

5 Things Every College Student Should Do NOW to Get a Security Clearance

The road to adulthood can be a bumpy one. Take it from someone who had a purple streak in her hair and wanted to marry Justin Timberlake: we all make mistakes. But if you're contemplating a career in national security, there are some mistakes you can't afford to make. A career in intelligence or national security will probably require a security clearance - and there are rigorous standards to get one. What's more, that security clearance may take a long time to get.

The good news is that you're not powerless. Here are just five ways you can avoid missteps and get on the fast track to a successful career protecting our nation.

1. STOP DOING DRUGS. STOP HANGING OUT WITH PEOPLE WHO DO DRUGS.

This is a freebie, folks. You know this. Don't do drugs. However socially acceptable drugs like marijuana may become, they are still illegal at the federal level. Even if you're smoking pot in a state where it's legal, doing it for medical purposes, or just consuming pot-laced edibles, federal law prohibits it. Someday that may change, but for now, recent or continued drug use is one of the few standards in the security clearance process where the government consistently shows no wiggle room.

That said, drug use can usually be mitigated by time and changes in behavior. If you smoked weed as a college freshman, have been drug free for several years, and cut ties with those who still use, you probably have nothing to worry about. Once you begin the security clearance application process, you just need to be honest about your past and demonstrate how you've changed.

2. PAY YOUR TAXES. AVOID DEBT. MAKE YOUR PAYMENTS.

Consistently, year after year, the number one reason for security clearance revocation or denial is financial issues. Missing payments, defaulted loans, uncontrollable debt - these are all things Uncle Sam frowns upon. Debt reflects your decision making; a college student buying a Charger with a Hemi V-8 implies bad judgment. Should someone who makes bad personal decisions have access to America's secrets? What's more, people under financial pressure are vulnerable to being blackmailed. Famous traitors Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen both started spying for the Soviets because they were in financial trouble.

Along the same lines, pay your taxes. At a recent meeting with background investigators, a security clearance attorney said young security clearance applicants are often denied clearances because they haven't paid their taxes. Many claim that they were "below the threshold" of the minimum income required to pay taxes - but they're not always right. Do your research, ask an accountant, read the IRS website; be sure that you are paying anything the law requires.

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3. KEEP TRACK OF YOUR ADDRESSES, JOBS, CLASSMATES, AND ACQUAINTANCES.

When I applied for my first government job, I'd had seven or eight different addresses in the previous seven years. My background interviewer was suspicious of me because of the locations and jobs I had listed. I wasn't lying - but my resume was full of errors because I couldn't keep all my dates and locations straight.

Don't be like me. The security clearance process has enough hiccups and delays; save yourself some stress and keep a spreadsheet or document with your dates and locations of employment, home addresses, etc. Also, try to keep tabs on people you knew from those jobs and locations. Security clearance background investigators will need to contact your friends and acquaintances to verify the information you've listed on your application. Having complete and accurate contact information is another way you can spare yourself unnecessary stress and delays.

4. BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU DO ONLINE.

Thank heaven there is no photographic evidence of my purple hair or Justin Timberlake crush. Today's youth are not so fortunate. You've grown up with a digital footprint that will - for better or worse - follow you for many years to come. With that said, be mindful of what you put on social media. It goes without saying that pictures showing illegal activity or anti-American comments will damage your chances. But let's say you didn't list any close relationships with foreign nationals on your security clearance application. Then a background investigator sees picture after picture of you on Facebook with your Iranian girlfriend - that's going to raise red flags.

Likewise, be careful what you do on any work or school devices. "Misuse of IT" is one of the guidelines the government will look at when evaluating you. If Uncle Sam sees that you were cruising porn sites or trading bitcoin on your work-issued laptop, it will raise questions about your trustworthiness with classified IT.

5. GET AN INTERNSHIP.

As many people will tell you, the security clearance process takes a long time. You may be waiting well over a year between filing paperwork and actually being able to start working. One way you can get a foot in the door is by getting an internship while you are still in school. Many companies like ManTech and government agencies like the NSA have robust early recruiting programs. You can start the security clearance process while you're still in school, gain real industry experience, and build relationships. Then by the time you graduate, your clearance will probably be granted and you're ready to start working in your field. It's an excellent opportunity both to get ahead on the security clearance process and ensure that a career in national security is right for you.

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