit and Online Institutions</u>	<u>Community College (CC)</u>	<u>Public or Non-Profit 4-Year Universities and Colleges</u>
Example of Institution	<i>University of Phoenix, DeVry's</i>	<i>Local CC</i>	<i>UCLA, Stanford, Georgetown, Yale</i>
Cost Effectiveness?	Lowest	Highest (for first two-years)	High
Loan Debt?	Highest	Lowest or Free	Average or Free
Post-Graduation Job Availability?	Lowest	Average	Highest
Sufficient Financial Aid (excluding loans)?	No	Yes	Yes - You might have to use your G.I. Bill, but some schools may offer a full scholarship, too
Graduation Rate?	Lowest	Average	Highest
Retention Rate?	Lowest	Average	Highest
Degree Flexibility?	Lowest	Average	Highest
Degree Options?	Lowest	Average	Most Options
Minor Options?	Lowest	Average	Most Options
Elective Opportunities?	For a technical certificate? Not a chance	Average	Most Options
Extracurricular Activities?	Usually nonexistent	Average - opportunities for starting your own club	Readily Available
Research Opportunities?	Sketchy at best	Limited	Available
Transferable Units?	Almost never	Yes	Yes



Veteran-Ready (institutional support for veterans)?	Such institutions label themselves as “Universities” and take advantage of veterans	Limited Support	Most Prepared
Quality of Teaching?	Lowest	Average	Highest
Social Support/Network?	Nonexistent	Available	Best
Professional Networking Opportunities?	Bet you can’t name one successful person who’s attended a for-profit...	Average	Yes - Best opportunity to meet future world leaders, or to become one
Fulfills Grad School Requirements?	No	No - but classes are transferable to a four-year University	Yes
Overall Quality?	Worst/Don’t Even Consider (Unless you like unemployment, debt and less money)	Cost-effective/classes are transferable	You can even go on to graduate school

1.2 THE DILEMMA: WHERE TO APPLY

Before applying to college, you have to choose whether or not to follow a traditional, four-year path. Since we won’t be considering for-profit institutions, your other option is to attend a community college. Below is a question set that will help you make your decision:

Did you graduate from high school?

If yes to question #1, were you averaging A’s and B’s in high school?

Did you graduate from high school within the last 4 years?

Do you feel academically prepared for a 4-year university?

Do you have any college experience (online schools do not count)?

If yes to question #5, did you do well in college?

You should *highly* consider starting out at a community college if you answered “No” to any of the questions above. Reputable four-year universities do care a great deal about military experience. At the same time, admissions officers are hesitant to accept applicants who lack a recent academic record showing they can pass the academic rigors of a university. Yet, with a year or (preferably) two of college under your belt, those same admissions officers could be receptive to your case.

Community college is a cost-effective way to ease into academic life. Community college allows veterans with not-so-stellar high school records to build academic distance between the person they are now, and the



civilian they were before joining the military. Furthermore, going to community college will not prevent you from attending a top-notch university; in fact, almost every veteran who is attending Columbia, Yale or other prestigious institutions as an undergrad transferred in from a community college. And if you have an atrocious high school record but excellent community college grades? Your high school record will hold little weight during the transfer admissions process. In the words of Michael Anderson, a veteran who transferred to Stanford University from a community college, *"The first school you attend is merely the start -- not the end point -- of your academic journey."* Another reason community colleges are a great option for many transitioning veterans is that it is a good place to acclimate oneself back into the civilian world and to gradually immerse oneself in their studies.

EVALUATE POTENTIAL COLLEGES BASED ON YOUR NEEDS

We'll start with where we last left off: taking the community college route. What you are looking for in a local community college are programs and departments that will satisfy your basic higher education needs. Those needs include (but are not limited to) having a transfer admissions staff, a readily available financial aid office, and a wide variety of transferable classes. Non-essential but important qualities for a community college include having an honors department, a dedicated counselor that works with veterans, and a scholarship office or staff. For those lucky enough to have options, more on choosing the right community college can be found at the end of this subsection.

The first step for those who are applying to four-year universities is to create a wish list. The four-year university admissions process for hopeful transfers or freshmen is labor-intensive, requiring time and thoughtful coordination to bring together all the necessary parts. Thus, you have to winnow down your list of universities until you have something you are comfortable tackling. It is always good to have a few *safety* schools on your list. As the nickname implies, *safety* schools are ones that you will likely get into (**online and for-profit/predatory "colleges" are still a no-go**). You should also add some *reach* schools – colleges with a competitive admissions process – to the list of places you'll apply to. *"You miss 100% of the shots you don't take,"* as the old saying goes. So take a (safe) risk and apply to your dream schools too!

While creating your list of safety schools, reach schools and those somewhere in between, you'll have to evaluate your choices. As stated earlier, not all schools are equal, and even prestigious institutions may not have what you are looking for. Case in point: Stanford University boasts of having the best psychology department in the world, but does not have a *clinical* psychology program for undergraduates. On the other hand, the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) has a world-renowned clinical psychology program. What the Stanford-UCLA example shows is that you cannot rely exclusively on name recognition when evaluating universities. You need to know what you want from an undergraduate institution before you can rank your choice schools. For example, if you aspire to become a medical doctor, then you should know that you'll need to take several science, math and physics courses, just to be eligible for medical school. Once you know the path to reach your goal(s), you can backwards plan and then rank your wish list of potential colleges based on how well they will help you reach your ultimate goal.

A questionnaire to help you create your list of potential colleges can be found below. Though, be advised: you will have to do your research. That means going on campus and talking to students and staff; it means reading reviews online and looking for red flags; it means ignoring the pretty brochures and studying the course list for your potential majors. You'll have your work cut out for you. **And please reach out to Service to School**



anywhere during this process, we are here to help you. Ultimately, all of this will be easy compared to everything you've already been through.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

- Is the financial aid office squared away?** Financial aid staff should be knowledgeable, helpful and resourceful. First, you should talk to a financial aid officer in person or via phone to get a feel for how business is done. Second, talk to students and read reviews online (Google: "Does _____ community college have good financial aid?"). Third, if anything negative comes up, find out if it is a one-time event or common occurrence.
- What classes are offered?** Check to see if the college offers transferrable courses in your major. You may also want to look at the availability of fun classes, such as dance or theatre. Fun classes that don't fit within your grand scheme help break up the monotony of taking required classes.
- How close is the college?** Those morning drives and commutes add up over time.
- Is there a counselor who works with veterans?** Having someone who regularly speaks with veterans can be helpful, even if they have no prior military experience.
- Is there a sizable and/or active veteran population on campus?** A support network is essential to college success, and can lead to increased proficiency through study groups, social support and networking opportunities. If a network of veterans cannot be found, try other avenues to get that support network. You can also create your own veterans club or group on campus (which looks great on a transfer application)!
- Are there honors classes, an Honors Department or an Honors Club?** Meet some of the best and brightest students on campus through honors coursework and events. While they might not have your real-life experience, honors students tend to be more mature and goal-oriented than their peers, and they can even connect you to other education opportunities. Honors classes may also be easier than regular classes because you'd learn from experienced and higher quality professors.
- Is there a scholarship office?** Google is great but not all scholarships can be found online. The benefit of a scholarship office is that it acts as a one-stop shop for scholarship opportunities. If you don't know, *scholarships are free money that help pay for educational and living expenses.*
- Can I get credit for my military experience?** This isn't as important as the other questions, but it can be nice to have your military experience on a transcript.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

- What is the actual cost for attendance?** Often you won't find out exactly how much you'll actually pay until you are admitted, but you should be able to find a ballpark figure. Actual price for attendance is usually less than the sticker price. This holds especially true for prestigious universities like Stanford, where financial aid is so good you can actually get paid to attend!
- (If using the Post-9/11 GI Bill and have 100% coverage) Does the university participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program? If so, how much do they offer?** The Yellow Ribbon Program allows for colleges and the VA to each give matching amounts of funding towards your educational expenses on top of your GI Bill, though only for those who are eligible for 100% coverage under the Post-9/11 GI



Bill. For example, if your college offers \$3,000 as part of the Yellow Ribbon Program, the VA will also give \$3,000 towards your tuition. This could save you thousands of dollars every year.

- What is the reputation of the institution?** Find out how well established the programs you're interested in are. Check online and see what former and current students say about the college and the quality of education.
- How well does the university prepare you for your future career?** Explore what classes are available in your potential major, as well as what students say about the professors who teach those classes (www.courserank.com and www.rankmyprofessors.com can provide you with answers).
- What kinds of opportunities are there for students in your potential major or field of study?** Say that you want to be a medical doctor; specifically, one who specializes in psychiatry. In that instance, you would check for internships and work-study opportunities with hospitals or clinical psychology labs. Work/volunteer opportunities will do three things: (a) internships or research within your field of study will give you an insider's look into your potential future career; (b) networking opportunities will arise from close contact with working professionals; and (c) those jobs look great on a graduate school application or job resume.
- What are the post-graduation employment statistics?** No point in getting a degree if you can't put it to use.
- What is the graduation rate?** No point in starting at a college with abysmally high dropout rates.
- (For transfer applicants) How many of my community college classes are transferrable?** The answer could mean another year or two of college.
- Are there veteran-specific resources?** A counselor that works with veterans and VA representatives can simplify veteran benefits paperwork.
- Is there an active veteran population?** Having that support network can serve you in many, many ways, from networking and job opportunities to a source for study groups.
- What else am I looking for?** Decide for yourself what else you are looking for in a university, from location to the kind of housing that is provided. The above questions are just meant to help you get started.

1.3 SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THOSE ON ACTIVE DUTY

Shifting from active duty to full-time school can be a culture shock. For many of us the first question is, "Where do I even start?" Here are three things to consider when transitioning from service to school.

1. **Consider avoiding for-profit schools.** For-profit schools exist to make money and your GI Bill benefits are appealing to them. Graduation rates at for-profit schools are embarrassingly low and since a huge part of our mission is to help you find a pathway to success, we don't recommend them.

2. **Consider location.** Is there a specific place you want to live? Maybe you want to live near the coast or near your family (or as far from your family as possible). There are enough great schools that it is perfectly acceptable to search for colleges in a desirable location.



3. **Consider your program.** If you know what you want to study, then do an internet search for prestigious programs. For example, you could Google search, *“Top undergraduate economics programs.”* Don’t apply to a school based solely on a blog post you found in an internet search, but this will at least give you a few names of schools that you can go and do further research on.

KNOW YOUR APPLICATION DEADLINES!

How much time you have left on active duty and your college admissions deadlines will determine a lot of your planning, so we suggest you make an application timeline. For example, the application deadline to attend University of California and Cal State schools is almost one-year before matriculation (when you enter college). If you miss the deadlines for your choice school though, don’t despair! Many Community Colleges have rolling admissions, meaning you can apply almost right up until classes start, or you could look into an internship.

SHOULD I TAKE CLASSES ON ACTIVE DUTY?

Maybe you are thinking, *“I have more than a year left on active duty, should I knock out some classes now?”* Here is something to consider if you have zero college credits and are considering taking classes: transfer admissions are generally much more competitive than freshman admissions. However, sometimes a school will have you apply as a transfer even with zero college credit just because you are older and more experienced than most freshmen. On the other hand, taking some basic classes using a tuition assistance program could save you from sitting through some potentially dull, but required, classes once you’re out. If you’re set on taking classes, look at the basic degree requirements for your school of choice and try to knock out some of those to save money.

You may also want to find your education office on base and ask about SAT/ACT preparation. Often those offices have great resources and provide free college counseling. Some prep courses offer discounts for veterans, so be sure to ask. Service to School can also point you in the right direction for savings!

Things you should find out about any school you are interested in:

- When can you start?** This will go a long way in helping you plan for the potential time gap between the time you leave active duty (your EAS/ETS date) and your first day of classes.
- Does the school participate in Yellow Ribbon? If so, how much do they offer?** This information can usually be found on the school website. You can also call schools directly, too. For some schools it can be additional thousands of dollars in financial aid and for others, like the University of Michigan, it will cover whatever portion of tuition your GI Bill doesn’t cover.
- Is there an office/individual dedicated to helping veterans on campus or a military/veteran page on the school’s website?** These will give an indicator as to the school’s attitude towards and support for veterans. A campus-based veteran organization can help you adapt to college life.



- Will you need to take the SAT/ACT?** If so, then go find your education office on base and ask about preparation and test dates. Be sure to ask the college if your old test scores are still good. Some schools may waive the testing requirement.
- What is the retention and graduation rate?** This will tell you how many freshmen returned and what percent of students graduate. See College Navigator on our resources page (Guidebook Section 9) for a convenient way to check this.
- Who is the Certifying Official on campus?** This person will verify your attendance and benefits with the VA and will be a valuable resource for you.
- Will the school grant credit for military service?** You may have a Joint Service Transcript (JST), which shows that some of your training has been certified by ACE for credit. If not, see if you can get credit based on your DD214.



CHAPTER 2: COLLEGE APPLICATION CHECKLIST

The checklists in this section lay out the general step-by-step process for enrolling at a two-year or four-year college. Don't feel overwhelmed by the checklists below. Take it one step at a time, and reach out to Service to School at any point during the process for assistance!

2.1 COMMUNITY COLLEGE APPLICATION CHECKLIST

- Complete an Application:** Nowadays, community colleges tend to have an online application process. At the same time, you might have to visit the campus in person to drop off documents.
- Gather Your High School Transcript or GED:** Your college may or may not require documentation from your previous institution of learning.
- Make a Copy of Your DD214 and MOS Transcript/Diploma:** You could receive college credit for your military service!
- Fill Out the FAFSA:** Short for the "Free Application for Federal Student Aid" (<https://fafsa.ed.gov>). You will need to fill out the FAFSA to see if you are eligible for university and federal financial aid.
- Apply for Other Financial Aid:** Some states, such as California, will waive community college fees for veterans.

-----*The following are optional but recommended steps you should take:*

- Save your G.I. Bill:** Your G.I. Bill can be of more use at a four-year university or beyond.
- Visit your Scholarship Office:** See if there are any scholarships available, and sign up early for newsletters or updates.
- Talk to Community College Counselor ASAP:** You want to know what classes are transferrable, and what to take for your (potential) major. Also, see if you can find a counselor who specifically works with veterans.
- (If Available) Visit the Honors Department:** Your potential community colleges may or may not have an honors program. Utilizing an honors program can benefit you in three major ways: (1) it makes you a more competitive applicant during transfer admissions; (2) usually the best professors teach honors courses, making honors classes easier than regular ones; and (3) honors departments can connect you to some of the best resources because they not only want you to succeed, they want you to excel.
- Locate a Veteran's Club:** If there isn't one at your college, try creating one! You may also want to seek out any local veterans organizations, such as the Student Veterans Association, or establish contact with vet-friendly organizations like the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA).



2.2 FOUR YEAR UNIVERSITY APPLICATION CHECKLIST

- Complete Online Portion of Application:** Most schools now use an online web service called the CommonApp (<https://www.commonapp.org>), which streamlines the application process. A benefit of the CommonApp is that there is less you have to do when applying to multiple colleges. Check your choice schools' websites to see if they require the CommonApp or another form.
- Start Writing Application Essays:** One essay will be sent to all your potential colleges via the CommonApp main application, but other colleges may require additional supplemental essays or short answer responses. Because many schools require supplemental essays that are unique to their own schools, treat each school as a separate application (and budget enough time for each one), even if logistically you'll be using the CommonApp platform to submit them.
- Request Letters of Recommendation:** Make sure to request your letters of recommendation well in advance of the deadline! By giving your recommenders plenty of time to write you a positive letter, you are helping him or her help you. See Guidebook Section 5 for more details on the letter of recommendation.
- Send in SAT or ACT Scores:** Go onto CollegeBoard.com or ACT.org and send your scores to colleges that require them. Do this well in advance before fees increase. If you have not taken the SAT/ACT, try to take it at least three months in advance of the application date (the sooner the better), and budget another three months for test prep – that's a total of six months. Most schools that require standardized tests will take either the ACT or the SAT, so take some practice diagnostic tests of each and then commit to the one that's the better test for you.
- Request and Send Official Copies of Transcripts from Other Colleges if Applicable:** This is applicable to all potential transfers or freshmen with college experience. Many colleges now allow you to order transcripts online.
- Request and Send Official High School Transcript When Required:** If you did poorly in high school but improved in college, sending your high school transcript may be advantageous to your application. Showing an upward trajectory in GPA is seen a significant positive in college admissions.
- Fill Out the FAFSA:** Short for the "Free Application for Federal Student Aid" (<https://fafsa.ed.gov>). You will need to fill out the FAFSA to see if you are eligible for university and federal financial aid.
- Check for Other Financial Aid Forms:** Some universities require additional financial aid forms. Check your choice schools' websites to see if this is true. In some cases, you may have to send in W-2 or tax transcripts.
- Save a Copy of Your Final Essays and Application!** The CommonApp does a hard reset every year, and you won't be able to access your old materials again. You can save your application materials as PDFs from the Preview menu in the CommonApp. Keep printed hard copies as well.
- Make Housing Arrangements:** If you are applying as a transfer, you may find that campus housing applications are due very soon after your admissions application. Once again, check your choice college's website to see if this is true.
- Visit ebenefits.va.gov and Apply for Benefits if You Intend to Use Them:** You can do this before you know what schools you are applying to, but you must activate this.
- Make a Copy of Your DD214 and MOS Transcript/Diploma:** For financial aid purposes and to receive college credit.



CHAPTER 3: PREPARING FOR THE SAT OR ACT TEST

Your grade-point-average (GPA) and test scores provide admissions officers additional data points that you are ready to thrive at their university. The test matters a great deal for freshmen applicants who have no college experience, but not as much for transfer applicants with a good record of college performance. Yet, while your numbers -- GPA and test scores -- are but one element of your college application, you want them to be as high as possible to maximize your chance for success.

Check with your potential colleges as soon as possible to find out if you need the SAT or ACT. While some colleges don't require a test, we advise you to **not** let that requirement stop you from applying. A good college is worth the extra effort.

3.1 CHOOSING BETWEEN THE (CURRENT) SAT OR ACT

You can take either the SAT or ACT to satisfy the testing requirement most universities have. There is no bias for one test over the other in college admissions. You'll be compared against peers for both tests. In other words, choosing a test for how easy it seems won't help because it will be easier for others too. Yet, notable differences between the SAT and ACT tests should be taken into account when deciding which to take.

For starters, ACT questions tend to be simpler, more straightforward, whereas some SAT questions will require a double-take to understand them. Samples are shown from the SAT essay and ACT writing test, courtesy of the Princeton Review site²:

SAT: What is your view of the claim that something unsuccessful can still have some value?

ACT: In your view, should high schools become more tolerant of cheating?

The SAT is written in a way to trip up test takers. For the SAT math section, the inclusion of additional variables makes problem sets seem harder than they already are. For reading sections, the SAT will field questions that pertain to two different passages. After reading passage A and B, a SAT question might ask, "Do you believe that the author of passage A would agree with the conclusion made from passage B?" On the other hand, the ACT will ask questions after the reading of a single passage.

ACT Test takers can also rely more on how words sound to identify correct answers for the English section; the SAT, by contrast, requires a deeper grammatical knowledge in order identify the correct answer. The SAT is heavier on vocabulary than the ACT test.

The SAT scoring system is a bit brutal when compared to the ACT test, too. For every wrong answer a tester selects, their score is reduced by .25 points. The wrong answer penalty is something all applicants have to face when taking the SAT, but not the ACT.

There is a lot of overlap between the SAT and ACT, as they both test your reading comprehension, vocabulary and mathematical knowledge. Differences emerge once you get past those general subjects. The math section

² <http://www.princetonreview.com/sat-act.aspx>



of the ACT is similar to the SAT, as it tests for basic arithmetic, algebra and geometry. Unlike the SAT though, the ACT requires proficiency in trigonometry. The ACT also has a science section that tests your analytical and problem-solving skills. Luckily, the ACT science section isn't a memorization test on what you learned in high school science classes.

The SAT test is broken up into smaller sections based on content -- three sections per subject area, plus one section that does not count -- and you'll be jumping around from one subject to another and back again. The ACT test subjects are taken in chunks, so once you leave a subject area you won't go back to it again.

You may already have an idea of which test you'll study for and eventually take. If not, consider trying a free practice test for both the SAT and ACT (more information found below). A comprehensive practice test will give you some idea of whether the SAT or ACT suits you better. Settle on the test where your practice score is highest.

Contact Service to School if and when you decide to take these standardized tests. We have partnerships with test prep companies to support you in your preparation for these standardized tests.

UPCOMING CHANGES FOR THE SPRING 2016 SAT

College Board is redesigning the SAT for **Spring of 2016**.³ What this means is that SAT guides prior to 2016 will be obsolete, unless stated otherwise. This may also affect your decision to take one test over the other. As of **November 25, 2014**, the following changes have been proposed:

Students will be asked to interpret word meanings based on the context of the passage. In College Board's words (see footnote for link), "*No longer will [students] use flashcards to memorize obscure words.*"

Students will be asked to analyze evidence from literary, humanities, science, history and social studies texts, as well as informational graphics. This means students will be integrating multiple sources into individual answers. Students may be asked to correct passages for grammar and substance, and align what is said to another source.

Called "*Command of Evidence*," students will also be required to write essays based on the texts that must be analyzed. The essay will also be an optional part (just like the ACT) but time allotted will be twice as long.

The College Board also claims to now test math that is relevant to college and careers: ratios, percentages and proportional reasoning ("*Solving and Data Analysis*"), linear equations and systems ("*Heart of Algebra*") and "*Familiarity with more complex equations and the manipulation they require*" (whatever that means).

Addition of "*Problems grounded in Real-World Contexts.*" Students will be asked to improve texts, through editing and revising, instead of just correcting errors.

The addition of subsections (similar to the ACT). The scoring system will change as well, though, that really shouldn't matter since everyone will be using the new scoring system.

³ <https://www.collegeboard.org/delivering-opportunity/sat/redesign>



Students won't be penalized anymore for selecting a wrong answer. This is a game change! It means it's now in your best interest to leave no unanswered questions. If you have to guess C anytime you don't know the answer, do so!

Inclusion of U.S. founding documents, as well as texts from global figures and documents.

Until all these changes shake out, you might find that prepping for the ACT is the safer way to go, but it's your call. If you perform better on your diagnostic SAT tests than on your ACT diagnostics, then stick with the SAT. If you're indifferent, or generally stronger in science, go with the ACT.

3.2 HOW TO BEAT THE TEST

Have you ever heard of the Seven P's acronym? A common saying in some military circles: *Prior Proper Preparation Prevents Pitifully Poor Performance*. The Seven P's can very well be applied to the SAT and ACT tests, as you need to prepare by studying in order to achieve high marks.

One option you may want to consider is to take a test prep course. Test prep companies are thorough because they cover every aspect of the test. More than just test coverage and analysis, the test prep companies aid military applicants because they provide a structured setting. These classes may be within a structured classroom setting, or a self-paced online instruction. Also of note: many test prep companies offer a military discount so be sure to ask. S2S applicants have access to a variety of discounted or even free prep options, and we highly recommend them. But even if you have to pay full fare, a good test prep program could easily save you money in the long run, because a good prep course will make you a more competitive applicant. At a minimum, you should budget several months for intensive self-study if you don't do a prep course; and do at least invest in test prep books and disciplined self-study.

The downside to preparing with a test prep company is that some prep companies provide material that is too basic or moves too slowly over topics that an applicant already understands. Moreover, some transitioning veterans who are still serving simply do not have the time to take these classes. For those who are busy with work, two good options are online classes or self-study.

With self-study, student veterans can move at a comfortable pace, focus on weaknesses in a certain area, and forego paying for a test prep class (which can cost up to \$2,000!). However, it may be difficult to keep disciplined for several months without getting distracted. If you decide to take the individual study path, you still should rely on the test prep material provided by prep companies.

Whether you choose one path or another also depends on the college you are applying to. Ask the admissions department of your choice colleges how much they prioritize SAT or ACT tests. Some schools care less about test scores if the applicant is a veteran, and if that's the case, they will tell you so. Look online and compare accepted students' scores to average applicants' scores and the national averages. If the colleges seem to prioritize test scores, then it might behoove you to shell out some extra money for a test prep class.

SIMULATE TEST CONDITIONS AND ELIMINATE AREAS OF WEAKNESS



Whether you decide to self-study or enroll in a test prep course, it is important to balance studying with test taking. Taking numerous tests without focusing on weaknesses is a poor management of time. However, practicing on sample problems to hone overall ability can lead to a false of security, as doing so eliminates the “time stress/crunch” of test-taking under simulated test conditions. It’s satisfying to keep doing the problems you get right, but that isn’t a good use of your time; you need to pick up as many additional points as you can, and that means spending your energy on the ones you miss during your prep and your practice tests, and understanding why you got them wrong. It is imperative to find and study questions that have been used in previous exams to simulate actual test conditions. While test prep companies often provide their own questions, the best questions are those previously administered by the standardized test prep companies. You can also buy books of previous tests and sample test problems – they are readily available online.

You should take a practice test to find your weak areas. Once you find that out, you can focus on those areas of the test. Though, be sure to practice for every section -- even the ones you feel most ready for!

PREPARE AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE; USE BACKWARD PLANNING

Allocate enough time to study for the test. Ideally, start studying six months ahead of the test date. Set some goals while you are studying, too. First create a list of the schools you want to gain admittance into, and see what they report as their median test score for their latest incoming class. That is the score you should aim to get. Applying to schools is a numbers game. Schools want applicants who have a proven track record and who can handle their rigorous curriculum. Aim to score either above or at the median test score that a school reports.

TAKE TIME TO REST AND REFIT

One can only take time to rest if one has planned accordingly. That is why it is really important that you allot plenty of time for test preparation. Allowing several months to prepare means you can take breaks in order to avoid test fatigue. The brain needs to recover after a hard workout (test preparation). When taking a practice test, bring along a healthy snack that will help sustain your body through several hours of test taking. Taking a three to four hour test can be mentally and physically draining exercise. Bring whatever snacks you prefer; however, make sure you also use those same snacks during your mock tests. You don’t want to bring a snack you’ve never had before... and then get an unexpected physical reaction. Taking a break can also help avoid straining relationships. Test preparation can be very stressful, and your immediate family will notice. Taking breaks and adding fun activities between intense study sessions will help you deal with the gravitas of test preparation.

UTILIZE ONLINE CONTENT

There are many great websites that provide strategy and helpful hints on how to “defeat” a test. These sites also are great places to share “war stories” about how one did or how one is feeling. However, don’t waste too much time on these websites. Some advice given at these websites should be taken with a grain of salt. While websites geared towards a test or graduate school can be fun and entertaining, they can also include misleading statements from anonymous “experts”.



3.3 TEST RESOURCES

Your main resource for the SAT and ACT tests will be College Board (collegeboard.org) and ACT Student (actstudent.org), respectively. We advise you to create a login for your choice test if you haven't already. That website will give you access to future test dates and tips for preparation. If you've already taken the SAT or ACT test, but never logged in before or forgot your login information, you can contact the test company via their website for help.

We also suggest that you first start with the testing companies (College Board and ACT Student) when looking for study guides and test prep material. Since those companies create their respective tests, it is safe to assume that you can get the most out of using their test prep materials. They also offer free practice tests online.



CHAPTER 4: LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Our bonds with others can define who we are. Think about all the times a friend has put in a good word for you or when you've been dissuaded from working with another person because of his or her reputation. Our bonds can say a lot about us, from how we work with others to what kind of leader we are. Those we form bonds with often have the greatest insight into who we are, our quirks and oddities, and our ability to navigate through social and professional situations. Our friends, mentors and siblings, among many kinds of bonding partners, can even observe things about ourselves that we fail to see.

By examining your bonds with others – namely, your recommenders – admissions officers are hoping to catch a glimpse of who you are from someone who isn't you. Which is great, because your recommenders can gush and brag about you in a way that is entirely inappropriate for your personal essays (bragging about oneself is never good form). They can say “so-and-so was the greatest Soldier I've ever had” and it would be completely acceptable! Your letters of recommendation have the potential to elevate your chances from ‘waitlisted’ to ‘accepted’; a generic letter of recommendation can sink your chance of admittance like an iceberg to the Titanic. No pressure, right?

Pressure can be good, and in this case it certainly led you to look up this section of the guidebook. What we want to emphasize is that ***you need to work just as hard on this part of your application as anywhere else.*** Since your application is like a jigsaw puzzle, with every part being essential, this piece needs to fit with the rest of your application. Planning and preparing is key to helping your recommenders help you. Remember the Seven P's from earlier? Answer: *Prior Proper Preparation Prevents Pitifully Poor Performance.* You'll need to plan and prepare early, starting with choosing who will write your letters of recommendation. It isn't rocket science, but there are tips and tricks to avoiding those icebergs. You've already turned up the self-pressure to read up and do well. Good work. Now you just need to harness those bonds you've made, which will define who you are to those college gatekeepers, hopefully, in the most positive light possible.

START EARLY

Start early. We mentioned this in the last paragraph but, you know, us vets aren't ones for subtlety, so we've centered and underlined the most important step in this whole process. You want to give your recommenders as much time as possible to write their letters of recommendation. Shoot for two months ahead of the deadline, minimum.

4.1 REQUESTING A RECOMMENDATION

Consider professors and military leaders who can attest to your abilities and strengths, and to what you have done in school and in service. Admissions officers want to see specifics, as in, “*So-and-so was among the best students I've ever taught in my 10 years as an educator,*” or, “*Specialist so-and-so represented Bravo Platoon at*



the 187th B Company board, and was selected for Soldier of the Month by those senior NCOs.” Even if your community college president offers you a letter of recommendation, don’t take him or her up on that offer, unless a strong working relationship is present! This also goes for other situations when high status individuals offer you help. A generic recommendation letter that says a lot of nothing about you means nothing to admissions officers, regardless of who penned the letter. Prestige does not have a horse in this race. For that reason, we often tell our applicants that you should find someone who “loves you” and knows you very well. It is very easy to detect in letters of recommendation whether the writer truly knows the person they are recommending.

You want your seniors, mentors and leaders to write you a letter of recommendation, with greater weight given to those you have worked under most recently. Unless you are a freshman applicant with no college experience, or you have a unique situation, admissions officers will be highly suspicious of letters from high school teachers. Letters from peers are generally a no-go as well.

Narrow down that list of potential recommenders to those who you have bonded strongest with. Your closest mentors and professors will invest more time and energy into their recommendation letter.

Lastly, remove any family members from said list. *Ain’t no one wanna read your momma brag about how great of a son or daughter you are.* That is one of those common sense things you should have (hopefully) known about already.

If you are left with nothing, then go back and this time rank your professors, high school teachers, military leaders, work supervisors and mentors based on: (1) the relationship you have with them; (2) what they’ve seen you do; (3) what they’ve heard from or about you; and (4) the capacity, the role they know/knew you in.

ASK NICELY

The preferred method of communication is in person. An email is appropriate too, assuming that your circumstances prevent face-to-face communication. Remind the recipient of who you are when requesting a letter of recommendation. This is especially important when requesting a letter from a professor who that may teach hundreds of students every semester/quarter. Afterwards, ask your question and state why you are requesting a letter of recommendation. Be courteous throughout this process and make sure you thank the recipients before sending your request. It is also good form to send a thank you email after a response is given, regardless of the answer.

The email example below is casual and, as you will notice, the sender has good rapport with the recipient. When in doubt, lean towards a more conservative approach.

Dear Professor Lanney,

I hope finals weeks hasn’t been too rough on your red pen.

I am wondering if you would write me a letter of recommendation for college applications. I enjoyed taking your Intro to Sociology class last semester, and I can still fondly recall our last conversation about military subcultures during your office hours. Since I want to major in Sociology at my future four-year university, I feel that your recommendation would carry a lot of weight to admissions officers. I would be honored to have you



write a letter of recommendation in support of my application. The letter of recommendation is due three months from now. What do you think?

If yes, I can send you more information, as well some reminders about what I did in your class. I am also very willing to answer any questions or concerns you may have. Thank you for your time!

*Best Regards,
So-and-so*

GIVE YOUR RECOMMENDERS NECESSARY INFORMATION

Give your recommenders everything – your completed essays, a brag sheet (see below), a list of universities you are applying to, your reasons for applying to those places, and a set of instructions guiding them through the process. You might be asking yourself, “Why do they need my essays?” Admissions officers that have no clue who you are or what you’ve been through will read your application and decide your fate. The best letters are personal in nature because they can make you come to life to those college gatekeepers. You want your recommenders can speak to your character, as well as your hopes and dreams, failures and achievements. This way you can seem like an actual person, and not some faceless application.

It would behoove you inform your recommenders of the standard operating procedure each university has for accepting recommendation letters. By that, we mean find out if the letter needs to be sent straight from the individual writing it or if you are permitted to send it. (Typically, the letter has to come directly from the recommender.) If the writer has to send it, then make sure he or she has the correct mailing address or the necessary information for submitting it online. Also give your recommenders your choice colleges’ contact information in case they want to clarify anything.

4.2 THE BRAG SHEET

Your recommenders will likely not have a perfect memory, so having a brag sheet to refer to will ensure you get a more thoughtful and inclusive recommendation. A brag sheet lists your accomplishments relevant to the relationship you have with your recommender. For example, a brag sheet for your military-connected recommender will include various service awards and commendations you’ve received, as well as job titles and roles you’ve served in (as well as your achievements/accomplishments). A brag sheet for a professor, in contrast, will (probably) not include a list of your military accomplishments. Instead, you would highlight your classroom work and interactions you’ve had with the professor outside the classroom (although the emphasis should be on you as that person’s student, not someone outside the classroom). Tailor every brag sheet in a way that is useful to your individual recommenders. Military recommenders might need a reminder to “translate” military jargon into language that civilian admissions officers can understand. In particular, if a particular role or achievement or promotion is a real stand-out, you should explain why – the mere name of the role or award might not mean much to a civilian without further explanation.

A solid list of your accomplishments includes job titles and achievements, along with a description of what you did. Stating that you, “*Received an Army Achievement Medal (AAM) while acting as a Noncommissioned Officer-in-Charge,*” is not helpful by itself. You want to describe what you were doing to receive the AAM, as



well as what you learned from the experience. Add quantifiable data when possible – anything that can be broken down into numbers. As a supply sergeant, you might state that you were in charge of maintaining and issuing over \$5 million dollars worth of equipment. As an infantry squad leader, you would state that you were responsible for the welfare and training of ten or so Soldiers. Be as descriptive as possible. (Note, too, that the civilian world does not capitalize the word “soldier.”)

Organize your brag sheet for coherence. You want to make your recommenders’ jobs as easy as possible, so **pages of unstructured bullet points is a no-go**. Opt instead for dividing your brag sheet into sections and subsections. Try using a military memorandum to organize your thoughts. Quote evaluations, positive counseling statements and award citations. Below is a short example of a brag sheet. And don’t call it a Brag Sheet! That sounds... braggy. It’s perfectly fine shorthand among applicants, but it’s better to refer to it as a resume with anyone else.

As noted above, we recommend you ask people who know you very well (“or love you”) to write your letters of recommendation because this close relationship often means that you can save a lot of steps in terms of having to put together a brag sheet.

<EXAMPLE START>

Resume for CPT Ranney

Captain Ranney, thanks again for writing my letter of recommendation! I want to help you help me, so below are a list of my roles and accomplishments from my time under your command. I hope you find the information helpful as you craft the LoR.

SECTION 1: Job Titles and Roles

August 2010 – November 2010: Acting NCOIC of our Unit Chaplain Ministry Team. *I was in charge of organizing the 40 weekly religious services in Kandahar Airfield (KAF), Afghanistan, in support of 30,000 service members and DoD employees on base. This included keeping track of all incoming and outgoing chaplains, structuring a method for scheduling special religious events on base, and requesting funding from Base Ops. At the end of this mission I was recognized by the 82nd Airborne Chaplain Ministry Team for “exceptional service under constant threat” to our religious community at KAF, and given an impact award: a Certificate of Achievement.*

November 2010 – August 2011: Role III Hospital Chaplain Assistant. *My job was to go around the hospital and check up on patients, as well as medical providers. During any given week I would talk to 200 – 300 service members. I co-facilitated 27 group therapy sessions with either my chaplain or a psychological provider. I enjoyed the work so much I would stay extra hours to support the night-shift.*

...

SECTION 2: Awards and Commendations

May 2009 - Honor Graduate in Basic Training. *Honor Graduate is bestowed upon the top 10% of the graduating class.*



...

SECTION 3: Other Relevant Information

I've worked under your command since February of 2010.

...

<EXAMPLE END>



CHAPTER 5: WRITING APPLICATION ESSAYS

Writing can be stressful; writing about yourself, when the quality of your literary compositions will decide your future, can be more stressful still. Yet, it is a necessary obstacle on the path to higher education, and, I hope, one that you will come to appreciate by the end of this section.

5.1 THE VETERAN ADVANTAGE

Welcome to the essay-writing portion of the college application. Within the confines of a couple of double-spaced pages, and sometimes only a few brief paragraphs, the applicant is asked to tell their story. Seemingly easy prompts—“What matters to you, and why?” (Stanford)—mask the complex task of defining oneself to admissions officers, college gatekeepers who must put a face to a faceless application. The essay-writing portion is significant, as it is where the applicant has utmost influence on their image. Letters of recommendation are outside the applicant’s control, and GPA and test scores will be set in stone months ahead of the application deadline. So it is no wonder that for many applicants, writing college essays will be the most stressful part of the whole application process. Having to differentiate oneself amongst tens of thousands is tough work.

But think of the essays as less of a challenge and more of a self-reflection journey, an exercise in communicating your beliefs. The rewards for writing a good essay are far worth the price, your effort. Your essays can act as a force-multiplier.

Spend some time on sites like CollegeConfidential.com and you’ll become familiar with the notion that college admissions is a random process. Kind of like pulling names of out a hat. After all, how can students with perfect numbers (which refer to an applicant’s test scores and GPA) get rejected from top-tier schools while some with just-above-average grades are accepted? What it boils down to is that admissions decisions are made holistically; that is, they are made by considering *everything* the applicant brings to the table. Your numbers give proof that you can succeed at a 4-year institution, but they do not indicate anything about you as a person, and they don’t say anything about your *fit*—how well your goals and ambitions match up with what a specific institution offers or with the broader school culture. Admissions officers look to the essays to determine how much research the applicant undertook before deciding that their college is the right place to be, and whether you’re the kind of person they want to have in the new learning community they build every year. They want to see that the applicant was thoughtful when choosing where to apply. And while *thoughtful* can mean a lot of things, an essay that flows logically and is enjoyable to read can certainly demonstrate your fit. In other words, a well-crafted essay can carry you past the finish line.

You already have one distinct advantage when writing your essays: you’re not the average applicant. In fact, you are what many consider “exotic.” As a Veteran, you put your education on hold to pursue the unbeaten path. A path that started with signing your life away to Uncle Sam, who broke you down in initial entry training and rebuilt you from the ground up into a disciplined force to be reckoned with. From there, you might have served in combat or on a sea deployment; been stationed half-way across the world in a foreign country or worked at home as a citizen-warrior, on call to serve at a moments notice. In other words, you



have rare earthen experience from which to sculpt your admissions essays. You can write with the commanding authority of someone who's *been there and done that*.

STANFORD APPLICATION SHORT ANSWER QUESTION:

What is the most significant challenge that society faces today?

Limit your answer to two sentences.

That we can so easily commit our nation to fight on foreign soil, leaving the burdens of multiple deployments on the shoulders of few, without any accountability of those who decided to wage war in the first place.

– Written by a Successful Veteran Applicant

4, 5

This section of the guidebook will help you discover how to harness that **Veteran Advantage**. Ultimately, we suggest you write about what you care about, what matters to you, and write in a way that fits your personal narrative. Just because you are a Silver Star recipient doesn't necessarily mean you need to write about the award. In some cases, readers are more impressed by what you leave out of your essays than what you include -- especially if they have already read about a certain accomplishment in your resume or letters of recommendation. By the end of this section, you will have all the tools you will need to sculpt a moving and authentic essay. We will even go over how to distinguish yourself as more than *just* another veteran. So be confident. We've got your six.

5.2 IN PREPARATION TO WRITE

We'll get to harnessing your story after we go over some essay preparation basics. I mentioned fit earlier—fit cannot be underestimated. Admissions teams reject many great candidates every year for not adequately expressing how a specific university will help them achieve his or her goal(s). This holds especially true for colleges with a competitive admissions process, who have no shortage of eligible applicants. To distinguish yourself from the rest, **you need to research, research, and research**. Know exactly what you can gain from the specific schools you're applying to. In your essays, you can be general ("*My goal for transferring is to attend a university with a top-notch political psychology lab*") or specific ("*I strive to attend UCLA because of its clinical psychology program, which allows students to assist with graduate-level research*"). Regardless of your approach, just don't mention that you're applying to a university because of its name-recognition. Such a statement is a classless way to waste precious space, and does not indicate your fit. You can do better.

Yet, you can only do better when you know better, so give yourself ample time to explore your inner creative writer. You have incredible incentive to spend time writing and rewriting and editing your essays till you get them right. And by "right" I mean until you're completely satisfied with what you have on paper. **Last minute essay writing is a no-go.**

⁴ The above serves as an example of the following question: would you take this statement more seriously from a high school senior or a veteran? Leverage your real world experience to lend credibility to your statements

⁵ As we'll go over later, it is best to create a vivid, three-dimensional picture of who you are.



As a general rule of thumb, you want to **start brainstorming how to address the essay prompts at least three months in advance** of the application deadline. Yes, you heard me, three months ahead of time. Your best writing won't happen during the first draft. It won't even happen during the second draft, or the third. Your best writing will happen after an epiphany, an "Ah-ha!" moment. You'll have several of those moments, which may or may not occur when you're doing or thinking about something completely unrelated. One of this guidebook's writers had such an epiphany while listening to "Eye of the Tiger" during a pre-workout run. As for what an epiphany will entail: a solution to parts of your essay that do not feel right to you. Wording problems, editing dilemmas and spatial issues will be the challenges you'll have to overcome. Give yourself enough time to process and tackle those issues, and you'll facilitate those "Ah-ha!" moments.

The formula for a well-written essay requires time, patience and preparation. There are no substitutes for those ingredients, no matter how many hours you can cram into last-minute essay writing.

5.3 CHOOSING A TOPIC

You need to choose a topic to address the essay prompt -- you need to decide what to write about. The genre you are working with is called the *personal essay*. Typical of that genre is a personal narrative, an invitation for the reader to step into the author's shoes and feel what the author wants the reader to feel. The personal essay can span decades and even lifetimes. The personal essay can cover singular moments, too, like a painting. In that way writing your story is an artistic expression: the work of you, the painter, who only has letters to draw and a desire to cover some blank canvass. Your story is the topic that addresses an essay prompt. You won't have space in your personal essays to cover your whole life because of word limits prescribed by most universities. Therefore, **your story should convey what you want the reader to feel, to know about you, with brevity.**

While writing your personal essay, "*You want to reveal yourself in a way that makes an impression,*" according to a Creative Writing Professors at Stanford University. "*There is no chance of standing out as a human if no risk [is taken].*" To add onto what that professor said, that risk is essential if you want to seem like more than just a Veteran.

The phrasing *personal essay* implies just that: a story only you can tell. The risk you take when writing your personal essay shouldn't feel enormous or extreme. Paraphrasing the same Creative Writing professor, there should be enough distance between you and the experience you wish to write about. Yet, it will take a lot of courage to reveal yourself in a way that feels vulnerable. What you write about should make you *feel* something, anything, a pull at the heartstrings because you are writing *from* the heart. When choosing a topic, dig deep and don't be afraid to take some risk. **Vulnerability is key to telling a story only you can tell.**

Let us go back to an essay prompt we mentioned earlier: Stanford University's infamous question, "*What matters to you and why?*" The prompt is forward and to the point. It is not a trick question, and the open-ended format means there is no right or wrong answer. In fact, no expert knowledge is needed, just a recollection of your own experiences. Yet, this prompt and its variations cause a great deal of grief for many applicants. The simplicity of the question does not make it any easier to answer, as it strikes at the heart, at the very soul of the applicant, asking *why are you who you are?* For anyone, veterans and civilians alike, such a question will bring to mind many answers, experiences, vague recollections and old beliefs, and all that brought us to where we are today. The challenge of this prompt is not that it is tough to answer, but that there are many ways to answer such a question.



Many applicants address the Stanford prompt by highlighting an issue that matters to them, like global warming or civil unrest in third world countries. So you know how we just stated that there was no right or wrong answer to the prompt? That was correct, albeit under certain conditions. Admissions officers aren't looking a specific answer but they do want to hear your voice come out. Most applicants miss out on a chance to **tell a story only they can tell** by choosing to write about a global issue. They are not asking you to write a position paper. No matter how they phrase they question, they are actually asking you to write about YOU. So our advice for choosing your topic, regardless of the prompt, is to write about something that is unique to you. And by unique we don't mean try to be different for the sake of being different. You'll find all sorts of unqualified advice online advising you to avoid certain topics, such as family and pets, for the sake of standing out. If you want to write about how your mother matters to you – something one of our writers did to get into Stanford – all the power to you! Having a mother isn't unique per se, but the bond you share with a parent is special. Heck, if you have a unique experience vis-a-vis a global issue, feel free to write about that too! There are no limitations on your topic because there is no right or wrong answer. Just be sure to tell a story only you can tell.

Another consideration to keep in mind whilst choosing a topic is word and letter limitations. Stanford's prompt ("*What matters to you and why?*") only allows for a little over half a page to write with, 12-font, single-spaced. To avoid an editing nightmare, you want your topic to be as specific as possible. It is easier to describe a single experience from deployment than it is to describe the whole deployment in a few paragraphs. Specificity allows for greater clarity and more details. At the same time, a general topic is needed if you want to cover more time, or if you want the reader to see the bigger picture. The question you want to ask yourself when evaluating a potential topic: can I do this experience, memory or idea justice within the spatial guidelines?

5.4 ESSENTIAL ESSAY WRITING AND EDITING ADVICE

Most veterans haven't had constant practice writing within the personal essay genre. In fact, what we are used to is military writing, which is characterized by stating the bottom line up front (BLUF). BLUF simplifies the message to the point you need to get across in military orders, FRAGOs and manuals. BLUF is critical to military communication, whether you have to call in a MEDEVAC on the battlefield or communicate with your supply NCO. Yet, BLUF-speak is ill-suited for the genre we will be working with. As essential as BLUF is to battlefield communication and military writing... it will bore your reader to tears. Demonstrator, Post!

Military Writing Example: *In October 2011, my friend PFC Castillo was wounded during a firefight at Combat Outpost Bullard. As the only combat medic on patrol, I immediately went over to treat his wounds. He was a good friend and I wanted him to live. I even prayed for him, too.*

Personal Essay Version: *The explosion shook the ground and I saw friend Castillo's body crumple, like tinfoil, under the weight of his 60lb rucksack, and I prayed, "Please God let my brother live." I ran while finishing my prayer, through smoke and whizzing bullets to arrive at the front of our defensive formation. I think I slid down to Castillo's body. I think he whispered a quiet help. It's all hazy now. I did hear the **Rata-Tat-Tat-Tat** from Lance Corporal Armenta's Squad Automatic Weapon as he laid down suppressive fire to cover me while I dragged Castillo's body back to the rear. In a safer position, I checked his body for wounds. An ensemble of automatic weapons could still be heard. I ignored the background noise because I was the only combat medic on this patrol. I was only one who could save Castillo's life.*



The military writing example relied heavily on *telling* the reader what was happening; the second version, in contrast, *showed* what the writer was experiencing. Imagine you are telling your story over an open campfire to your audience. Whether it is a horror story, a tale of adventure, or a comedy, a good storyteller meets their audience halfway by leaving room for the imagination. They talk about what was seen, the smells, tastes, noises made and what was felt. A good story does not have to state what the author thought because the audience can learn as much from what was described. What you want is a good balance between showing and telling. **Avoid dull, military-style writing in favor of enlivened description that shows the reader what happened.**

You may also want to get to your point quickly before the reader loses patience. **Every sentence and every word should serve a purpose**, in that they somehow add to what you are trying to say.

Always assume your audience is a college admissions committee that has little experience in working with veterans. They don't know who you are or what you've been through. So you need to avoid military jargon (corporate speak) that you have learned from your time in service. Military jargon can be appropriate in sentences where context fills in the blank ("*I do remember hearing the **Rata-Tat-Tat-Tat** from Private First Class Armenta's Squad Automatic Weapon as he laid down suppressive fire to cover me*"). In most instances though, try to find words that can be used in place of jargon. Instead of "MOS" use the word "job"; replace "NCOIC" with "supervisor" or "team leader". **Write in a way that any civilian would understand.**

ON EDITING

Editing is a must. Think of essay writing as exercising and editing as stretching. If you want to be really physically fit then you have to exercise and stretch. The same goes with great essays: you not only have to write a great essay but you have to edit it.

Your goal during the editing process is to smooth the rough edges of your previous draft. You want your sentences to be clearer and your message more concise. Since every word should serve a purpose, you may need to cut away the parts you love. Don't worry, you'll find a way to fill that space. Your first draft won't be your best work; in fact, your last draft may look completely different than what you first started with. All in the name of changes that you deem necessary. As Stephen King has said, "*To write is human, to edit is divine.*"

- Put your first draft away, long enough so that what you wrote isn't fresh on your mind. Then start editing. Giving space between your first draft and your first edits is like looking at your work with fresh eyes. This point serves as one of many reasons you want to start writing months in advance of the deadline.
- We suggest having several editors look at your work after your second or third draft. Having several editors can be a reliable indicator on what you've done well, and what needs to change.
- Take your editors seriously, but not *too* seriously. You shouldn't change your work based on every little comment someone makes. Fact: your editors are humans too. On the other hand, healthy criticism can go a long way in helping you craft your story. At the end of the day, you are the final arbiter as to whether or not to incorporate a certain piece of feedback. At S2S we often tell our



applicants that although we are providing feedback we want them to know that they should be the ones deciding whether or not to disregard or implement the feedback.

- Have a civilian proofread your essay for military jargon that admissions officials won't understand. Ask them if there is anything they are confused about, and try to see what they can glean from your essay. Take advice you feel is useful.
- Have a veteran proofread your essay. Other veterans, brothers and sisters who've served, know what you are trying to say as it pertains to your military background. They've lived similarly to you. So recruit another veteran or a friend from your old unit(s) and ask them for their input.

5.5 EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL ESSAYS

Below are essay prompt responses that were written by veterans. Included is one essay that was written for admission into a class. As you read the personal essays, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did the essay answer the prompt?
- Could a civilian understand what was written?
- Did you enjoy reading the essay?
- What would you have changed?
- Was the essay well written?
- Was there more *showing* or *telling*?
- What did you learn about the writer? Did the writer show authenticity and voice?

Prompt: Please attach a brief paragraph describing why you would like to take the class [Reading for Writers].

I can get lost reading fiction. Book opened wide and flashlight tucked in between my right cheek and shoulder, I used to read past midnight and into the early morning to finish a story. This was in high school. I would lose sleep again to old habits during Army Basic Training, when wakeup was at "zero-five-hundred" (5:00 AM) and the little sleep I got was precious. In Iraq, under the dusty shade of netting, I would go through books like water. Few things are as satisfying as finishing a story. And it's that same love I want to share with the world through my own writing. Stories about The Wars, about gender inequality, the in-group/out-group psychology that leads to hazing, and survival; all themes I want to blend in fictional stories that reveal deep truths of human behavior. But to get there I need to learn how to become a critical reader first. Otherwise I'll just get lost while reading fiction, and lose a chance to share my stories.

Prompt: What matters to you and why? (Stanford)

They watched with a gaze oft seen at a funeral service, but as I buried myself deeper into embarrassment I just wished someone would laugh. Sweaty palmed, body slightly shaking, and with the lingering taste of old toothpaste on my tongue, I dared glance every now and then from my paper to my audience. What I saw wasn't reassuring. What I heard was worse: A few short laughs, but mostly silence. For a wannabe stand-up comedian the silence emanated failure.

After I ended my routine and took what felt like an undeserved bow, the sound of my classmates' polite applause filled the air. Polite meaning, "Oh, I'm sorry you weren't funny but at least you tried." I wished I



hadn't. Worst of all, I couldn't blame my lines for the lackluster performance... I had written them myself. The only conclusion was that I just wasn't funny. And without realizing it, my classmates witnessed the passing of an aspiration. When my first high school semester ended I had a chance to take Comedy Workshop again. I chose Piano class instead.

Seven years later, my fingers anxiously skim across the plastic black and whites, running over the dusty controls to settle briefly on a small red button. (*click*) A small screen in the middle of the keyboard lights up. I haven't played often since joining the Army, but my fingers remember, working organically, filling the room with a language that is understood by all. I don't feel like I'm in Afghanistan anymore. A male voice says, "I wish I knew how to play." My fingers stop moving as I turn to see my audience: a young, junior-enlisted, infantry soldier in a worn down uniform. Thinking back to why I first started playing the piano, I mutter, "Some doors close, so others can open. He flatly replies back, "Who gives a shit, I still wish I could play." We share a laugh, and I turn back while my fingers pick up from where they had last rested. I lose myself again, far away from the War and its terrorists, and the everyday worries that keep many a young soldier awake at night.

Prompt: *How did you spend your last 2 summers? (Stanford short answer)*

Well, I spent the summer of '11 in Afghanistan, which is like a beach minus the water. When I arrived home in June of '12 I completed "The Tough Mudder", a 10-mile obstacle course made by the British Special Forces that gave me sunburns, sore muscles and bragging rights.

Prompt: *Why do you want to transfer to George Washington University?*

I have had the rare opportunity to be one of few women to serve with an infantry unit on a combat deployment. What I learned throughout that deployment has made me absolutely certain of two things. The first is that the opportunities presented to us should never be taken for granted. Witnessing what people are willing to sacrifice in order to protect their freedom and way of life has convinced me that it is every persons duty to be involved in the decisions made in their country because if you do not defend what you believe in then no one else is obligated to. The second great lesson I learned is that I have a passion for economics. I began learning about economics on my free time to help locals realize their dreams. I had the opportunity to help people who could not help themselves to start small businesses and help villages start informal schools for local children. All of these events led up to my decision to begin researching and applying to colleges to continue my education. Being active duty military, I never had the chance to visit George Washington University so everything I learned was from friends, phone calls and the Internet. My interest began with a conversation I had with dear a friend who transferred to George Washington University last year and I quickly found that what I want the most in a school lines up with what is offered at George Washington. I want to attend a school that encourages involvement in politics. One political event that I would have loved to attend was the George Washington Rumble 2012 debate. The atmosphere is appealing to me because I want to be surrounded by people who think it is important to have a voice in the future of this nation. Coming from the military it is important to me to attend a school that offers support to veterans and holds a positive view of the military. I want to continuously serve even outside of the military. Through programs such as Teach for America, George Washington encourages its students to make a positive difference through community service. I have grown to believe that education is essential to the success of a nation, especially after seeing the affect it can have on the small villages in Afghanistan. Beyond just encouraging students to make a difference, George Washington University offers support to those who want to make a difference through Public Service grants for student led projects. These are just a few of the events and programs that piqued my interest though I've researched so many more that show George Washington's willingness to cater to the



needs of its students and for these reasons I am convinced George Washington University is the right school for me. I have a lot to offer from my personal experience and I look forward to being a part of a proactive, diverse and engaged community.

Prompt: *What are your reasons for Transferring? (CommonApp main essay)*

It's hard to fit a lifetime into a small paper, say my inner thoughts. I still make another attempt:

She walked into my office on that chilly January morning in Afghanistan, wearing a look of defeat and fresh blood on her uniform...

My fingers pause while I ponder, briefly, before going on:

Her voice wavered slightly as she quickly said, "He was a triple amputee... we tried to save him, but he had too many holes in him."

Suddenly, our obviously distraught Psychiatrist and on-call Surgeon left the room, presumably through the double-doors of the NATO Role III Hospital. I wanted to share that memory because, strange as it may sound, it reminds me of why I want to become a medical doctor.

I realize that a medical provider has to be tough. While I was working at the NATO Role III Hospital, in spring of 2012, there was a constant stream of wounded service members who wouldn't make it through the night. Yet, I find it admirable that every day, despite the losses, my department Psychiatrist would put in extra hours off-duty to give incoming casualties a fighting chance for survival. I can see myself doing that too, whether it's on the battlefield or in a civilian hospital. The contentment I get from serving others, and the time spent working with exceptional medical providers have only furthered my childhood desire to join their ranks...

I smile after typing that last sentence, for I didn't think medical school possible until I started at Moorpark's Community College. During that first semester I earned all A's, which was an about-face from my pre-college record of mediocrity and failing to pass the standard. Still reminiscing, I find inspiration to continue onward:

I've thoroughly enjoyed studying at Moorpark's Community College. Under the mentorship of professors and through collaboration with peers I've grown into a more-balanced student these past years. At Moorpark College I was even able to utilize my Military-learned initiative to create research opportunities: the basis for one of my two abstracts accepted into the UC Irvine HTTC Honors research conference, titled "How the Body Can Destroy the Brain", was statistical data I collected on the health and GPA of randomly-selected classes (stratified sampling). Those experiences and many more have given me high expectations for transfer.

Ideally, my University for transfer would have the following: (1) well-funded, medical research opportunities; (2) rigorous premedical courses and guidance to better prepare me for the MCAT; and (3) a diverse, proactive student population, because I enjoy interacting with other individuals who want to make a positive impact on their environment.

"I know how to end this!" I say aloud, much to my own amusement. Following that excited outburst I end with a proclamation:

At the end of the day I really can't promise to become one of your famous alumni. But I can say this: the lives I could save as a doctor will be a lasting tribute to your University's legacy.



CHAPTER 6: THE INTERVIEW

The college interview is the portion of the application process that may seem to be the most alien to a veteran. How many of us had to interview for a job in the military? Most of us did not, but you may have been through something much more arduous: I can guarantee that any NCO promotion board, soldier of the month board, or a cherry infantry private meeting his NCOs for the first time are all far more demanding than a college interview.

The college interviewer is not going to try to trip you up, or dig into you for an imprecise or hesitant answer. Your interviewer is not looking for the ‘right’ answer. The point of the college interview is for the school to get to know you and why you want to attend their institution and how you’ll contribute to the community they’re building. They will gauge your curiosity, so make sure you speak up when you have questions. It’s meant to be a conversation, not an interrogation. Think of the interview as demonstrating your ability to contribute in a classroom setting. Interviewers are also looking to see if you’re some kind of idiot savant who may have a killer paper application and essays, but has the interpersonal skills of a brick and no ability to engage in meaningful discourse. The interview is not too high of standard to meet. Believe it or not, admissions officers *want* to like you. Your job with the application, and the interview, is to help them build a case to admit you.

The interview is an opportunity for veterans to score some major points. You can demonstrate that your mind crackles with intellect and wit, and it’s an opportunity to explain any irregularities in your educational background. Don’t worry about any irregularities too much though. One of this Guidebook’s authors failed sophomore geometry and was on the discipline steps program, but now attends an Ivy -- Yale University. If nothing else, you should have some interesting stories. But try to avoid any stories that begin with, “No shit, there I was...”

Know the interviewer and be courteous. Often the person conducting the interview is an alum, but could also be someone from admissions. It’s important that you make the effort to know at least the name and position of the person you will be speaking with. Treat everyone respectfully, even the person manning the front desk and answering the phones.

Prepare answers. You cannot predict exactly what you will be asked, but most questions will revolve around your academic interests, activities outside the classroom, hobbies, your personal traits, and why you want to attend that specific college. Some questions to prepare for:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself?
- What is it about ____ University that made you apply?
- What programs or campus events are you specifically interested in?
- What have you learned in the military that will be useful in a college setting?
- What do you want to do with a college degree once you graduate? What do you plan to study?

Have questions for your interviewer. This is a good time to learn more about the interviewer, a major you are interested in, or a specific program or activity. This is not a good time to demonstrate that you haven’t done any research online though, so don’t ask if they have a business program or a library. Those are things you should already know from looking at their website. Some questions you might want to ask are: _____



- What was your major? (if they are alum) What's the most popular major?
- What is the one event or tradition on campus that I absolutely should not miss during the year?
- Is the veteran community on campus active?
- How did you make the most of your undergraduate years?

Logistics and follow-up. Make sure you plan properly before your interview. Know where you are going and give yourself enough time to get there. If it's a phone interview, make sure you are in a quiet place with good service.

Please don't wear an Affliction shirt or any other graphic anything. Dress professionally. For example, a button down shirt, tie and slacks would be appropriate.

Be sure to say thank you when the interview is complete, and get contact information to send a thank you email or letter. The interviewer took time out of their day to meet with you; show respect for the time they gave you. And keep in mind that alumni interviewers are all volunteers – they do it out of loyalty to the school, and they like being good ambassadors. They can be great resources!



CHAPTER 7: REVIEW FROM A SUCCESSFUL APPLICANT

All of us at S2S are here to help you achieve your higher education goals, but it's not a one-way street. We mean that our services achieve the best results when our applicants are proactive in working with us. To help give future applicants a better idea of what this might entail, the following section was put together by Sang, a former Army infantryman and current Columbia School of General Studies student. Sang will talk about what he felt allowed him to make the most out of what we offer.

Ra, Sang B.
3rd Infantry Regiment
United States Army
March 06, 2014

Service to School can help you achieve acceptance into your target school. That being said, they can only take you as far as you are willing to go. The sooner you contact S2S, the better they can assess your situation and advise the proper training towards your ultimate goal. Arguably the most important part of applying to schools is the personal statements/responses. Besides your GPA, service and activities, these essays are what schools use to evaluate you. The college application process is not only stressful and arduous but can be financially costly as well. Make sure to budget and save enough money to pay not only for your application but other fees associated with the application process. Don't lose sight of your goal and stick with it.

Under guidance from Service to School, I was able to take the proper training to fulfill my potential as an applicant. Their initial assessment of my GPA and test scores resulted in instructions on how to make myself a stronger candidate. I am not nor have ever been a strong tester. S2S was able to suggest the best study aids to work with to best fit my study habits. Aids such as in class test prep, online test assistance or texts. Whatever works best for you.

Writing an essay is not something I am skilled at. With the assistance from Service to School, I was able to accurately and eloquently present myself in my personal statements. Their tireless effort would have been in vain, had I not put in the effort to rewrite my essays with their edits and submit them as quickly as possible. Depending on writing ability, there can be anywhere from 3-6+ drafts for a single essay. I usually received an edit within 12 hours of a draft submission and re-drafted and submitted on the day of receiving the edits. I cannot stress enough the importance of sending the drafts in a timely manner. A potential 3 draft-2 day essay can easily turn into a week-long endeavor. Multiply that by the number of school applications and the average number of essays per application (usually 2) and application deadlines will be missed. It is vital that essays be rewritten and submitted as soon as possible.

With all the back and forth of essays and edits, it is very easy to mix up the essays and edits. One possible solution would be to work on one essay at a time and arrange each draft and edit in chronological order in a dedicated folder for college essays. Another possible solution is labeling each file with [school name, question#, and draft/ edit #] and save to a dedicated essay folder. These small steps will ensure that no time be lost due to resubmission of already edited drafts.



Applying to schools can be a financial burden. Plan accordingly through saving and budgeting. There are schools that waive application fees for veterans, but from my experience, those are the exceptions and not the rule.

Standardized testing (SAT or ACT): Roughly \$60 to \$100 to take a test and send scores.

Application fee: roughly \$75 for every school.

Transcript delivery fee: \$10 to \$15 each.

Note from Editors: You may be able to waive some of the costs through your community college. Visit your financial aid office for more details. You may also want to call your potential school and find out if they offer application fee waivers.



CHAPTER 8: OTHER GOOD-TO-KNOW INFO

8.1 Q&A WITH A YALE ADMISSIONS OFFICER

Information that comes directly from a first-hand source is always a tremendous asset. With that in mind, S2S contacted Yale University admissions officer and head of admissions for Yale’s Eli Whitney Non-Traditional Students program, Patricia Wei, hoping to gain further insight into college applications for veterans. Patricia was eager to help, despite being in the thick of undergrad admissions season and reading through a deluge of essays from some of the most promising high school seniors from across the country. For this, all of us at S2S would like to extend our deep gratitude and appreciation.

<Interview Start>

S2S: A chief concern of many vets is that their less than stellar high school record will prove to be an obstacle when they decide to apply to college. How much will high school performance factor into a vet’s application and what can they do to overcome this?

Patricia: In college admissions, the most important factor an admissions committee looks for is evidence that an applicant will be able to do well in the school. Academics are very important for this, and not only veterans, but also non-traditional students in general, often do not have the best high school grades. It is recognized that veterans have developed in many positive ways through their time in service, which is looked upon very positively by an admissions committee. Nonetheless, strong academics remain crucial, and a poor high school performance record may be compensated for through scholastic success in rigorous community college courses relevant to the degree the veteran hopes to earn. Courses in specific fields such as criminal justice or accounting are typically not acceptable to demonstrate academic potential in this regard. In applying to selective schools, professional accomplishment is good, but will not be helpful without recent academic success. Do not forget the importance of academics.

(S2S Comment ~ What is meant by “relevant, rigorous” courses are courses in academic subjects that directly correlate with an intended field of study. They tend not to be pre-professional classes, which is why she gave examples from criminal justice and accounting as ones to avoid. Elite colleges tend to prefer courses from the humanities, hard sciences, or social sciences. If the intended major were English, writing, literature and other liberal arts courses would be most relevant. Similarly, biology majors should demonstrate strong performance in science and math courses.)

S2S: Does it make a difference whether courses are taken online or in an actual school?

Patricia: Community colleges are fine, but Yale does not accept online courses. Classes can be taken at a 2 or 4-year public or private institution.



(S2S Comment~ While Patricia can only speak for Yale, it would be best to assume that other four year universities have a similar position on online courses. In person community college classes should be your first choice.)

S2S: Are the military experiences of the veteran relevant to an admissions committee? To what degree do they matter to universities?

Patricia: Veterans are important as they add diversity to the student body, and can add substantively to class discussions. At Yale, it is expected that veterans will share their experience with other students in and out of the classroom.

Regarding how Yale and other highly selective colleges evaluate military service, it is desired that non-traditional students have contributed substantially to whatever it is that they were doing outside of school, military or otherwise. One career field is not favored over another; what is looked for is that a candidate has made a demonstrated impact through their work.

S2S: In your personal experience with veterans, what have veterans done to make the most significant impression on you during the admissions process?

Patricia: The military background of veterans is important, but so is their ability to demonstrate their own views and academic interests. They can embrace their military side while still demonstrating their individuality in other ways; admissions committees want to see what candidates are passionate and excited about. Veteran applicants should not be afraid to offer their own opinions in an interview. Be respectful, thoughtful, and know what you are talking about, which will demonstrate that you can contribute to classroom discussions. Good college interviews often involve a respectful back and forth discussion that demonstrates intellectual depth and curiosity beyond what grades and test scores can indicate.

It's also important to remember that the most successful college students know when to ask for help, and student veterans need to be willing to do the same. It's my understanding that many military training courses are designed to test a soldier's endurance and dedication under trying circumstances. This is a great characteristic for veterans to have, but they should also be cognizant of its limits. If a veteran is struggling in a particular course, it is important that they not only stick to it, but that they seek out the help they need to overcome their difficulty. Professors, teaching assistants, and campus tutoring services are all there to help students, and veterans must be willing to use them when needed if they want to succeed in college.

S2S: Is there any final advice you could share with veterans concerning succeeding in college?

Patricia: In terms of applying to highly selective schools, an applicant must focus on their academic performance. Academic achievement in courses which are relevant to the degree program being applied to is crucial, so if an applicant hopes to transfer from another institution their former coursework must be germane to what they will study at their new institution. Career success is a definite positive in the eyes of an admissions committee, but it will not negate the need for demonstrated academic success.

Candidates need to think about their own goals, strengths, weaknesses, and the type of environment for which they are best suited, then research different schools and programs to see what they offer. Do some soul searching, be sure of whom you are, and then find the school that is right for you.

<Interview End>



All of us at S2S want to again express our thanks to Patricia for her time and thoughtful advice. As it comes directly from the mouth of an Ivy League admissions officer, there can be no doubting its authoritativeness.

I would personally like to point out the emphasis that Patricia placed on the importance of academics, and remind all of those who were not National Honor Society Members in high school that all is not lost. My own high school record was atrocious, but after spending two years at another college and creating a new track record of scholastic success, I was able to transfer to Yale. In fact, Patricia and I had a bit of a chuckle comparing my high school to college transcripts at my own Yale interview, so it can be done.

8.2 VALUABLE RESOURCES

College Navigator: Type the name of a school in the search bar on the left to view a profile of the school. Check out the graduation and retention rates!

<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid. On this site you can check the deadlines to submit FAFSA for federal and state applications.

<https://fafsa.ed.gov/>

JST: Joint Service Transcript shows a transcript of ACE accredited training. The school you apply to may allow you to transfer some of these, so be sure to ask.

<https://jst.doded.mil/>

VMET: Verification of Military Experience and Training

<https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/tgps/>

College Confidential: This site is packed with information and assistance on how to choose a college, how to pay for it, how to apply and much more.

<http://www.collegeconfidential.com/>

College Board: This is the site you will use to have your SAT or ACT scores sent to your potential schools or to register to take the tests.

<https://www.collegeboard.org/>

Ebenefits: This is where you will go to activate your education benefits via online forms. Click the button that says ‘Apply for Veterans Benefits via VONAPP.’

www.ebenefits.va.gov

The Common Application: The CommonApp is an online platform that lets you submit your applications to many different participating schools. There are differences from application to application, so it’s not truly a “common” application, but the platform does make applying to multiple schools much easier. Each school’s website will give instruction on whether they use CommonApp or not. Most competitive colleges do



participate in the CommonApp (with two big exceptions being the public college systems in California and Texas).

www.commonapp.org

On selecting a test prep course:

<http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/college-admissions-playbook/2013/07/29/how-to-select-the-right-sat-act-prep-course>

On choosing between the ACT and SAT tests:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/education/edlife/guidance.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

8.3 CONTRIBUTORS AND SPECIAL THANKS

Saamon Legoski, Zach McDonald and Reagan Odhner wrote this undergraduate guidebook. Rahul Harpalani and Khalil Tawil edited and formatted the guidebook for clarity. Anna Ivey, Mike Anderson, Tim Hsia and John Hackerson contributed ideas and expertise for several sections. Special thanks goes out to Professor Nina Schloesser of Stanford University for her enormous contributions to the essay writing section of this guidebook. Credit is also due for Patricia Wei of Yale University, who granted Zach an interview on college admissions as it relates to veterans.

We want to thank our Ambassadors, who volunteer countless hours to help other veterans get into the best schools possible.

Service to School has several partners who provide free resources and support for our veterans: the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), Veritas Prep, AJ Tutoring, the Four Block Foundation, the Warrior-Scholar Project, Smith College, Amherst College, Dartmouth College, and Yale University (Current partnerships as of February 2015). We are always adding more partners, so please check our website for a complete list. Do reach out to contact@service2school.org if you want to partner with us in helping the next greatest generation thrive in higher education and beyond.