



.....

# BACK TO SCHOOL

**A Guide to  
Academic Success  
After Traumatic Brain Injury**



# WELCOME LETTER

**Congratulations on taking a positive step toward seeking higher education! We hope this guide helps you navigate campus life and overcome any challenges you may face along the way.**

This guide is intended as a starting point for your journey. It should not be your sole source of information. Once you are enrolled, talk to your academic advisor to learn about available services. Take charge and advocate for yourself.

As the TBI Pathway of Care manager within the Military Health System, the Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence (TBICoE) worked with a panel of experts to develop this guide. This panel was composed of TBI survivors, as well as specialists from the following disciplines: education, medicine, counseling, neurorehabilitation, occupational therapy, psychology, vocational rehabilitation, social work, and speech-language pathology. We would like to thank representatives from the following organizations for contributing to our first and second edition expert panel:

- Psychological Health Center of Excellence
- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
- University of Minnesota
- Virginia Commonwealth University
- U.S. Military Academy at West Point

We hope the *Back to School: A Guide to Academic Success After Traumatic Brain Injury*, will help you take advantage of the military and VA educational benefits so that you can succeed in your new endeavors.

Very Respectfully,

The TBICoE Team

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **GETTING STARTED**

- Considerations
- Do Your Research and Weigh Your Options
- Online Learning
- Find a School
- Apply
- Transcripts and Credit for Military Experience
- Get Benefits
- Apply for Financial Aid and Scholarships
- Seek Support
- Access Health Care Services
- Other Helpful On-Campus Resources
- Key Takeaways

## **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- GI Bill
- Financial Aid and Tuition Assistance
- Scholarships and Grants
- Key Takeaways

## **DISABILITY SERVICES AND ACCOMODATIONS**

- Disability Support Services (DSS) Office
- Assistive Technology
- Key Takeaways

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

- Recognize Your Strengths
- Stay Organized
- Follow a Schedule
- Manage Your Emotions
- Key Takeaways

## **PRIORITIZING YOUR HEALTH WHILE IN SCHOOL**

- Keep in Touch with Your Health Care Team
- Manage Your Symptoms
- Helpful Mobile Apps

## **STUDENT RESOURCES**



Photo Courtesy of U.S. Army Garrison Fort Lee Public Affairs

# GETTING STARTED



You have likely overcome many challenges while serving in the military. No matter how difficult an obstacle may have seemed, you found the strength to continue to push forward. Deciding to start or return to school after a traumatic brain injury (TBI) can seem overwhelming, but know that it is a challenge you can tackle with the same dedication and hard work you put toward your military career. Also know that there are many organizations, including campus support systems and online resources to help you successfully transition into the classroom.

## CONSIDERATIONS

### How do I know if I'm ready to go back to school?

Entering or returning to school can positively change the direction of your life and provide you with a broader range of professional opportunities. Still, you need to know where you're headed before starting your journey. Consider the following questions as you think about your future.

- Am I motivated and committed?
- Will I be able to balance school, work, and family obligations?
- Do I have a strong support system?

### What are the most common concerns that service members and veterans have when returning to the classroom after a TBI?

Many people face challenges when returning to the classroom, whether or not they have a TBI. Some of the most common concerns include staying organized, making decisions, managing time, balancing priorities, retaining information, and staying focused. You can find suggestions for addressing each of these challenges in the [Strategies for Success](#) section.

### Is it possible for me to succeed in school after a TBI?

Yes! Working hard is part of being in the military; the same is true of succeeding in school. If you are willing to work hard and receive support, having a TBI is not a barrier to reaching your educational goals.



U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Katherine Spessa

## DO YOUR RESEARCH AND WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS

- Think about where you are now and what commitments you have in your life.
- Take time to decide which career path will be the best fit for you (e.g., community college, traditional university, trade school or technical school).
- If you are active duty, contact your installation military education office for help with:
  - Researching schools
  - Reviewing benefits
  - Receiving credit for military experience
- If you are a veteran, you can find information on VA education and training benefits at [va.gov/education/](https://www.va.gov/education/). You can also read stories about veterans' experiences going to school at [Make the Connection](#).
- Decide if you want to take online or in-person classes.

## ONLINE LEARNING

### Should I take in-person or online classes?

When deciding between taking classes in-person or online, consider your academic goals, learning style, technical skills, and ability to self-motivate. If you prefer the peer interaction, structure, and hands-on experience of the classroom environment, in-person classes may be a better fit. Some colleges have even developed assessments to help prospective students determine whether they are prepared for online learning.

### What are some advantages of taking online classes?

- Self-paced learning
- Flexibility to juggle other priorities such as work or a family
- No need to relocate or commute to take a class
- May be easier to achieve optimal school-life balance

### Does an online class require as much work as an in-person class?

Yes. An online class requires as much time and dedication as an in-person course but affords you more flexibility. As long as you meet deadlines and communicate with your instructor and peers, it often doesn't matter where or when you work on assignments.

### Do employers accept online degrees?

Yes. As long as you go to a reputable online college that is accredited by the U.S Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, your diploma and transcripts will be identical to those in an in-person program.

### Do online schools offer the same student support service as in-person schools?

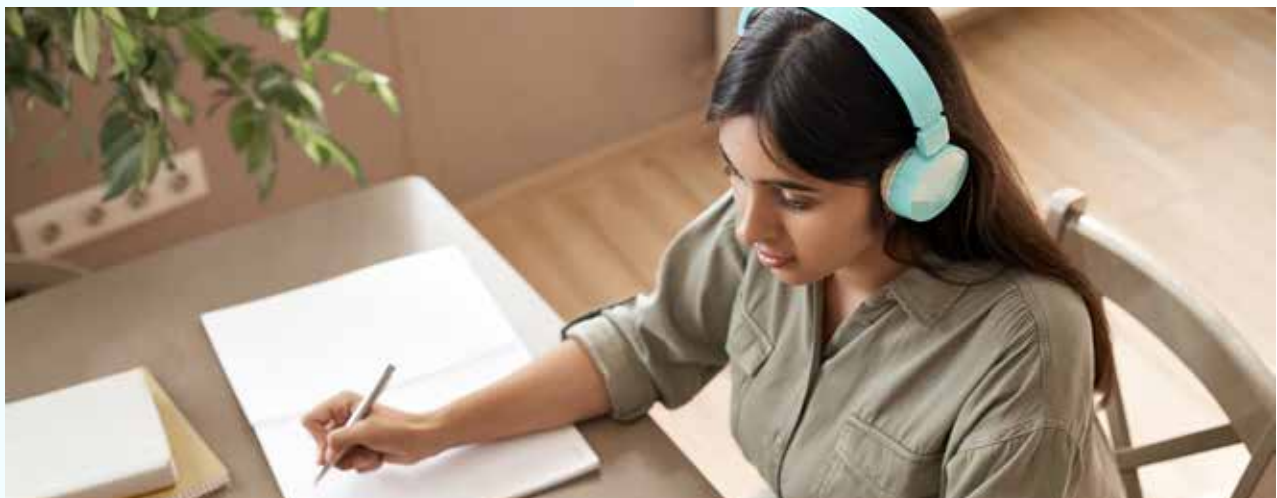
Yes. Online colleges tend to offer the same support services as campus-based ones, although they may be administered differently. For example, tutoring or career advising might rely on video conferencing software.

### Can students use military education benefits to pay for online education?

Yes. Active duty and veterans can typically apply their military education benefits towards an online degree.

### Are online students eligible for additional financial aid?

Yes. Qualifying students enrolled in online degree programs are eligible for federal aid and many of the same loans, scholarships, and grants as in-person students.



## I have decided to take online classes. What are some tips for setting up my home workstation?

### Technology

- Ensure your computer/laptop/tablet have the necessary specifications for the course software.
- If you choose to use a laptop, it is recommended that you set up a docking station with an external monitor, keyboard, and mouse to support proper positioning.
- Adjust computer display (e.g., font size, screen brightness, reduce screen glare) to a comfortable level.

### Chair positioning

- Use a supportive chair that has a back support and seat cushion.
- Adjust chair height so that your knees are aligned with your hips and your feet are flat on the floor. Your arms should be supported with your elbows at a 90-degree angle.
- The monitor should be at your eye level and an arm's length away.

### Headset

- If you need to use the phone or attend a virtual meeting, use a headset instead of cradling the phone between your head and neck which can cause neck strain.

Remember to take breaks throughout the day to give your brain, eyes, and body a chance to decompress and decrease chances of fatigue, strain, headaches or blurred vision. You can try the tips suggested in the [Manage your Symptoms](#) section to help.

## FIND A SCHOOL

- Start early and look for schools that have partnered with the VA through the [Yellow Ribbon Program](#) to lower tuition rates for student veterans.
- Determine your academic career goals and priorities.
  - Use the [CareerScope](#) assessment to help you determine a career path that is right for you.
  - Consider contacting a current student within the degree program you are considering to learn more details.
- Check with the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) to guarantee that the school you have chosen to attend is accredited. This will ensure you receive quality education that employers widely accept.
- Look for a campus with easy access to mental health and medical support, disability services, academic accommodations, and career services.



## APPLY

- Visit the Prospective Students section on the school's website or call the admissions office for more information regarding application requirements and deadlines.
- Ask if they have a Veteran/Military Service office that provides support to military personnel and veterans. These offices may assist with the application and transcript review process, waive application fees, and provide academic advising.
- Ask the college to provide you with an unofficial transcript review to determine how many of your military and other college credits will transfer towards a degree. Then request that all your transcripts and test scores are sent directly to each school that you are applying to by completing an Official Transcript Request. Since this step can take some time it is a good idea to complete it early in the process.
  - For the Army, Navy, Marines, or Coast Guard, go to the [Joint Services Transcript](#) website.
  - For the Air Force, go to the [Community College of the Air Force](#) website.
- Check if the school you are applying to accepts a common application. This is a single application you can send to multiple schools.
- Clarify whether you will be admitted as a new or transfer student. This determination will be based on the amount of academic credits you have from military transcripts or College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests. CLEP tests allow you to earn college credits by obtaining satisfactory scores on college subject exams. Not every program accepts these credits.

- Ask if you will be admitted as an in-state or out-of-state student. For public universities, the answer to this question can significantly impact the cost of your tuition.

## TRANSCRIPTS AND CREDIT FOR MILITARY EXPERIENCE

- Your military transcript will indicate the following:
  - **Military course completions:** All courses that have been evaluated by the [American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#) with full descriptions and credit recommendations
  - **Military occupations:** Full descriptions, skill levels, and credit recommendations
  - **College-level test scores:** CLEP, Defense Subject Standardized Tests (DSSTs), and [Navy College Program for Afloat College Education \(NCPACE\)](#) score data
  - **Other learning experiences:** Additional completed courses and occupations not evaluated by ACE for college credit

## GET BENEFITS

Take advantage of your military and veteran education benefits. If you are a veteran, get a copy of your discharge papers and separation documents ([DD-214](#)).

## APPLY FOR FINANCIAL AID AND SCHOLARSHIPS

In addition to any military benefits, you may qualify for funding through financial aid grants, loans, and scholarships to help cover the cost of tuition. See the [Financial Considerations](#) section for more information.





## SEEK SUPPORT

- [VetSuccess on Campus \(VSOC\)](#)
  - VSOCs support service members and veterans who are transitioning from the military into college life.
- [Personalized Career Planning and Guidance \(PCPG\)/VA Chapter 36](#)
  - PCPG provides education, career guidance, planning, and resources to empower service members and veterans to reach their educational and career goals.

## ACCESS HEALTH CARE SERVICES

Continue to follow up with your health care team.

- If you are Active Duty/Guard/Reserve, find your providers with [TRICARE](#).
- If you qualify for [VA health care benefits](#), complete registration to find new providers.
- You can use the tools at [My HealthVet](#) to access your personal health record and correspond with your health care team.

## OTHER HELPFUL ON-CAMPUS RESOURCES

- **School orientation:** Is a campus event that provides students with a chance to:
  - Meet other students, faculty, and staff members
  - Get to know your way around campus
  - Learn more about extracurricular clubs and activities
  - Receive more information about your school's tutoring, counseling, and health services
  - Obtain help registering for courses

- **Academic advising office:** Each student is assigned an academic adviser to help them choose classes, keep track of their credits, and make sure they meet graduation requirements.
- **Campus counseling center, student services office, or chaplain's office:** Provide a place for students to talk with a counselor.
- **Military services office:** Typically run by veterans and can provide academic and peer support.
- **Registrar's office:** Responsible for academic records including handling registration, withdrawals, and transcript requests. Many offices will have an appointed veteran's representative or a VA certifying official to address the needs of veterans on campus.
- **Ombudsman:** Investigate complaints by anyone in the university's community, including students, staff, and faculty.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Entering or going back to school can be challenging for anybody—not just individuals with TBI. Many resources are available that can make the transition into the classroom easier.
- Determine your career goals and priorities and find a school that can best support your success.
- As soon as you are accepted, contact the Disability Support Services (DSS) office, VSOC, and your academic adviser on campus. They can each provide you with valuable information to ease your transition.
- In-person and online learning have unique advantages; determine which program is right for you.
- Ensure your home workstation is properly set up for success.



# FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

## GI BILL

Always explore your military and veteran benefits first because they may cover all or most of your college expenses. As a military member or veteran, you may qualify for the **GI Bill**, which has helped qualifying veterans and their family members afford higher education or career training since 1944. Under the bill, there are numerous benefits available. Determining which benefits are most suitable for you will depend on your service history and educational goals.

## FINANCIAL AID AND TUITION ASSISTANCE

Financial aid is money from loans, scholarships, grants, or work-study programs that can help you pay for tuition, room and board, books, and other school supplies.

- **Loans** provide money for you to use right now, but you will have to pay them back once you graduate.
- **Grants** and **scholarships** provide money that you will not have to pay back.
- **Work-study** is an agreement between you and your school in which you work in exchange for money to pay your tuition. Work-study may be available through on-campus or off-campus employers.
  - The Veteran Work-Study Program can be an option if you are using your VA education benefits.
  - Check with your school's financial aid office to see which work-study options are available.
- Other sources of financial aid include:
  - Federal or state programs
  - Banks and lenders
  - Privately funded organizations (e.g., churches, civic organizations, and employers)

### How do I apply for financial aid?

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([FAFSA](#)) is a free application that your college will use to determine your federal aid eligibility. It allows you to apply for federal grants, work-study programs, and loans. It is best to complete the form as soon as you are accepted into a program so that you do not miss the [deadline](#). It is important to remember that each form only applies for a single academic year and that you will need to submit a new one each year.

### How does it work?

Once you have completed your FAFSA, you will receive an aid offer which explains the type and amount of aid you are qualified to receive. If you have been accepted to multiple colleges, you will need to compare the school costs to the aid offers.

- Decide whether or not to accept the aid from the school you selected and inform them of other sources of aid you expect to receive.
- Most organizations will send the payment directly to your school. Your financial aid office will apply your aid to the amount you owe and send you any remaining balance to spend on other college costs.
- If you receive loans, be sure you understand the process of paying them back.

### What can I use it for?

Financial aid for school helps cover all the costs associated with your education. This includes tuition, books, supplies, and room and board.

### Does financial aid cover all courses?

Ask the organization providing your financial aid if any courses are not covered. For example, most financial aid cannot be used for audited courses (those not taken for college credit).

### Could I lose my financial aid?

Contact the financial aid organization or your school's financial aid office to learn about criteria that could put your financial aid at risk. Usually, you need to show satisfactory academic progress and maintain a sufficient course load to continue receiving federal student aid.

### How can dropping or failing a course affect my financial aid?

If you think you may fail a course, need to drop a class, or will earn an incomplete grade, contact your financial aid office right away. If you have to drop a course for reasons beyond your control, your financial aid office, academic adviser, or DSS counselor may be able to help explain the situation to the financial aid organization to keep you from losing your aid. You may be asked to provide written proof of your need to withdraw from the course. Some of these situations may include:

- Mental or physical illness or injury
- Severe illness or death of an immediate family member
- Employment changes
- Unexpected family or financial obligation
- Mobilization to activated military service or training (National Guard or Reserve)
- A military deployment or temporary duty assignment (active duty)

### Am I eligible for financial aid as a part-time student?

Yes. Most financial aid organizations provide either full or partial financial support if you are a part-time student. The rules vary by organization. Contact your school's financial aid office to discuss the criteria before you decide to become a part-time student.

### Do I have to report my VA education benefits as income when applying for federal aid?

No. Since VA education benefits are considered a resource and not income, you do not need to list them in the income section.

## SCHOLARSHIPS AND GRANTS

### Are grants and scholarships the same thing?

Both grants and scholarships can help you pay for college and do not need to be paid back. However, grants are generally given to students with financial needs whereas scholarships are usually awarded based on criteria that may include academic achievement, field of study (e.g. teaching, medicine, etc.), special skills (e.g., sports, art), or traits (e.g., ethnicity). A scholarship can be awarded in a lump sum or be divided over a certain amount of time, usually four years.

### How do I find out if I qualify for a scholarship?

Reach out to your financial aid office at the school you plan to attend. They can help you find a good match for your strengths and interests. You can also use online scholarship search engines to locate additional funding opportunities.

- Check out scholarships geared towards service members and veterans by visiting the [Resources](#) section.

### Where can I find out more?

- If you need more information, contact your financial aid office and ask to speak with your financial aid counselor.
- If you need more information about military educational benefits or tuition assistance, contact a VA educational benefits specialist to discuss your options at 888-GIBILL-1 (888-442-4551).
- If you are active duty, visit your local military education office for help.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Explore your military and veteran benefits first because they may cover most of your college expenses. If you need additional aid, start the financial aid process early and be sure to meet application deadlines.
- You must fill out the FAFSA form each year if you are applying for loans, scholarships, grants, or work-study programs.
- If you have received loans, make sure you know how and when to repay them.
- Scholarships and grants help reduce the cost of your education and do not need to be repaid.





# DISABILITY SERVICES AND ▶ ACCOMMODATIONS

Going to school after a TBI is filled with new experiences and challenges you may not have had in the past. Because of your TBI, it is essential to seek support from the Disability Support Services (DSS) office on your campus. If your campus does not have a DSS office, contact your academic adviser or registrar to discuss alternative options your school may provide.

## DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS) OFFICE

### What does the DSS office do?

DSS offices help students with documented disabilities get the most out of college. Counselors will assist you with your educational needs and support you in your journey to achieve your academic goals. They can help with things such as housing, assistive technology, library access, campus access, and student activities. Most importantly, they can create an accommodation plan tailored to your needs. It is best to seek assistance at the start of your school year and not wait until you are struggling to keep up in class.

### What are accommodations?

Accommodations are modifications or adjustments to your academic experience that a school makes on a case-by-case basis. The DSS office can help you identify which accommodations will be the most helpful for your specific needs. These vary by school, but examples include:

- Extra time to finish tests or assignments
- Alternative test formats
- Approval to use a voice recorder

- Permission to have another student take notes for you
- Assistive technology
- Materials provided in a different format (e.g., textbooks in electronic form)
- Priority seating in class
- Approval to wear a visor/cap or tinted prescription glasses in class
- Foreign language requirement waivers

### When should I let my school know about my history of brain injury?

You aren't required to tell the DSS office about your history of TBI, but you will not be able to get approval for accommodations otherwise. If you choose to share this information with a DSS counselor, it is recommended you do so as soon as you are accepted to the school.





U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Carlos Vega.

### **What should I bring with me to the DSS office?**

Contact your school's DSS office to find out what documents you should bring when meeting with a counselor.

- Most DSS offices will need medical documentation about your TBI from your health care provider. Ask which forms and information they require.
- If you don't have the required documentation, ask if there are any temporary alternatives they would accept until you are able to get the necessary documents.
- DSS staff members understand veterans may experience delays obtaining paperwork. For more information, see the Department of Education's [Auxiliary Aids and Services for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities](#).

### **How will my professor know that I need accommodations?**

The DSS counselor will send a letter to your professors with a list of approved accommodations. This letter will not have any information about your diagnosis. In addition to the letter, it's a good idea to set up meetings with your professors to further discuss the specifics and logistics of your accommodations. While you are not required to tell your professors about your TBI, it can be beneficial to have open communication with them. Try rehearsing a brief script about your TBI that includes how it impacts certain abilities and what compensation strategies you like to use. For example, you can say: "Since my TBI, I have had trouble concentrating. To help, the DSS counselors recommend that I record lectures so that I can go back and listen to parts I may have missed."

### **My professor is not giving me my accommodations. What should I do?**

Contact the DSS office as soon as you can. Every school is different, but all have the same goal of helping you succeed. Sometimes situations come up because of a communication issue between the DSS office and your professor. The DSS counselor can help resolve the problem by reviewing the accommodation plan details with your professor.

### **Will my college transcripts state I have used DSS?**

No. This information is confidential and will not be released unless you choose to disclose it.

### **I don't think my accommodation plan is helping me anymore. What should I do?**

Speak to your healthcare team and the DSS office about updating your accommodation plan. Sometimes a trial and error process is necessary to arrive at the best plan for you. While this may take some time, try and stick with it because getting the right accommodations can make all the difference in achieving your academic goals.

### **I think that the difficulties from my TBI are temporary. Should I still go to the DSS office?**

Yes. The DSS office can help students with all degrees of difficulty. Accommodations are meant to change over time and can easily be stopped if you don't think you need them anymore.

## ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

### What is assistive technology?

It is any device, software, equipment, or tool that helps a person maintain or increase their functional capabilities. In short, assistive technology helps you do what you want to do more efficiently or independently. Many people use it daily through devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and smartwatches. Assistive technology can be particularly beneficial for people who have physical or cognitive difficulties, including difficulty with concentration, memory, or organization.

Examples of other assistive technologies include:

- Screen magnification
- Grammar and spelling checkers
- Word prediction
- Custom keyboards
- Writing prompts
- Note-taking tools
- Screen readers
- Text-to-speech programs
- Smart pens that can sync recorded lectures to notes
- Adapted pencil grips
- Digital highlighters
- Speech-generating devices
- Recording devices
- Electronic magnifiers
- Bluetooth trackers

### How do I choose the right assistive technology?

Work with your treatment team to find the best fit. You can also visit the [VA's Assistive Technology](#) website or the [Computer/Electronics Accommodations Program](#) for helpful information.

Tell your team what is working and what isn't to ensure you get what you need. It may require some trial and error and over time, you may find that you need a different type of assistive device.

### Is assistive technology expensive?

It depends on what you need. If a device is too expensive, your care team may be able to find cheaper options. Many free or inexpensive apps can be used on everyday devices, such as smartphones and tablets. If you need additional assistive technology, please talk to your VA representative or a member of your health care team.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Contact your DSS office as soon as you are accepted into school. They are there to help you achieve your academic goals.
- The DSS office will tailor accommodations to your needs and will not disclose your TBI diagnosis.
- Make an appointment with your professors soon after school starts to discuss details of your accommodations. Maintain open communication with them in case you need further assistance.
- If your professor is not giving you the accommodations outlined in your plan or your accommodations are not helping you, contact your DSS office immediately.
- Using assistive technology can greatly enhance your college experience.





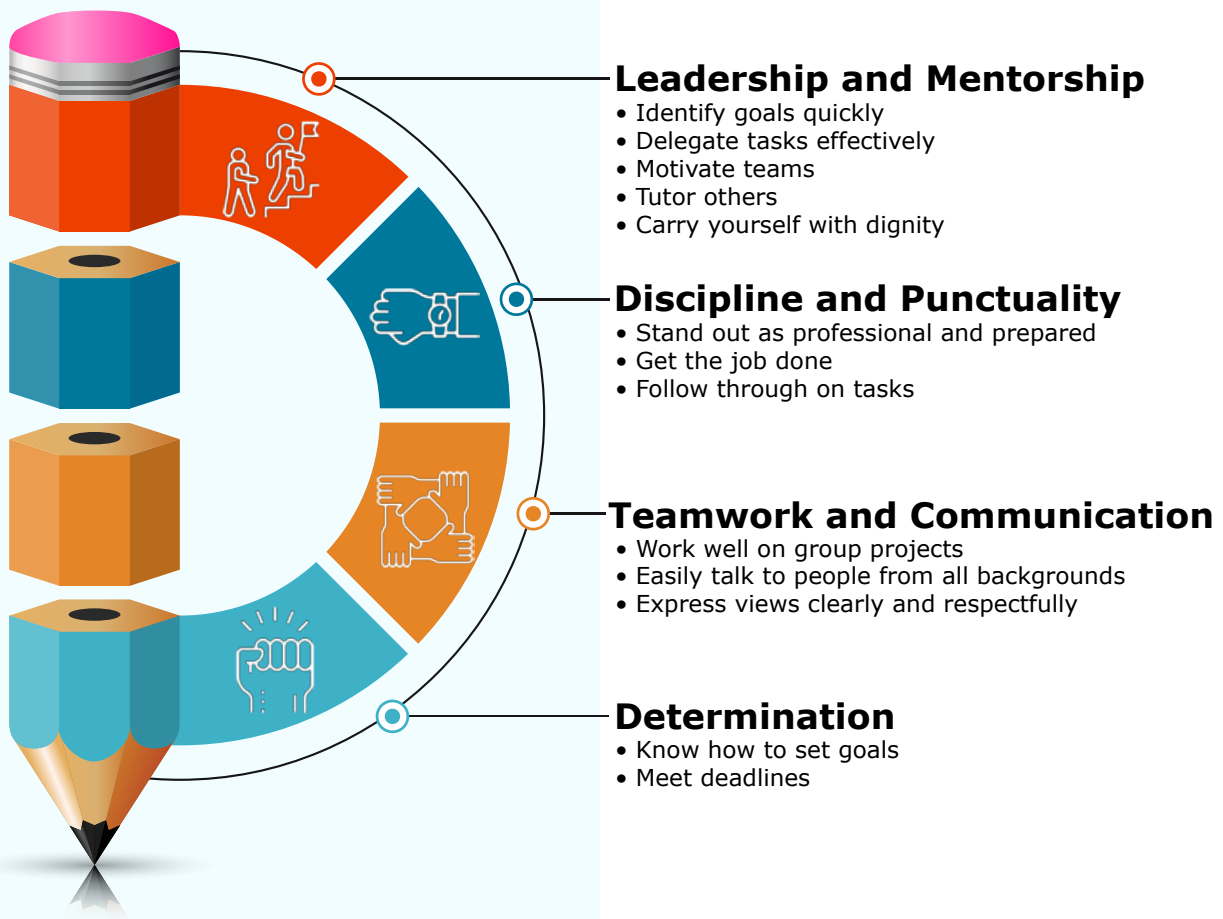


U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Mary Junell

# STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Strength and skills acquired through your military experience can help you face new challenges, including those that may come with going back to school. For instance, your intense physical and mental training has helped develop your work ethic and resilience.

## RECOGNIZE THE STRENGTHS GAINED THROUGH YOUR MILITARY SERVICE



## STAY ORGANIZED

### How do I stay organized?

- Use a daily to-do list and prioritize tasks each day.
- Organize material by class using a binder, notebook, or computer folder for each course.
- Break up intimidating tasks or assignments.
- Use a planner or smartphone calendar to keep track of assignments and due dates.
- Look for smartphone applications that can help you stay organized.
- Color-code tasks or assignments when entering them in your notebook or phone (e.g., tasks in red should be done first).

### How do I manage my course load and time effectively?

- Try to ease your way into school by taking a smaller course load. Remember to keep your academic adviser informed because they monitor your course load to ensure you stay on track.
- For your first semester, try to avoid classes with long lectures.
- Stay connected with the DSS office and use the accommodations they give you. Talk to the instructor and the teaching assistant to ensure that your accommodations are in place.
- Estimate the amount of time it will take for you to finish assignments and then check yourself by keeping track of the actual amount of time it takes. The more you do this, the better you will become at time management and setting aside enough time to complete tasks.
- Try to schedule your classes for the times of the day you feel most alert.
- Turn off any distractions (e.g., cell phone, TV, etc.)
- Be sure to set deadlines for yourself whenever possible.

## FOLLOW A SCHEDULE

### What are some tips for keeping a schedule?

- Keep a specific schedule that includes class times, study times, times to complete assignments, and times to relax.
- Find a planner that works best for you. You can use an electronic or paper planner, as long as you use it consistently. Choose only one tool so that you don't mistakenly overbook yourself or miss appointments.
- Once you find a scheduling system that you prefer, stick to it and set aside some time to plan your week.
- Add your weekly obligations first, such as class time, work hours, medical appointments, and family time. Then add the things that don't need to be done at specific times.
- Plan on three hours of study time for every hour of class time. A typical course meets for three hours a week, so that would require nine hours of homework/study time.
- Remember to add time for yourself. Exercise, meals, and seven to eight hours of sleep are essential; adjust your schedule until you get to the right work/life balance.

## MANAGE YOUR EMOTIONS

### What should I do if I am feeling distracted?

Many situations can cause distractions such as being in large crowds, getting to or from class, joining campus celebrations or athletic events, or eating in the cafeteria. If you find yourself frequently distracted, try some of the following coping tips:

- Avoid crowds by taking classes online or in the evening.
- Go to class early and stay a few minutes later.
- Find a seat in the classroom closest to the instructor or near the end of an aisle.
- Meet with the DSS office to see if a seating accommodation plan is possible.

### What should I do if I am feeling overwhelmed?

You may feel overwhelmed by the lack of structure you were once used to in the military. You may enjoy being able to make all your own decisions now, but it can also feel like a burden. The best way to lessen the chances of feeling overwhelmed is by creating structure in your schedule.

- Consider starting with one or two classes for your first semester.
- Make a daily schedule to keep track of schoolwork and personal time.
- Clean and organize your physical workspace.
- If you start to struggle in a class, talk to your professors as soon as possible so they can help you connect with a tutor. You can also reach out to your academic advisor or a campus behavioral health counselor.



U.S. Army photo  
by Erin Bolling

## What should I do if I am feeling out of place?

The transition from military life to civilian life involves a change in culture, which may be challenging. Your peers may not have the same background as you and you may not see things the same way. Know that it takes time to learn about and get used to the school culture and that other service members and veterans may share some of your feelings. Here are some tips you can use if you are feeling out of place:

- Connect with your college peers because they can provide you with academic and emotional support.
- Look for a community on campus that makes you feel comfortable.
- Seek advice on dealing with your challenges. Your school has many resources that can help you. You can also contact the [Psychological Health Resource Center](#) or call 866-966-1020; it is open 24/7.
- Some schools have programs and organizations such as a Vet Center to help service members and veterans connect with each other. Check with your campus or student life office for more information.

## What if I am having difficulty interacting with peers?

Conversations with classmates who did not serve in the military can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Out of curiosity, they may ask you difficult questions about your military experience that you may not want to answer. Here are some tips to use when this occurs:

- You can share as little or as much as you want with your peers.
- Sometimes it's best to say, "I appreciate you getting to know me but that's not a topic I am comfortable discussing with you. Let's talk about this instead."
- Talk with other student veterans or a family member. Find out how they have handled similar situations.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Adapt skills acquired during your service to the campus environment.
- Stay organized and manage your time wisely by creating a schedule.
- If you need help, reach out to your professor or school counselor.



# PRIORITIZING YOUR HEALTH WHILE IN SCHOOL

## **KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM**

There are many health care team members invested in your health and recovery. They may include members with different skills and training, but they all want to help you succeed. It is important that you regularly follow up with them while you are in school to ensure your TBI symptoms are properly managed.

## MANAGE YOUR SYMPTOMS

Readjustment to student life and classwork demands can trigger or worsen TBI symptoms; before you make the transition, work with your health care provider on a plan in case symptoms intensify. You can also refer to the symptom strategies outlined in the next few pages or visit [health.mil/TBIFactSheets](https://www.health.mil/TBIFactSheets) for symptom-specific fact sheets.

### Attention

#### What you may experience:

- Easily distracted
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty focusing on more than one thing at a time
- Inability to shift attention from one task or person to the next
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Taking a long time to make a decision

#### Strategies you can try:

- Focus on one task at a time.
- Break tasks or assignments into smaller components.
- Reduce clutter at home and in the work environment.
- Avoid situations that are overstimulating (e.g., noisy, crowded).
- Remove distractions and unnecessary noise (e.g., turn off all screens).
- Use timers and checklists to keep you on track during tasks.
- Schedule rest breaks, and take one when you notice your attention drifting.
- Avoid making decisions when you're tired, hungry, or stressed.



### Comprehension

#### What you may experience:

- Easily confused
- Taking longer to answer questions or understand things that were once easily understood
- Taking a long time to react and respond to others
- Missing information because people were talking too fast

#### Strategies you can try:

- Ask others to slow down and repeat information.
- Allow extra time to respond to questions and to learn and understand new information.
- Recap information at the end of a conversation to make sure you didn't miss anything.





## Dizziness

### What you may experience:

- Feeling like surroundings are spinning or moving (vertigo)
- Loss of balance or unsteadiness
- Nausea, wooziness, or lightheadedness

### Strategies you can try:

- Sit for a few minutes before walking to give your brain time to adjust.
- Sit or lie down as soon as you feel dizzy.
- Avoid driving if you are frequently dizzy or lightheaded.
- Use good lighting when getting out of bed at night.
- Avoid sudden movements or bending over.
- Visually fixate on an object in front of you before standing.



## Headaches

### What you may experience:

- Throbbing, constant, sharp, or dull pain in your head or face

### Strategies you can try:

- Avoid bright sunlight, especially when leaving a dark building.
- Avoid common triggers such as skipping meals, lack of sleep, cold foods, alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, or chocolate.
- Keep track of headaches in a journal by noting the time of day, activity, and intensity. Take all medications as prescribed.

## Hearing

### What you may experience:

- Muffled hearing
- Ringing in the ears (tinnitus)

### Strategies you can try:

- Let others know that you have hearing difficulties before starting a conversation.
- Ask others to state your name and get your attention before they start talking.
- Face speakers so you can see their lips and expressions when they talk.
- Repeat information back to ensure you heard it correctly.
- Tinnitus can become more irritating in a quiet environment. Try playing some music, turning on the radio, or using a white-noise machine.
- Keep a log to identify any tinnitus triggers.



## Memory

### What you may experience:

- Difficulty remembering recent information about people, conversations, places, events, and appointments
- Difficulty finding keys, wallet, phone, or other frequently used items
- Repeating questions or stories over again
- Inability to recall recent or new information

### Strategies you can try:

- Keep a planner or calendar with you to write down important events, tasks, or conversations.
- Plan ahead by placing important items in a consistent place or a place where you can easily see them.
- Consider recording lectures, taking notes, or using a highlighter.
- Distribute your studying throughout the day and avoid cramming.
- Stay mentally active by reading, playing card games, and completing crossword puzzles.
- Recap information at the end of a conversation to make sure you didn't miss anything.

## Mood

### What you may experience:

- Not feeling like your usual self
- Easily irritated
- Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or sad
- Blaming your problems on other people or things

### Strategies you can try:

- Monitor your mood to identify when you are having negative thoughts and use coping strategies such as breathing exercises.
- If you find yourself in an upsetting situation, walk away and take a few minutes to calm down.
- Set aside dedicated time to do things you enjoy.
- Try to teach yourself to stop and think before you do or say something that may be inappropriate.
- Before starting a task, think about possible challenges and plan how you will handle them.
- Seek out a mentor who can provide regular feedback.

## Organization

### What you may experience:

- Poor time management
- Difficulty gathering and understanding which tools are needed to complete a task
- Problems breaking down complex tasks into smaller steps
- Problems making plans and completing them

### Strategies you can try:

- Have a designated place for everything.
- Check off tasks when completed.
- Use a tote bag or backpack to organize needed items for the day ahead.
- Rank activities by priority.







## Pain

### What you may experience:

- Swelling and warmth
- Limited range of motion
- Muscle tightness and spasms
- Cramping, stabbing, aching, or throbbing sensations

### Strategies you can try:

- Don't let pain take over your life. Adapt your favorite activities so you can keep doing them.
- Practice pain-reduction techniques such as relaxation exercises and mindfulness.
- Keep track of your pain triggers in a journal.
- Change positions every 10–15 minutes.
- Try to maintain neutral neck positions to decrease muscle tension on your muscles. For instance, bring reading material closer to eye level instead of bending your neck to read.
- Adjust the distance to your computer monitor so you're not leaning forward.
- Sit facing forward, not sideways, in meetings, classes or while watching TV, so you are not turning your head.

## Psychological Trauma

### What you may experience:

- Experiencing feelings of threat or fear like those felt during the traumatic event
- Avoiding situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event
- Being very jumpy and easily startled
- Negative thoughts about self and others
- Having nightmares or difficulty sleeping

### Strategies you can try:

- Use breathing or mindfulness exercises when you start feeling upset or triggered.
- Recognize your triggers and try to avoid them, changing your routine if necessary.
- Share your feelings or experiences with others.
- Let loved ones know how they can help when you are feeling frightened, angry, or upset.



## Reading

### What you may experience:

- Problems understanding what you have read
- Trouble stating the main idea or point of a passage

### Strategies you can try:

- Review any reading material using the 5W strategy: Find the Who, What, Where, When, and Why.
- Write out important information or say it aloud; this uses other senses to increase comprehension.
- Use a line guide or highlighter to help maintain focus on the line you are reading.

## Sleep

### What you may experience:

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep (insomnia)
- Snoring, gasping, or choking for air during sleep
- Frequent naps
- Sleeping too much or too little

### Strategies you can try:

- Limit daytime naps to 20 minutes.
- Avoid caffeine after noon.
- Exercise during the day and avoid exercise too close to bedtime.
- Try to eat the last meal of the day four hours before bedtime.
- Maintain consistent bedtimes and wake-up times, even on weekends.
- Avoid using the bed for activities other than sleep and sexual activity.
- Make the bedroom a sleep-friendly place: Turn the clock away from the bed, use room-darkening shades, and make sure the room's temperature is comfortable.
- If you cannot fall or stay asleep within 20–30 minutes, get out of bed and watch TV or read until you feel tired.
- Try relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness.



## Vision

### What you may experience:

- Blurry or double vision
- Sensitivity to light
- Visual-spatial problems (e.g., finding things on a messy desk)
- Difficulty reading or frequently losing your place when reading
- Eye discomfort or pain

### Strategies you can try:

- Adjust your computer settings to make items on the screen bigger, brighter, or otherwise easier to see. Try searching Display, Accessibility, or Ease of Access to find the menus.
- For dry eyes, use preservative-free over-the-counter eye drops.
- Use natural light when possible to minimize glare.
- Reduce visual strain.
  - Keep all items needed to complete a task in one place.
  - Store frequently used items in a consistent location.
  - Organize your eye movements by following visual patterns. For example, when searching for an item in a room, look up and down and then left to right.
  - Take frequent breaks. Follow the 20-20-20 rule: Every 20 minutes, shift your gaze to look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds.



## Writing

### What you may experience:

- Problems expressing thoughts in writing
- Problems beginning tasks that involve writing

### Strategies you can try:

- Record or speak the words aloud before writing them.
- Proofread what you wrote to make sure it makes sense.



## HELPFUL MOBILE APPS

The [Defense Health Agency](#) and [VA](#) provide several resources designed to reduce stress and teach new calming skills.



### **Breathe2Relax**

Provides instruction on diaphragmatic (or “belly”) breathing, which helps reduce anxiety and lower stress.



### **Tactical Breather**

Provides guided breathing instruction to gain control over heart rate, emotions, and concentration during stressful situations.



### **Mindfulness Coach**

Provides nine guided mindfulness exercises and strategies for overcoming challenges to practicing mindfulness.



### **AIMS for Anger Management**

Provides users with education about anger, opportunities for finding support, the ability to create an anger management plan, anger tracking, and tools to help manage angry reactions.



### **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i) Coach**

Includes a sleep diary to help you pinpoint behaviors contributing to your sleep problems. It also provides interactive exercises to adopt positive sleep habits and guide you through progressive muscle relaxation.



### **Virtual Hope Box**

Contains simple tools to help users with coping, relaxation, distractions, and positive thinking using personalized audio, video, pictures, games, mindfulness exercises, activity planning, inspirational quotes, and coping statements.



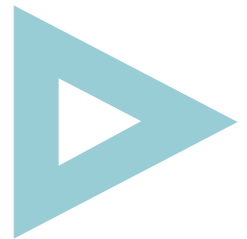
### **Path to Better Sleep**

A course that delivers the core components of CBT-i. The course takes advantage of natural sleep rhythms to improve sleep. It includes a sleep diary, personalized sleep scheduling, and relaxation exercises to better prepare for sleep.





# STUDENT RESOURCES



Adjusting to academic life, especially after a TBI, can be stressful. The following resources (categorized by topic) can help you successfully navigate from military to student life:

## DO YOUR RESEARCH/WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS

[VetSuccess on Campus \(VSOC\)](#): On-campus program that assigns each veteran to a vocational rehabilitation counselor. VSOC provides many services such as vocational testing, career and academic counseling, and referrals for more intensive health services (e.g., mental health treatment, VA medical treatment, community outpatient clinic treatment).

[Veterans Upward Bound \(VUB\)](#): Designed to motivate and assist veterans in developing academic and other necessary skills for acceptance and success in postsecondary education. The program provides assessment and enhancement of basic skills through counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and academic instruction in the core subject areas.

[Veteran Readiness and Employment Program \(Chapter 31\)](#): Evaluates veterans who have service-connected disabilities to determine their abilities, skills, and interests in employment. Also assesses for talents to succeed in college, vocational, technical, or business school training.

## GET CREDIT FOR MILITARY EXPERIENCE

[Joint Services Transcript](#): Provides transcripts for the Army, Coast Guard, Navy, and Marine Corps.

[The Community College of the Air Force \(CCAF\)](#): Provides transcripts for airmen.

[American Council on Education \(ACE\)](#): Major coordinating body for U.S. colleges and universities that provides a searchable database to check if military training experiences can qualify for credit. You will need the ACE ID number on your transcript to use it.

[Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support \(DANTES\)](#): Provides service members with no-cost education and career-planning programs.

[Navy College Program](#): Provides opportunities for sailors to earn college degrees by offering academic credit for Navy training, work experience, and off-duty education.

## GET BENEFITS

[DD-214 Form](#): This *Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty* form, issued when you complete active duty, is a military service record that outlines your experiences and accomplishments in the military. You will need a copy of this to access GI Bill benefits.

## APPLY FOR FINANCIAL AID AND SCHOLARSHIPS

[Federal Student Aid](#): U.S. Department of Education information clearinghouse on all types of questions regarding financial aid, including eligibility requirements and information on how to apply.

[Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#): U.S. Department of Education application for federally funded grants, loans, and work-study programs to help you cover the costs of going to school. It also offers information about application filing options and deadlines.

[GI Bill](#): Provides information about the GI Bill benefits and eligibility requirements for both the Post-9/11 GI Bill and Montgomery GI Bill.

[ArmyIgnitED](#): A way for eligible active duty, Army National Guard, and Army Reserve soldiers to request tuition assistance online and manage their education records, including college classes.

[Coast Guard Institute](#): Provides information for Coast Guardsmen on ways to pay for college.

[Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship](#): Provides application details for the Edith Nourse Rogers Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) Scholarship, a scholarship that allows some eligible veterans and dependents in high-demand fields to extend their Post-9/11 GI Bill or Fry Scholarship benefits.

[Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses \(VET TEC\)](#): A program that can match you with a leading training provider to help you develop skills to start or advance your career in a high-tech industry.

[Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program \(VRRAP\)](#): Offers education and training for high-demand jobs to veterans who are unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and are not eligible for GI Bill or Veteran Readiness and Employment benefits.

[The National Call to Service program](#): Allows those who provided national service to choose an education benefit as an alternative to the Montgomery GI Bill.

## SEEK SUPPORT

[Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\) Vet Center Programs](#): System of community-based counseling centers staffed by small multidisciplinary teams of providers, many of whom are combat veterans themselves, who provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to returning troops and veterans. Military families also receive no-cost marriage and family therapy and supportive services for military-related issues. Services provided in Vet centers are strictly confidential and do not become part of the medical record.

[Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program \(CAP\)](#): Provides assistive technology and devices as reasonable accommodations to support individuals with disabilities and wounded, ill, and injured service members throughout the Department of Defense (DOD) in accessing information and communication technology.

[Military/Veterans Crisis Line](#): A service that connects veterans and active duty service members who are facing a crisis, as well as their families and friends, with qualified VA responders through a confidential hotline by calling or texting 988 or chatting at [988lifeline.org](#). Calls can be referred to local suicide prevention coordinators and other VA providers specializing in TBI.

[CEMM Traumatic Brain Injury \(TBI\)](#): Developed by the Center of Excellence for Medical Multimedia (CEMM) to provide information about TBI for patients, family members, and caregivers. Topics include TBI diagnosis, symptoms, treatment, recovery, potential long-term effects, and what loved ones can do to help.

[Military OneSource](#): DOD site that provides resources to help military families face everyday challenges. Support services offer 24/7 personal non-medical counseling services online, in person, or by telephone (800-342-9647).

[National Resource Directory](#): Provides access to thousands of services and resources at the national, state, and local levels to support recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration of service members and veterans.

[Warrior Care](#): A portal of resources and programs to support military members of all branches and their families. Its aim is to ensure wounded, ill, injured, and transitioning service members receive high-quality care and seamless transition support through proactive leadership, responsive policy, effective oversight, and interagency collaboration.

## ACCESS HEALTH CARE SERVICES

[Veterans Integrated Service Network](#): A national network of medical centers and outpatient clinics that offer primary and specialized care, medical equipment, prosthetics, prescriptions, and other benefits to eligible veterans.

[Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership \(VITAL\)](#): A joint effort between the VA and participating colleges and universities that aim to ease the transition from being a service member to a student. Contact your local VA to see if a VITAL representative is working with your school.

[TRICARE](#): Provides health care benefits and resources for eligible military personnel, veterans, and their dependents through networks of civilian health care professionals, institutions, pharmacies, and suppliers.

[Psychological Health Center of Excellence \(PHCoE\)](#): An outreach center staffed with trained, professional health resource consultants with expertise in psychological health. They can answer specific questions or connect you to someone who can, whether that person works in the DOD, a federal agency, or a civilian/community organization.

[inTransition Program](#): Assigns a personal coach for support as you move between health care systems or providers.

[Veterans Affairs Social Work](#): VA social workers who can help you with many issues, including financial planning, family counseling, substance abuse, and establishing connections with community resources.



U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Christopher Jones

PRODUCED BY THE DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY

Released February 2014 | Revised January 2023 by the Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence.  
This product is reviewed annually and is current until superseded. 800-870-9244 • Health.mil/TBICoE  
4810.2.1.5