

The background is a solid yellow color with several white, five-pointed stars of varying sizes scattered across it. The stars are positioned at various angles and locations, creating a pattern reminiscent of the American flag.

MEMBERS OF THE MILITARY:

10 TIPS FOR APPLYING TO
AN MBA PROGRAM



AFAA



Applying to business school can be stressful and overwhelming—this can be particularly true for members of the military who may be less familiar than some of their peers with the process.

At Harvard Business School, the **Armed Forces Alumni Association (AFAA)** is committed to helping veterans both learn more about the MBA Program and put together the strongest possible application. As part of these efforts, members of the Association have compiled their top ten application tips for members of the military.

While this advice reflects the veterans' experience applying to HBS, it is not official guidance from the admissions office. Many of these AFAA recommendations are applicable no matter which top MBA program you are considering.

01.

CONSIDER THE VALUE OF AN MBA

It can be hard to transition from the military, but pursuing an MBA helps to put you back on equal footing with your civilian peers. In business school, you'll be in a structured environment where you will master basic business skills, receive professional preparation for your job search, and interview with recruiters on campus who will be eager to meet you. Beyond that, you have this incredible, life enriching experience where you'll get to know people from all over the world and build lasting friendships.



02.

CREATE A FLEXIBLE APPLICATION TIMEFRAME FOR YOURSELF

Try to build a flexible timeline that can withstand unexpected deployments or field time. If you are more than one year out, it could be a good idea to budget time for two GMAT/GRE attempts (in case you are not satisfied with your first outcome) and develop your resume before applications open in June. This allows you to focus exclusively on the essays and letters of recommendation once the application opens. Focusing on one aspect at a time can create better results than trying to study for a standardized test and write an essay simultaneously.



03.

DO YOUR RESEARCH AND APPLY TO A FEW DIFFERENT PROGRAMS

Spend some time researching different business schools and thinking about which programs might be the best fit for you. Do you want to be in a city or a small town? Do you want to pursue a part time or full time program? Do you prefer to learn through lectures or the case method? What military resources are available at the school? It's important to do your homework and find out what program will be the best fit for you.

One approach some members of the AFAA chose was to apply to their top three schools in Round 1. They were then prepared to apply to their next top three schools in the Round 2 timeframe. While there are some economies of scale in applying to multiple schools, it's difficult to interview in person with more than three schools in a single round.



04.

KEEP IN MIND THERE ARE A FEW CHALLENGES THAT MILITARY APPLICANTS FACE

It's worth noting that three of the four are shared with non-military candidates as well.

- a. Informing your chain-of-command you are planning to leave the military and to apply to business school is complex. You must balance your personal desires with the needs of the unit and the desire to continue serving in meaningful positions until it's time to hang up the uniform. While it may be tempting to delay this announcement, a letter of recommendation is much stronger when the recommender knows the candidate's career aspirations.
- b. Studying for the GMAT/GRE and working on an essay after a long day at work takes discipline and sacrifice. Just remember your future non-veteran classmates are facing the same challenge.
- c. Scheduling multiple interviews in multiple cities over one month can be incredibly challenging and costly. Most schools conduct interviews during the week, so candidates will need to take time off. We encourage you to take advantage of the Skype interview option that HBS (and often other schools) offer if it is necessary with your schedule.
- d. Military Officers are often unfamiliar with writing letters of recommendation to elite business schools. You will need to manage the process closely.



05.

THINK ABOUT WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE

Don't underestimate the number of outstanding military candidates out there, but also don't be intimidated. HBS considers each applicant individually, so the best strategy is to try to convey who you are as authentically as possible. Think about what distinguishes you and emphasize that in your application. What unique challenges did you face in your career? What is different about your unit or your colleagues because you were there? Make your application personal and it will stand out.



06.

BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE APPLICATION

Much of your application is set before you decided to start the process. You can't change your job history, your reputation, or your undergraduate GPA. Focus on what you can control, which is how hard you study for the GMAT/GRE and how much thought you put into your resume and essay. Another big factor is how well you inspire those around you to champion your goal. Is your recommender fired up to write the best recommendation of his/her life? Is your partner ready to embark on this journey with you? Remember you can't do this alone.

RESUME: Imagine the person reading your resume is unfamiliar with the military and let that guide your thinking. Eliminate all military jargon and common military accomplishments like managing equipment without loss. Focus on things that separated you from your peers. Did your senior supervisor rank you as the #1 of 12 officers on an annual review? Were you selected over five other candidates for that Executive Officer job? The personal section is incredibly important as well as it serves as a great conversation starter.

ESSAY: An effective essay is the result of months of reflection and it tells your story in an authentic way. It's an opportunity to talk about how your past ties to your future. Focus on times in your life that shaped who you are today and who you want to become. It's perfectly acceptable to show weakness in your essay.

RECOMMENDERS: Manage the recommendations like a project - complete with in-progress reviews and milestone dates. Choose recommenders who really know you well, warts and all. Avoid high-ranking people who don't know you well. Emphasize to your recommenders the importance of telling a story in the recommendation. Make sure he/she addresses a legitimate weakness in that portion of the letter. Finally, if your recommender is unfamiliar with business school recommendations, try to provide them with some examples or connect them with someone who has written them in the past.



07.

TRY NOT TO WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT THE INTERVIEW

The interview at HBS is a surprisingly pleasant experience. Admissions sets up a great day of programming on campus where you attend a class, take a tour, and spend time with current students. Try to schedule your interview later in the day as you'll shake your nerves meeting other candidates and talking about your background. The interview itself feels like a conversation and your interviewer will seem to have every detail of your application memorized.

Remember that by receiving an invitation to interview, Admissions is essentially saying that you are a strong candidate for business school, and now they want to better understand what you'll be like as a section mate and a member of the community. A good section mate is someone who is humble, willing to learn from others, and is ready to bring her perspective at the appropriate time. This probably describes you, so be yourself and try to relax as much as possible.



08.

REACH OUT WHEN YOU NEED APPLICATION HELP

The AFAA is committed to helping military applicants apply to business school because we had HBS vets show us the way and now we are paying it forward. When we receive an email from a military applicant, we match that candidate with a current HBS student with a similar background who mentors him or her through the application process.

It usually starts with an overview based on the candidate's knowledge and can sometimes lead to specific resume, essay, or interview advice. It is very important for candidates to remember that HBS students are extremely busy and most advice is high level and directional in nature. Besides reaching out to our club, you can also look into an organization called **Service 2 School**, which provides free assistance to military candidates applying to business school.



09.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE GENEROUS FINANCIAL AID OFFERED BY HBS & THE GI BILL

As you've probably seen, the GI Bill is very generous and HBS is a **Yellow Ribbon participant**.⁷ If you don't have 100% GI Bill, there's a possibility you'll receive some other type of HBS fellowship. The VA is incredibly efficient at paying the GI Bill. You submit two forms and the school and VA does the rest. Payments are prompt and accurate, although the BAH doesn't hit your account until the end of September or October. You'll certainly have living expenses that force you to draw down your savings and most likely take some loans, but the return on investment is phenomenal. The bottom line is don't let your financial circumstances discourage you from attending HBS. Also, as of June 2017 HBS will waive the \$250 application fee for all active duty military applicants, thanks to the generosity of an HBS alumnus and military veteran.



10.

KNOW THAT WHEN YOU ARRIVE ON CAMPUS SUPPORT WILL BE IN PLACE FOR YOU

The AFAA hopes to make your transition from the military to business school as smooth as possible. We know it can be challenging – you've been a part of a team for the past several years and it's likely you'll miss that teamwork and sense of purpose.

When you arrive at HBS you'll be invited to our monthly social gatherings, our annual retreat, and our Harvard-wide Veteran's Day programming. You'll be encouraged to participate in military resume reviews, career coaching, and a veteran's career fair.

The military community at HBS is incredibly strong, and it's an integral part of the whole MBA experience. However, the people you spend the most time with at HBS will be your section mates and new friends from outside the military. Partners and families are also a vital part of the community and will be integrated and supported by HBS through many clubs and resources. The beauty of the AFAA is that when we do meet, we provide a kind of home base where you can let your guard down and talk through your new challenges.





As you consider an MBA, and a transition from the military, we hope you'll keep these tips in mind. And as any questions come up we encourage you to reach out to the AFAA. We hope to hear from you!

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