

CCAF. Education Now

COLLEGE DEGREES OPEN DOORS FOR TODAY'S AIRMEN

STORY BY MASTER SGT. BEN GONZALES ✦ PHOTOS BY LANCE CHEUNG ✦ DESIGN BY MIKE CARABAJAL

This college has no traditional classrooms, teachers, dorms or libraries, but more than 300,000 students are registered. Sixty-seven degree programs are available, and each student can have an individual degree plan developed by any one of more than 5,700 counselors available for assistance. More and more classes are taken by students from homes or even while they are deployed supporting the war on terrorism.

This is today's Community College of the Air Force. It helps enlisted members earn job-related associate's degrees in applied science and other academic credentials that enhance mission readiness. The face of CCAF has changed as 21st century Airmen shape educational needs of the Air Force.

Overseeing the largest multi-campus community college in the

world is Lt. Col. Raymond Staats, the commandant of CCAF at Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base, Ala. The CCAF has more than 5,700 credentialed Air Force faculty members to guide and counsel students who are spread out in 37 states and nine foreign countries.

CCAF students complete 1.61 million hours of college credit each academic year. In 2008, CCAF officials handed out 17,899 associate's degrees, the largest number ever in one year.

It all begins when Airmen report for Basic Military Training.

"Airmen become Community College of the Air Force students as soon as they report for basic training," Colonel Staats said. "They begin earning credits right away with four semester hours of physical education from BMT that goes toward their CCAF degree."

Education is the number one perceived benefit that gets people to join the Air Force. "We keep the promise of education every day for Airmen, and the availability of education is there throughout their career," he said.

"I joined the Air Force to get an education while I got paid for doing a job full time," said Staff Sgt. Mark Gabenski, an education technician at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. "I've used \$17,000 in tuition assistance that I don't have to pay back, compared to having to get a student loan as a civilian to pay for school. There is no way I could afford that if I wasn't in the Air Force."

Being in the Air Force for five-and-a-half years, the Toledo, Ohio, native already has earned two CCAF degrees, one in information systems technology and the other in education and training management. He is now three classes short of a bachelor's degree in computer information systems management.

"Knowledge is power, and as an education technician, I do my best to help other Airmen develop knowledge through courses and help them earn their CCAF," he said.

"The foundation of liberty is knowledge" has served as the motto for the Community College of the Air Force since it was established in 1972.



The Community College of the Air Force has now moved to its new location at Gunter Annex, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.



Senior Airman Tiffany Harris-Rivera reviews a pamphlet on pre-nursing education at the Lackland AFB, Texas education office. A formal training technician with the 37th Mission Support Squadron, she used the Air Force tuition assistance program to get her bachelor's degree and is now pursuing an education in nursing.



Larry Johnson prepares ceremonial diplomas prior to Community College of the Air Force graduation at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He is an education specialist with the 37th Mission Support Squadron.

CCAF officials seek to expand that knowledge by providing new ways for Airmen to receive education.

“Airmen are getting education coupled with real-world experience,” said Mr. Billy Thompson, the chief of the education services flight for the 37th Mission Support Squadron at Lackland AFB. “But above all else, Airmen know how to work with people to manage, lead and to teach; and that is where you get all the payback from education.”

“Our students are better-educated warriors,” Colonel Staats said. “Online learning is a new way of presenting education to our students. Instead of taking 12 semester hours in classrooms, Airmen are taking classes on their home computers, or they take classes with them wherever they go, on personal media devices, laptops, on videos or Web cams, so they can do schoolwork at anytime and anywhere. CCAF officials need to be ahead of our time because we have forces around the world, and the younger generation expects educational access no matter where they are. Today’s Airmen are hungry for education.”

To feed the zest for higher education, CCAF officials began to offer the Air University Associate-to-Baccalaureate Cooperative program in 2007. The AU ABC initiative partners CCAF with accredited higher-education institutions to offer bachelor’s degree opportunities through distance learning. AU ABC applies CCAF associate-degree credit toward baccalaureate degrees and requires participants to complete no more than 60 semester hours.

The initiative is for active-duty, Reserve and Guard Airmen, and degree requirements may be completed after a student retires or separates from the Air Force. AU ABC maximizes military education and training, and provides a multitude of online academic and support services for Airmen.

“With AU ABC, students are able to participate in courses anytime, anywhere to earn career-relevant bachelor’s degrees,” Colonel Staats said.

“Educational opportunities have changed so much since

CCAF began in 1972,” said Mr. Thompson. “Initially, Airmen could only earn certificates. Now, Airmen in every Air Force specialty can earn an associate’s degree directly related to their jobs, and they are signing up for classes and taking classes online.”

One thing that has not changed is the help provided by guidance counselors, academic advisers, education technician specialists and test examiners at each education office. These education specialists help Airmen plan and pursue educational goals with tailor-made degree plans.

“With a degree plan, we only pay for courses that we can see absolutely fit into an Airman’s plan,” Mr. Thompson said. “A degree plan gives Airmen the choice of what kind of degree they want and which school they want to take classes through. They have the flexibility to make their degree plans and their wishes for their future.”

With a focus on the future, CCAF’s vision is to be the Airman’s college and to educate Airmen for life.

“Education is a lifetime endeavor, from the moment they sign on the dotted line at BMT, until they hang up their uniform; and afterward,” Colonel Staats said. “CCAF helps to bring young men and women into the Air Force; it helps them stay in the Air Force to continue using educational benefits. It gives Airmen a leg up on the competition when they leave the service.”

Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Rodney J. McKinley has challenged CCAF officials to lower the timeframe of Airmen receiving their degrees. Today, the average Airman takes 10.5 years to earn his or her CCAF degree, but that isn’t good enough for the chief. He wants the Airman to have his or her degree completed at 5.5 years.

“In today’s Air Force, if you stay in four to six years, there is no reason why you shouldn’t have your CCAF degree,” said Chief Master Sgt. Juan Lewis, command chief for the 37th Training Wing at Lackland.

Along with Basic Military Training, technical school, career development courses and Airman Leadership School all help Airmen earn college credits. Airmen only need to take about five classes to earn the CCAF degree in their first term of service.

“I had about a year of school under my belt before I joined,” said Senior Airman Tiffany Harris-Rivera, a 37th MSS formal training technician at Lackland. In three years, Airman Harris-Rivera earned her human resources and management associate’s degree from the CCAF and graduated from Park University with a bachelor’s degree in human resources and management. She is now pursuing further education in nursing.

“With the classes I’ve taken since I joined the Air Force, I’ve been able to do my job better and answer questions on my own because of an interpersonal communications class that helped me communicate better with others,” said the 25-year-old native of Bryan-College



Senior Airman Mark Gabenski (standing) assists Senior Airman Amando Arrabis in accessing some of his education information. Airman Gabenski is an education specialist at Lackland AFB, and Airman Arrabis is on a temporary duty assignment from F.E. Warren AFB, Wyo.

Station, Texas. “Everything worked out for me because I was able to go to work full time and still take classes to get a degree. I wouldn’t have been able to do that or been able to pay for classes if I hadn’t joined the Air Force.”


Earning an associate’s degree early in an Airman’s career also is vital later in his or her career because an Air Force policy in 2007 states that a senior NCO is not entitled to a senior-rater endorsement for promotion to E-8 or E-9 if the individual does not hold at least a CCAF degree. Today, 72 percent of senior master sergeants and chief master sergeants hold a CCAF degree in their career field, and that percentage will only increase.

“It wasn’t that long ago that a CCAF degree wasn’t required to get a senior rater endorsement (for promotion),” Chief Lewis said. The 24-year Air Force veteran holds a CCAF degree in hotel, fitness and restaurant management for the services career field.

“Once you get that degree, it certifies you as being a professional inside your career field,” he said. “If your records meet the senior NCO promotion board without a CCAF degree, that, to me, is a negative mark. With a senior-rater endorsement for promotion, you are getting a recommendation from the highest level.

“The time to get your education is now and as fast as you can,” said Chief Lewis. “The chief master sergeant of the Air Force has even said Airmen can start on their CCAF degree even before they finish their CDCs, and supervisors need to support that.”

“When you go up for rank or for selection boards, they look at the level of education you have or if you are taking classes,” said Airman Harris-Rivera. “Education only helps you in every facet of life.”

“Get your education so you can be a better professional,” said Chief Lewis. “Do it so you develop more skills and so you can go on to be a better person and can lead Airmen. The Air Force of the future is going to be a better-educated force. We all need to take advantage of all the opportunities through CCAF to go out there and get educated. Education makes you and the Air Force stronger.” 

THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF THE AIR FORCE:

1. Classes taken must be toward an Airman’s CCAF degree.
2. Up to 30 hours of the CCAF degree can be obtained by CLEP and DANTES exams — CCAF offices have study guides for these exams.
3. Airmen can apply for classes, get information on tuition assistance and ask counselors questions online.
4. Airmen can enroll and take classes while deployed.
5. The Air Force pays for 100 percent of tuition assistance, up to \$250 per semester hour (\$166.60 per quarter hour) and up to \$4,500 for tuition per fiscal year.
6. CCAF will pay tuition assistance for up to master’s degrees for enlisted and officer members.
7. Through the Air University Associate-to-Baccalaureate Cooperative Program, Airmen can receive their bachelor’s degree with no more than 20 classes.
8. CCAF counselors can help develop a specific degree plan tailored for any student.
9. Airmen can get additional CCAF degrees on special-duty jobs or if they cross-train into a new Air Force specialty code.
10. The Air Force Virtual Education Center link on the Air Force Portal serves as the gateway for degree programs, student services, online enrollment, tuition assistance processing and other educational services.



Command Chief Master Sgt. Juan Lewis (right) has a strong message to all enlisted personnel concerning education — get your Community College of the Air Force degree. Chief Lewis and Senior Airman Zachary Fouk are with the 37th Training Wing at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.