
THE EARNED ACT: A DEGREE FOR SERVICE

SOME EARNED IT IN A CLASSROOM. THEY EARNED IT IN UNIFORM.

The **EARNED Act** recognizes the training and skills of every service member who completes an honorable four-year enlistment with a **Bachelor of Arts in Defense of Freedom**. EARNED stands for Education Achieved for Real-world National service, Excellence and Duty.

THE ASK

Every service member who completes a four-year enlistment with an honorable discharge should receive a guaranteed, accredited bachelor's degree at discharge, a Bachelor of Arts in Defense of Freedom, with a concentration in their military specialty. The GI Bill stays fully intact on top of it, so veterans can go on to a master's degree, a trade license, or specialized training and start civilian life ahead, not behind. Congress can make the EARNED Act law through the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

WHY IT MATTERS

Military training is intensive and accelerated, and it is done under real stakes for the country. Service members lead people, manage equipment and logistics, and carry responsibility most college students never face. Yet when they leave, many civilian employers screen them out for lacking a bachelor's degree.

- **The skills are real.** Military occupational training is formally evaluated for college credit through the Joint Services Transcript, approved by the American Council on Education.
- **The credential gap is the barrier.** Credit recommendations only help a veteran who goes back to school, and each school decides how much it accepts.
- **Not every veteran can go back.** Many have already used their GI Bill, are mid-career, or are supporting families. A degree earned through service removes the barrier without asking them to start over.

IT ALREADY WORKS: THE AIR FORCE MODEL

The Air Force has granted accredited degrees for military training since 1972. Its Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) awards enlisted airmen an Associate in Applied Science degree in their Air

Force specialty, accredited through Air University. The Marine Corps, Army and Navy have no equivalent degree-granting college for enlisted members, and CCAF stops at the associate level. The EARNED Act extends the model to every branch and to the bachelor's level.

EFFORT	WHAT IT DOES	STATUS
West Virginia SB 846 (2024)	Confer a bachelor's or associate degree for military service	Introduced; referred to committee
Miami-Dade County (2026)	Veterans may substitute documented active-duty experience for degree requirements in county jobs	In use, per 2026 county report
California SB 943 (2024)	Waive the bachelor's for veterans at E-6+ for 2+ years, for state jobs	Failed
Chance to Compete Act (2024)	Moves federal hiring from degree screens to skills assessments	Public Law 118-188

HOW IT WOULD WORK

1. **Four years earns the bachelor's, guaranteed.** An honorable discharge after a four-year enlistment confers the degree automatically. No extra application, no coursework after discharge.
2. **A Bachelor of Arts in Defense of Freedom, with a specialty concentration.** The core degree recognizes discipline, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving under pressure and service to the nation. The concentration names the specialty (logistics, aviation maintenance, communications, medical), the way CCAF maps degrees to Air Force jobs.
3. **The GI Bill comes on top, not instead.** The degree recognizes the training and skills already achieved; the GI Bill is the springboard for what comes next.
4. **Accredited through existing military schools.** Build on accredited institutions the military already runs (Air University, Marine Corps University) so the degree carries the same weight as a civilian one.
5. **Retroactive for veterans.** Veterans who already completed honorable service could claim the degree using their service records and Joint Services Transcript.

General education is already taught in uniform

COLLEGE GEN-ED REQUIREMENT	WHERE SERVICE MEMBERS ALREADY LEARN IT
History	Recruit training covers service history and traditions; leadership schools assign military history through professional reading lists
Writing and communication	Orders, reports, counseling records and award write-ups to formal military standards
Math	Land navigation, logistics planning, supply and maintenance accounting
Ethics and philosophy	Core values and leadership ethics, taught at every rank
Health and physical education	Daily physical training, fitness testing, first aid and casualty care
Management and leadership	Leading fire teams and squads, training junior members, accountability for people and equipment

Where a gap remains, the bill funds the missing courses during the enlistment through the existing tuition assistance program, so the degree is complete on discharge day.

THE MILITARY ALREADY GRANTS DEGREES, JUST NOT TO MOST ENLISTED

WHO	WHAT THE MILITARY ALREADY AWARDS
Service academy cadets and midshipmen	Accredited bachelor's degrees
Mid-career officers	Master's degrees from the war colleges and Marine Corps University
Technical officers	Master's and PhDs from the Naval Postgraduate School and AFIT
Enlisted airmen	Associate degrees from CCAF, since 1972
Enlisted Marines, soldiers, sailors	No degree-granting college of their own

Four years for four years. A service academy graduate serves the country and leaves with a bachelor's degree. An enlisted Marine who serves four years leaves with none. The time commitment is the same; the recognition is not.

WHY IT'S EASY TO SAY YES

- **Bipartisan.** Skills-based hiring has been backed by a Democratic president (Chance to Compete Act), a Republican president (Executive Order 14170) and a bipartisan 2026 House bill.
- **Proven model.** CCAF shows how it works in practice.
- **Helps recruiting.** A degree earned through service is a concrete benefit recruiters can offer. (This is an argument, not a measured result.)

- **Fair to those who already served.** Making it retroactive lets veterans with decades of civilian experience compete for jobs that screen them out today.
- **No mandate on private employers.** It recognizes the credential veterans already earned, and employers keep deciding.

WHY NOW

Leaders from both parties and major employers have opened jobs to skilled workers, one step at a time. The EARNED Act carries that progress to every employer, so a veteran's service counts at a city, a hospital or a manufacturer too.

WHEN	ACTION	WHAT IT DID
2026	Federal Jobs for STARS Act (H.R. 9596), bipartisan	Would strip unnecessary degree requirements and names military service as a skills pathway. Pending.
April 2026	OPM directive	Removed degree mandates across a wide range of federal positions
May 2025	Merit Hiring Plan	Put skills-based federal hiring into practice
January 2025	Executive Order 14170	Directed agencies to cut degree requirements unless legally necessary
2024	Chance to Compete Act (Public Law 118-188)	Required federal agencies to judge applicants on skills, not degrees
Feb 2024	Harvard Business School and Burning Glass Institute study	Found that announcements to drop degree requirements changed fewer than 1 in 700 hires
2022	Private employers; Tear the Paper Ceiling coalition	IBM, Bank of America and others announced fewer degree requirements; Opportunity@Work and the Ad Council launched a national campaign

PATH TO LAW

The fastest route to the President's desk is an amendment to the annual NDAA, the bill Congress passes every year to set military personnel policy. Cities and states don't have to wait: any city can let veterans use documented military experience in place of a degree for city jobs, as Miami-Dade County already does. The campaign started with that ask in Surprise, Arizona.

- **Your U.S. senators and representative:** sponsor or cosponsor an NDAA amendment.
- **Veterans organizations:** adopt a resolution and add it to their legislative agendas.
- **State legislators and city councils:** count military service in place of a degree for public jobs now.

SOURCES

- CCAF: A lighthouse for enlisted (Air Force, 2014): <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/485346/>

- CCAF General Catalog 2022–2024 (Air University)
- Joint Services Transcript fact sheet: <https://ong.ohio.gov/members/oharng/education/gi-bill/joint-services-transcript.pdf>
- Chance to Compete Act, Public Law 118-188: <https://www.congress.gov/118/plaws/publ188/PLAW-118publ188.htm>
- Federal Jobs for STARs Act of 2026, H.R. 9596
- West Virginia SB 846 (2024); California SB 943 (2024)
- Miami-Dade County veteran degree substitution report (2026):
<https://www.miamidade.gov/govaction/legistarfiles/Matters/Y2026/261045.pdf>
- Burning Glass Institute and Harvard Business School, Skills-Based Hiring (Feb 2024), via Higher Ed Dive
- Opportunity@Work, Tear the Paper Ceiling: <https://www.opportunityatwork.org/tear-the-paper-ceiling>
- CNBC, companies eliminating degree requirements (Apr 2022)

A citizen proposal started in Surprise, Arizona. Not affiliated with the Department of Defense or any branch of service. [earnedact.org](https://www.earnedact.org)