

7.0.0.0 Section 7.

The Merit Badge Program

7.0.0.1 The Benefits of Merit Badges

There is more to merit badges than simply providing opportunities to learn skills. There is more to them than an introduction to lifetime hobbies, or the inspiration to pursue a career—though these invaluable results occur regularly. It all begins with a Scout's initial interest and effort in a merit badge subject, followed by a discussion with the unit leader or designated assistant, continues through meetings with a counselor, and culminates in advancement and recognition. It is an uncomplicated process that gives a Scout the confidence achieved through overcoming obstacles. Social skills improve. Self-reliance develops. Examples are set and followed. Fields of study and interest are explored beyond the limits of the school classroom.

All merit badge requirements must be met while a registered Scout in Scouts BSA, or a qualified Venturer or Sea Scout. Accomplishments before joining, or while a Cub Scout, do not apply.

7.0.0.2 About the Application for Merit Badge ("Blue Card")

For decades, the "blue card" has been the nationally recognized merit badge record. Even though technological advances now provide a number of benefits, it still can play an important role. Not only does it support the intended interaction between Scout, unit leader, and merit badge counselor, it provides a hard copy of the information needed for proper posting and for evidence and reference as needed later. Councils are encouraged to take advantage of innovations such as the Boy Scouts of America's Scoutbook system or various computer-generated spreadsheets, etc. Units and other councils are expected to accept these alternative forms of documentation as long as the documentation provides the information necessary to track and record the Scout's progress. Though when this is done it may be necessary to use blue cards as well to assure that the merit badge process functions as it was designed and that a permanent hardcopy record is generated for the Scout to retain.

Since blue cards support the merit badge process as it is intended to function, the Guide to Advancement continues to reference and recommend them. It is expected that when blue cards are not used, advancement administrators at all levels will find ways to carry on the processes, interactions, documentation, and other nuances that make the process such a critical element in BSA mission achievement.

APPLICATION FOR MERIT BADGE

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

is a registered
 Scout Venturer Sea Scout

of _____ No. _____
Troop, crew, ship


District _____

Council _____

I have discussed this merit badge with this Scout and recommended at least one merit badge counselor.

Date

Signature of unit leader

 **BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA®**
 34124

How the blue card works. The blue card has three parts: the "Application for Merit Badge" portion, the "Applicant's Record," and the "Counselor's Record." It requires a total of four signatures—two each from the unit leader and a merit badge counselor. The unit leader signs first on the front of the Application for Merit Badge portion and gives the entire blue card to the Scout. Each signature represents interaction with a registered adult. It is through this interaction and association with adults—the conversations, the counseling, the instruction and learning experiences—that mission-oriented Scouting takes place. This association must occur even if blue cards are not used. See "The Scout, the Unit Leader, and the Merit Badge Counselor," 7.0.0.3.

After the unit leader signs the blue card, the Scout, using appropriate Youth Protection measures, contacts the merit badge counselor and sets an appointment. If a Scout does not complete all the requirements, the counselor does not sign for completion, but initials those requirements that were fulfilled in the spaces provided on the back of the Applicant's Record part. This is called a "partial" (see "Partial Completions," 7.0.3.3). Note that when it comes to partials, tracking which requirements have been met is an essential function. Problematically, some alternative systems to blue cards do not offer this feature. Whichever system is used, completion of requirements should be recorded in a manner that both the Scout and counselor can use to easily track the Scout's progress.

Once satisfied that all the requirements have been met, the merit badge counselor signs the blue card in two places: on the reverse of the Application for Merit Badge (to the left) and on the Applicant's Record (in the middle). These two parts are returned to the Scout. The approving counselor should retain the part of the card called the Counselor's Record for at least one year—in case questions are raised later. Once a registered and approved counselor signs that all requirements have been met, the Scout and the unit leader should meet to discuss the Scout's experience. Note that this discussion is not to be a retesting on the requirements. The unit leader then signs the Applicant's Record portion and returns it to the Scout, who should retain it permanently.

7.0.0.3 The Scout, the Unit Leader, and the Merit Badge Counselor

When the tremendous variety of badges are considered, the merit badge program supports all eight of the methods that Scouts BSA puts to use in meeting its mission (see "The Methods of Scouting," 2.0.0.4). Universal to all the merit badges, however, are the methods of advancement, personal growth, and adult association. Here we will focus on adult association, which is furthered through experiences involving discussion, counseling, and learning that are facilitated not only by a merit badge counselor, but also by the unit leader.

The Scout and the unit leader. Any registered Scout, or qualified Venturer or Sea Scout, may work on the requirements for any merit badge at any time. However, before working with a counselor or attending a group or virtual merit badge opportunity, a Scout should meet with his or her unit leader. This is the leader's opportunity to give guidance on the wisdom of pursuing a selected badge, to advise the Scout on how work might be approached and what may be encountered along the way. It is also the time to provide the names and contact information for one or more approved counselors. The best outcome, however, is that a growth-oriented, positive dialog occurs that provides inspiration and direction in a

Scout's life and even leads to conversations about talents and interests, goal setting, and the concept of "challenge by choice." The benefits can be much like those of a well-done Scoutmaster conference. It must be noted that this visit is sufficiently important that it should be documented either by the unit leader's signature on the Application for Merit Badge (blue card) or by other means.

Even though a leader may voice concerns about a particular Scout pursuing a particular merit badge, it is the Scout's decision whether or not to proceed.

The Scout may want to take advantage of opportunities at merit badge fairs or midways, or at rock-climbing gyms or whitewater rafting trips and so forth. This is acceptable, but should be a part of the discussion with the unit leader. Group instruction has both advantages and disadvantages (see "Group Instruction," 7.0.3.2 and related topics 7.0.4.9 and 7.0.4.10). Another discussion with the unit leader should take place if a Scout wants to change counselors.

Because of the counseling opportunity presented, it is the unit leader's responsibility to sign blue cards, or to otherwise document the visit that takes place before a Scout meets with a merit badge counselor. In the role of giving leadership to the delivery of the troop program, a Scoutmaster, for example, has a better opportunity than other leaders to get to know the youth. This background with the Scouts allows a unit leader to add greater value in the discussion and counseling intended to take place. However, in circumstances when this may be impractical—for example, in large units or when the unit leader may be absent—the unit leader may delegate authority to conduct and document the discussions. This authority should be entrusted to a knowledgeable assistant unit leader.

Regardless how they come to work with a Scout, all merit badge counselors must be registered and approved. See topics 7.0.1.2, 7.0.1.3, and 7.0.1.4.

The Scout and the merit badge counselor. Although it is the unit leader's responsibility to see that at least one merit badge counselor is identified from those approved and available, the Scout may already have one in mind. The unit leader and Scout should agree on the selection of the counselor. Lacking agreement, the Scout must be allowed to work with the registered and approved counselor of his or her choice.

Even though Scouts may benefit from reviewing requirements with a merit badge counselor before getting to work, a Scout may begin the effort on any badge at any time after registering in Scouts BSA or becoming a

qualified Venturer or Sea Scout. It is the counselor's decision whether to accept work or activities completed prior to any meeting with the unit leader or the merit badge counselor. Common sense should prevail, however. For example, nights already camped as a Scout in Scouts BSA or as a qualified Venturer or Sea Scout, or coins or stamps already collected, would count toward their respective badges.

The National Council does not limit the number of merit badges a youth may earn from one counselor, though a unit leader is permitted to do so as long as the same limit applies to all Scouts in the unit. Ideally, Scouts should work with a variety of adults. In so doing, they may gain insight and learn from examples offered from a variety of perspectives and approaches to life.

Counselors may work with and pass any member, including their own children, wards, or relatives. Nevertheless, we often teach young people the importance of broadening horizons. Scouts meeting with counselors beyond their families and beyond even their own units are doing that. They will benefit from the perspectives of many "teachers" and will learn more as a result. They should be encouraged to reach out.

All camps, events, or other merit badge opportunities, and all advancement recording systems are expected to promptly document merit badge partials and completions in a format that is easy for Scouts, adult volunteers, and merit badge counselors to use and understand.

It is acceptable for a counselor registered in one council to approve merit badges for Scouts in another. This is an important consideration, especially in areas where counselors are scarce, when Scouts are away from home and want to continue advancing, or when merit badge experiences include web-based components provided by someone in another council.

7.0.1.0 Merit Badge Counseling Risk Management and Quality Control

7.0.1.1 Supervisory Qualifications and Certifications

Several badges involve activities for which the Boy Scouts of America has implemented strategies to improve safety, enhance the Scouts' experiences, and manage risk. These activities often require supervision with specialized qualifications and certifications. Merit badge counselors who do not meet the specific requirements may use the services of helpers who do. Additional details can be found below, and also in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* and the merit badge pamphlets.

General Supervision Requirements

- Swimming and watercraft activities must be conducted in accordance with BSA Safe Swim Defense or BSA Safety Afloat, respectively, and be supervised by mature and conscientious adults at least 21 years old and trained in the program applicable. Counselors for merit badges involving swimming or the use of watercraft must be so trained, or use helpers who are.
- All physical activities presented in any Scouting program must be conducted in accordance with the "SAFE Checklist." These four points, embodying good judgment and common sense, can be found at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/safe.
- CPR instruction, wherever it is required, must be taught by people currently trained as CPR instructors by a nationally certified provider, such as the American Red Cross, the Emergency Care and Safety Institute, or the American Heart Association.

The following merit badges have special qualifications or certifications for either the merit badge counselor or the supervisor of certain activities that may be involved.

Counselors and advancement administrators should consult the merit badge pamphlets for details and to maintain awareness of changes and updates as pamphlets are revised.

Climbing. All climbing, belaying, and rappelling exercises and activities must be supervised by a mature and conscientious adult rock-climbing instructor, age 21 or older, who has completed BSA Climb On Safely training and who understands the risks inherent to these activities. Training as a BSA climbing Level 2 Instructor is highly recommended. Someone with certification in First Aid/CPR/AED from the American Red Cross (or equivalent) must be present at these activities. Current policies are found in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss08/#a and supersede any other publications or literature.

Snow Sports. Activities in the field must be supervised by a mature and conscientious adult 21 years or older who is committed to compliance with BSA Winter Sports Safety. Current policies are found in the *Guide to Safe Scouting* at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss12/#b.

The qualifications below for aquatics-related merit badge counseling and supervision not only assist in managing risk, but also give counselors credibility. Current policies are found at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss02 and supersede any other publications or literature.

Canoeing. Those supervising canoeing activities must have either BSA Aquatics Instructor or Canoeing Instructor certification from the American Canoe Association, American Red Cross, or equivalent; OR local councils may

approve individuals previously certified as such or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Kayaking. Those supervising kayaking activities must have formal training in kayaking and paddle craft instruction, evidenced by either BSA Aquatics Instructor or Paddle Craft Safety Instructor certification, or kayaking instructor certification from the American Canoe Association, British Canoe Union, or American Red Cross, or equivalent; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Lifesaving. Demonstrations or activities in or on the water must be supervised by a mature and conscientious adult, age 21 or older, with certification in Red Cross First Aid/CPR/AED or equivalent, and as a BSA Lifeguard or Aquatics Instructor or equivalent.

Motor Boating. Motor boating activities must be supervised by a mature and conscientious adult, age 21 or older, who has completed Safety Afloat training. Appropriate credentials include current or previous certification by an organization (such as the National Safe Boating Council, the United States Power Squadrons, the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, or the US Powerboating component of US Sailing) that meets the voluntary National On-Water Standards for Powerboating or the NASBLA national boating education standards for powerboating; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such, or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Rowing. Those supervising rowing activities must have either BSA Aquatics Instructor certification or equivalent; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Scuba Diving. All phases of scuba instruction—classroom, pool, and open-water training—are limited to instructors trained and certified by one of the BSA's recognized scuba agencies as found in the *Guide to Safe Scouting*.

Small Boat Sailing. Those supervising sailing activities must have completed Safety Afloat training. They must be mature and conscientious adults age 21 or older. Appropriate credentials include instructor certification with a recognized sailing agency or school, US Sailing, or the American Sailing Association for sailing experience with different hull types including the rig being used for instruction; OR local councils may approve individuals previously certified as such, or trained by an instructor so qualified.

Swimming. Demonstrations or activities in or on the water must be conducted according to BSA Safe Swim Defense and BSA Safety Afloat.

Water Sports. Demonstrations or activities in or on the water must be conducted according to BSA Safe Swim Defense and BSA Safety Afloat.

Whitewater. Those supervising whitewater activities must be certified as whitewater canoeing or kayaking instructors by the American Canoe Association or have equivalent certification, training, or expertise.

The qualifications below for shooting sports-related merit badge counseling and supervision not only assist in managing risk, but also give counselors credibility. Current policies are found at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss08/#a and supersede any other publications or literature. See the *Guide to Safe Scouting* and the *BSA National Shooting Sports Manual* for further details on shooting sports.

Archery. Archery activities must be supervised by a BSA National Camping School-trained shooting sports director or USA Archery or National Field Archery Association instructor, or by someone who has been trained by one of the three; or alternatively, the activities may be supervised by someone with at least Level 1 training in the operation of an archery range from USA Archery, NFAA, or an equivalent.

Rifle Shooting. The merit badge counselor is responsible for ensuring that all instruction or other activities involving any handling of firearms or live ammunition is consistent with state and federal law and supervised by a certified BSA National Camping School (NCS) shooting sports director, or National Rifle Association (NRA) Rifle Shooting Instructor or Coach. Instruction or other activities involving handling muzzleloaders must be supervised by an NCS shooting sports director or NRA/National Muzzleloader Rifle Association (NMLRA)-certified muzzleloader firearms instructor. Shooting must be supervised by an NRA certified Range Safety Officer (RSO). If instruction and shooting are to occur at the same time, both the RSO and qualified instructor must be present. The supervisor and instructor may not be the same person. Note that commercial shooting ranges may provide RSOs.

Shotgun Shooting. The merit badge counselor is responsible for ensuring that all instruction or other activities involving any handling of firearms or live ammunition is consistent with state and federal law and supervised by a certified NCS shooting sports director or NRA Shotgun Instructor or Coach. Instruction or other activities involving handling muzzle-loading shotguns must be supervised by an NCS shooting sports director or NRA/NMLRA-certified muzzleloading shotgun instructor. Shooting must be supervised by an NRA-certified Range Safety Officer. If instruction and shooting are to occur at the same time, both the RSO and qualified instructor must be present. They may not be the same person. Note that commercial shooting ranges may provide RSOs.

All certifications listed above
must be current

7.0.1.2 Merit Badge Counselor Approvals

There are two aspects to merit badge counselor approval: approval for registration in the position of merit badge counselor and approval for the badges to be counseled. Both functions are the responsibility of the council advancement committee, though how they are carried out is left to council determination. That said, the council advancement committee must assure the provisions below in topics 7.0.1.3, and 7.0.1.4 are met. Processes used should not be rushed to the point where unqualified counselors are allowed to serve. The Merit Badge Counselor Information sheet (filestore.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/34405.pdf) is an excellent tool to use in these efforts.

Note that both aspects of merit badge counselor approval apply also to those serving as counselors at summer camp or in any virtual or group instruction setting.

7.0.1.3 Qualifying and Registering as a Merit Badge Counselor

To function as a merit badge counselor one must be registered as such. Only adults of good character, age 18 or older, shall be approved to register as merit badge counselors. It is important too, that potential counselors have a good rapport with unit leaders and Scout-age youth. Counselors register at no fee, using the BSA's standard adult registration form with position code 42.

Council advancement committees determine who at the council or district level provides the approval signature on a counselor's adult application form. Note that counselors must reregister annually to continue serving. See "Counselor Reregistration," 7.0.1.5.

7.0.1.4 Approving Badges To Be Counseled

Council advancement committees have the responsibility to implement an approval procedure that assures merit badge counselors have the necessary skills and education to offer quality experiences in the badges they counsel. The intent is for Scouts to learn from those with an appropriate level of expertise.

A well-qualified counselor can extend a young person's attention span: more will be heard and understood, discussions will be more productive, and true interest will be developed. The conversations can lead to a relationship of mutual respect where the Scout is confident enough to offer thoughts and opinions and to value those of the merit badge counselor. Thus social skills and self-reliance grow, and examples are set and followed.

Note that the National Council does not limit the number of merit badges an individual may be approved to counsel. It is permissible, however, for councils to do

so—as long as Scouts' choices, especially in small or remote units, are not so limited as to serve as a barrier to advancement.

Scoutmasters serving as merit badge counselors.

Scoutmasters wishing to counsel and sign off on merit badges must also qualify and register in the position of merit badge counselor and be approved for the badges they counsel according to council procedures.

Reporting merit badge counselor concerns. In the event unit leaders or other volunteers discover that any merit badge counselors are not following mandated procedures such as working with the requirements as they are written, they should complete and submit to the council advancement committee the Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns form found in the appendix (See 11.1.0.0). Unit leaders should regularly review the policies and procedures related to the merit badge process with Scouts, parents, guardians, and leaders, and counsel them on proper methods as the need arises.

In approving counselors, the local council advancement committee has the authority to establish a higher minimum, reasonable level of skills and education for the counselors of a given merit badge than is indicated in "Supervisory Qualifications and Certifications," 7.0.1.1. For example, NRA certification could be established as a council standard for approving counselors for the Rifle Shooting or Shotgun Shooting merit badges.

7.0.1.5 Counselor Reregistration

The council advancement committee annually coordinates counselor reregistration. This may be done as part of the local council charter renewal process. A letter or message extending an invitation can be sent to each counselor who is to be approved for another year. Those identified as not following Boy Scouts of America policies and procedures, or not providing services as promised should not be invited to return.

The invitational message or letter could include the following:

1. Gratitude for service
2. Invitation to reregister
3. Reminder to maintain current Youth Protection training
4. Listing of merit badges each is currently approved to counsel
5. Contact name in the district or council who can provide assistance and information

6. Response card, e-form, or other way for counselors to return updated contact information, preferred method for contact, merit badges they wish to add or drop, updates to their skills and education profile, and anything else that may be helpful
7. News and information regarding merit badge “midways” or “fairs,” counselor training opportunities, other activities or meetings of interest, and additional volunteer opportunities
8. FAQs or suggestions covering “best practices” for counseling

Volunteers who are properly registered as merit badge counselors can renew annually without completing a BSA adult application; their names will appear on the district roster for renewal. Anyone who is currently unregistered, or who is registered in another position but also desires to serve as a merit badge counselor, must complete an adult application.

7.0.1.6 Training for Counselors

The council or district advancement committee must assure counselors understand the Boy Scouts of America’s mission, aims, and methods. It is also important they know how Scouts can learn and grow through the merit badge process. Every merit badge counselor should take Merit Badge Counselor Position Specific Training, which is available online at my.scouting.org. Well trained counselors will have a better understanding of how Scouting furthers a Scout’s personal growth as they share their passion for their subject matter.

If a counselor corps is organized into groups based on the popularity or subject matter of badges, with “head counselors” for each group (see “Getting Started,” 7.0.2.1), there is also an opportunity for “on-the-job coaching.” This is helpful where individual counselors need a better understanding of the merit badge plan.

In multicultural communities, local councils should endeavor to offer bilingual training and mentoring.

7.0.2.0 Merit Badge Counselor Lists

7.0.2.1 Getting Started

The council advancement committee is responsible to assure that listings or databases of registered and approved counselors are kept current and maintained on a council-wide or district-level basis.

To get started, the council or district advancement committees should organize the badges into logical groups—such as citizenship, outdoor activities, Scout skills, STEM, trades, hobbies, personal development, business and industry, communications, and public service—and recruit a head counselor for each group.

Head counselors are not expected to be experts in each badge, but they should be capable of recruiting those who meet the qualifications. Remember that counselor recruiting is an ongoing responsibility. As new ones are added and others drop off, it is vital these changes be communicated to the district or council advancement committee and the list of counselors updated.

The number of counselors needed for the list depends on badge popularity. First consider merit badges required for Eagle Scout rank, which are obvious “musts.” Next think about those most popular in the local area. Reports on merit badges earned can be generated at your council service center. For low-demand subjects, counselors may appear on more than one district list. Urge troops, crews, and ships to make as many of their counselors as possible available district- or council-wide.

The council or district counselor list or database is made available to troops, crews, and ships. Scouts should not have access. It is most efficient to set the list up as an electronic document that includes all counselors in the council. Establishing it as a spreadsheet or database can allow sorting for counselors willing to serve at the council, district, or unit level. It is important to maintain and update this list regularly so users can depend upon it.

7.0.2.2 Web-Based Counselor Lists

Online counselor lists present a number of challenges. They should only be placed on official council websites that conform to the National Council guidelines. Council sites must consider the safety and privacy of their members and participants by obtaining the necessary permissions to release information about or images of any individual. Give attention to protecting counselor privacy. Limit access to those who have merit badge-related responsibilities, such as advancement committee members and chairs, or unit leaders and selected assistants. Scouts should not have access. Their interaction with the Scoutmaster in discussing work on a badge, and obtaining a counselor’s name, is an important part of the merit badge plan.

7.0.2.3 Unit Counselor Lists

Units may establish their own lists of counselors, but these lists are sub-sets of the official district or council list. Counselors included on a unit list may or may not opt to work with youth in other units. It is helpful to have ready counselors for the most popular badges, but it is worth remembering that Scouts learn from the perspectives of counselors outside their own troop. Note that all merit badge counselors, including those serving only one unit, must be registered and be approved according to topics 7.0.1.2, 7.0.1.3, and 7.0.1.4.

Due to concerns about merit badge counselor privacy and since Scouts should receive the names and contact information from the Scoutmaster, unit counselor lists should not be made available to Scouts.

7.0.2.4 Sources of Merit Badge Counselors

District or council advancement committees are charged with recruiting and training sufficient counselors to meet unit needs. As with any recruitment effort, it begins with prospecting: gathering names of people who may be qualified to serve. This can be done in a group setting through brainstorming as outlined in *Friendstorming On Tour*, or considered on an individual basis. Merit badge counselor prospects are most often found from the following sources:

- Schools and colleges
- Parents groups
- Local businesses
- Service clubs
- Trade groups
- Religious organizations
- Neighborhood associations
- Government agencies
- The armed services
- Chartered organizations
- Nonprofit organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America
- Parents and guardians of Scouts

A Guide for Merit Badge Counseling can be useful in recruiting. Visits to district meetings, roundtables, training sessions, and other events may also uncover prospects. While there, unit and district volunteer feedback may be sought on the quality of those currently active.

To learn more about Friendstorming, see the booklet *Friendstorming On Tour*, which can be accessed at www.scouting.org/advancement.

7.0.2.5 Venturing Consultants as Merit Badge Counselors

Venturing consultants are people whose special skills or talents are needed for a crew activity or project. Usually they are adults recruited on a one-time basis. More information can be found in the *Venturing Advisor Guidebook*. Consultants generally would be considered qualified to counsel merit badges related to their expertise. To serve as merit badge counselors, however, they must be registered and approved as merit badge counselors, according to topics 7.0.1.2, 7.0.1.3 and 7.0.1.4.

7.0.3.0 The Process of Counseling

Earning merit badges should be Scout initiated, Scout researched, and Scout learned. It should be hands-on and interactive, and should not be modeled after a typical school classroom setting. Instead, it is meant to be an active program so enticing to Scouts that they will want to take responsibility for their own full participation.

Counseling should take place at a location conducive to the subject matter at hand that satisfies youth protection requirements. In-person meetings are preferred because they enrich the experience. Counselors should first confirm with the Scout that he or she has discussed with the unit leader the Scout's interest in working on the merit badge. Then counselors should move on with discussions about what the Scout already knows. This could be followed with coaching, guidance, and additional meetings, not only for passing the candidate on the requirements, but also to facilitate understanding of the subject.

The sort of hands-on interactive experience described here, with personal coaching and guidance, is hardly ever achieved in any setting except when one counselor works directly with one Scout and the Scout's buddy or with a very small group. Thus, this small-scale approach is the recommended best practice for merit badge instruction and requirement fulfillment. Units, districts, and councils should focus on providing the most direct merit badge experiences possible. Large group and web-based instruction, while perhaps efficient, do not measure up in terms of the desired outcomes with regard to learning and positive adult association.

The health and safety of those working on merit badges must be integrated with the process. Besides the *Guide to Safe Scouting*, the "SAFE Checklist" must be consulted as an appropriate planning tool. It can be found online at "Scouting Safely," www.scouting.org/health-and-safety.

Recommended Merit Badge Process

1. The Scout develops an interest in a merit badge and may begin working on the requirements.
2. The Scout and unit leader discuss the Scout's interest in the merit badge.
3. The unit leader signs a blue card or otherwise documents the conversation and provides the Scout with at least one counselor contact.
4. The Scout contacts the counselor.
5. The counselor considers any work toward requirements completed prior to the initial discussion with the unit leader.
6. The Scout, the Scout's buddy, and the counselor meet (often several times).
7. Partial progress is recorded as requirements are completed.
8. The Scout finishes the requirements.
9. The counselor approves completion.
10. The Scout gives the blue card or other evidence of completion to the unit leader. The unit leader signs the applicant record section of the blue card or otherwise documents completion of the merit badge.
11. The unit leader gives the Scout the applicant record portion of the blue card or other hard copy record that the Scout may retain.
12. The unit reports completion of the merit badge.
13. The Scout receives the merit badge

7.0.3.1 Counseling Sessions and Certifying Completion

A youth member must not meet one-on-one with an adult. Sessions with counselors must take place in accordance with the *Guide to Safe Scouting* (www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss01). Notwithstanding the minimum leader requirements, age- and program-appropriate supervision must always be provided. Youth should be encouraged to bring a buddy, such as a friend, parent, guardian, brother, sister, other relative—or, better yet, another Scout working on the same badge. If merit badge counseling includes any web-based interaction, it must be conducted in accordance with BSA's social media guidelines (www.scouting.org/training/youth-protection).

For example, always copy one or more authorized adults on email messages between counselors and Scouts.

When meeting with the counselor, the Scout should bring any required projects. If these cannot be transported, the Scout should present evidence, such as photographs or adult verification. The unit leader, for example, might state that a satisfactory bridge or tower has been built for the Pioneering merit badge or that meals were prepared for Cooking. If there are questions that requirements were met, a counselor may confirm with adults involved. Once satisfied, the counselor signs the blue card or otherwise documents completion using the date upon which the Scout completed the requirements, or in the case of partials, records the individual requirements passed.

Note that from time to time, it may be appropriate for a requirement that has been met for one badge to also count for another. See "Fulfilling More Than One Requirement With a Single Activity," 4.2.3.6.

7.0.3.2 Group Instruction

It is acceptable—and sometimes desirable—for merit badges to be taught in group settings. This often occurs at camp and merit badge midways, fairs, clinics, or similar events, and even online through webinars. These can be efficient methods, and interactive group discussions can support learning. Group instruction can also be attractive to "guest experts" assisting registered and approved counselors. Slide shows, skits, demonstrations, panels, and various other techniques can also be employed, but as any teacher can attest, not everyone will learn all the material. Because of the importance of individual attention and personal learning in the merit badge program, group instruction should be focused on those scenarios where the benefits are compelling.

There must be attention to each individual's projects and fulfillment of all requirements. We must know that every Scout—actually and personally—completed them. If, for example, a requirement uses words like "show," "demonstrate," or "discuss," then every Scout must do that. It is unacceptable to award badges on the basis of sitting in classrooms *watching* demonstrations, or remaining silent during discussions.

It is sometimes reported that Scouts who have received merit badges through group instructional settings have not fulfilled all the requirements. To offer a quality merit badge program, council and district advancement committees should ensure the following are in place for all group instructional events.

- A culture is established for merit badge group instructional events that partial completions are acceptable expected results.
- A guide or information sheet is distributed in advance of events that promotes the acceptability of partials, explains how merit badges can be finished after events,

lists merit badge prerequisites, and provides other helpful information that will establish realistic expectations for the number of merit badges that can be earned at an event.

- Merit badge counselors are known to be registered and approved.
- Any guest experts or guest speakers, or others assisting who are not registered and approved as merit badge counselors, do not accept the responsibilities of, or behave as, merit badge counselors, either at a group instructional event or at any other time. Their service is temporary, not ongoing.
- Counselors agree to sign off only requirements that Scouts have actually and personally completed.
- Counselors agree not to assume that stated prerequisites for an event have been completed without some level of evidence that the work has been done. Pictures and letters from other merit badge counselors or unit leaders are the best form of prerequisite documentation when the actual work done cannot be brought to the camp or site of the merit badge event.
- There is a mechanism for unit leaders or others to report concerns to a council advancement committee on summer camp merit badge programs, group instructional events, and any other merit badge counseling issues— especially in instances where it is believed BSA procedures are not followed. See “Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns,” 11.1.0.0.
- Additional guidelines and best practices can be found



in the “Merit Badge Group Instruction Guide,” developed by volunteers in conjunction with the National Advancement Program Team. This guide for units, districts, and councils includes several important event planning considerations as well as suggestions for evaluating the event after it is over to identify opportunities for improvement. The guide can be downloaded from www.scouting.org/advancement.

There must be attention to each individual’s projects and fulfillment of all requirements. We must know that every Scout—actually and personally—completed them.

It is permissible for guest speakers, guest experts, or others who are not merit badge counselors to assist in the counseling process. Those providing such assistance must be under the direction of a registered and approved counselor who is readily available on-site and provides personal supervision to assure all applicable BSA policies and procedures—including those related to BSA Youth Protection—are in place and followed.

7.0.3.3 Partial Completions

Scouts need not pass all the requirements of one merit badge with the same counselor. It may be that due to timing, location issues, etc., they must meet with different counselors to finish a badge. The Application for Merit Badge has a place to record what has been finished—a “partial.” In the center section on the reverse of the blue card, the counselor initials and dates each requirement passed. In the case of a partial completion, the counselor does not sign or retain his or her portion of the card. A subsequent counselor may choose not to accept partial work, but this should be rare. A Scout who believes he or she is being treated unfairly may work with the unit leader to find another qualified counselor. An example for the use of a signed partial would be to take it to camp as proof that the camp’s prerequisites have been met. Partials have no expiration except the Scout’s 18th birthday. Units, districts, or councils shall not establish other expiration dates for partial merit badges.

If blue cards are not used, the council advancement committee must assure that an alternative system for recording partial merit badge completion is available.

7.0.4.0 Merit Badge Miscellany

7.0.4.1 New Merit Badges

Suggestions for new merit badges may be sent to merit.badge@scouting.org. Ideas are researched for relevance to the BSA mission and the needs of today's youth and families. Subject matter must spark interest in Scout-age youth; thus part of the process has often involved presenting submissions to a youth panel.

7.0.4.2 Revising Merit Badges

Merit badges are reviewed periodically to improve relevance, consistency, and also requirement and content accuracy. Merit badge counselors, unit leadership, parents, and youth are encouraged to send suggestions or comments to merit.badge@scouting.org. All submissions are reviewed and considered as merit badges and pamphlets are revised. Feedback has been invaluable in correcting errors, updating material, and enhancing content.

7.0.4.3 What to Do When Requirements Change

Merit badge requirements, along with changes to them, can be found at the Scouting.org Merit Badges web page: www.scouting.org/programs/scouts-bsa/advancement-and-awards/merit-badges. Once new or revised requirements appears on that page, any Scout beginning work on a merit badge must use the requirement as stated there.

Changes may also be introduced in a revised merit badge pamphlet, youth handbook, or other official BSA publication or release before appearing on the Merit Badges web page. In this case, unless official communications set forth a different procedure or establish a date by when use of the old requirements must cease, youth members have through December 31 of that year to decide what to do. They may continue—or begin work—using the old requirements, or they may switch to—or begin work—using the new requirements. Scouts who choose to use the old requirements may continue using them until the merit badge is completed. Scouts who have not begun work on a badge by December 31 of the year a change in its requirements is announced must use the new requirements.

There is no time limit between starting and completing a badge, although a counselor may determine so much time has passed since any effort took place that the new requirements must be used.

7.0.4.4 Discontinued Merit Badges

Scouts are not allowed to begin work on discontinued merit badges. If actual and purposeful effort that is more than simply incidental to participation in Scouting activities has already begun by the time discontinuation becomes effective, and work actively continues, then the badge may be completed and can count toward rank advancement.

However, presentation of the badge itself will be subject to availability. It is a misconception that discontinued merit badges may be earned as long as the patch and requirements can be found.

7.0.4.5 Earning Eagle-Required Merit Badges for Star or Life Rank

Candidates for Star or Life, in the selection of "any four" or "any three," respectively, of the merit badges required for Eagle, may choose from all those listed, including where alternatives are available: Emergency Preparedness OR Lifesaving; Cycling OR Hiking OR Swimming; and Environmental Science OR Sustainability. For example, if a Scout earns Cycling, Hiking, and Swimming, all three of them count as Eagle-required for Life rank. Only one, however, would serve toward the required merit badges for the Eagle Scout rank. The other two would count toward the optional merit badges required to make up the total of 21 merit badges.

Note that Star and Life requirements each allow two non-Eagle-required merit badges. It is the Scout's decision, however, to earn more—or all—of the merit badges for the Star and Life ranks from the Eagle-required list.

7.0.4.6 Once It Is Earned, It's Earned

A Scout who has *earned* a merit badge from a registered and approved counselor by actually and personally fulfilling the requirements as written will have met the purpose of the merit badge program and the contribution to the aims of Scouting. The Scout may keep the badge and count it toward advancement. See "Personal Growth Is the Primary Goal," 2.0.0.3. The same holds true if a Scout, without intent to violate national BSA procedures or policies, fulfills merit badge requirements with someone who is not registered and approved as a counselor. This could happen, for example, if a Scout, in good faith, contacts someone who has inadvertently been dropped from a unit or district charter or otherwise has an expired membership, but who remains on an approved list of counselors.

In cases where it is discovered that unregistered or unapproved individuals are signing off merit badges, this should be reported to the council or district advancement committee so they have the opportunity to follow up. But it is also the responsibility of unit leaders to help Scouts understand that only registered and approved counselors are to be used. If a Scout to whom this mandated procedure has been made clear has ignored it, then the unit leader may require the youth to work with another counselor who is properly documented and who will verify or ensure that requirements are met. A unit leader should discuss any potential follow-up counselors with the Scout and provide the name of at least one, but the Scout must be allowed to work with registered and approved counselors of his or her choice.

7.0.4.7 Limited Recourse for Unearned Merit Badges

From time to time, it may be discovered that merit badges could not actually have been *earned*. For example, a Scout who returns from summer camp or a merit badge fair with evidence for an extraordinary number of badges could raise concerns. If, after consulting with those involved in the merit badge program—such as an event coordinator, the camp director, or a merit badge counselor—it becomes plainly evident that a youth could not have actually and personally fulfilled requirements as written, then the limited recourse outlined below is available. It may result in a decision that some or all of the requirements for a badge could not have been fulfilled, and thus, that the badge was not actually earned.

After such a consultation, the unit leader, in a positive environment similar to that of a unit leader conference, discusses with the Scout the circumstances under which a merit badge in question was approved. A parent or an assistant unit leader should attend as an observer. The Scout shall not be retested on the requirements, but a conversation with the Scout can reveal if he or she attended the class, and actually and personally fulfilled all the requirements. Such a discussion could cover who taught a class, what sort of activities took place, where and when they occurred, how testing was done, what the Scout might have brought home from the class, and other similar process-oriented details.

In most cases, with a fair and friendly approach, a Scout who did not complete the requirements will admit it. Short of this, however, if it remains clear under the circumstances that some or all of the requirements could not have been met, then the merit badge is not reported or awarded, and does not count toward advancement. The unit leader then offers the name of at least one other merit badge counselor through whom any incomplete requirements may be finished. Note that in this case a merit badge is not “taken away” because, although signed off, it was never actually earned.

Just as we avoid penalizing Scouts for the mistakes of adults, it should be a rare occurrence that a unit leader finds the need to question whether merit badges have been earned. This procedure for recourse is limited and reserved only for clear and evident cases of noncompletion or nonparticipation. For example, the recourse could be allowed when it would not have been possible to complete a specific requirement at the location of the class, event, or camp; if time available was not sufficient—perhaps due to class size or other factors—for the counselor to observe that each Scout personally and actually completed all the requirements; if time available was insufficient for a “calendar” requirement such as for Personal Fitness or Personal Management; or if multiple merit badges in question were scheduled at the same time.

This procedure is not to be viewed as an opportunity for retesting on requirements, for interjecting another set of standards over those of a merit badge counselor, or for

debating issues such as whether a Scout was strong enough, mature enough, or old enough to have completed requirements.

Unit leaders who find it necessary to make use of this recourse must act quickly—if possible, within 30 days of discovery. It is inappropriate to delay a Scout’s advancement with anything less than a prompt decision.

If Scouts or their parents or guardians believe a unit leader has incorrectly determined that a merit badge was not earned, or more than 30 days have passed without a reasonable explanation for the lack of a decision, they should address their concerns with the unit committee. They should first, however, develop a thorough understanding of the merit badge requirements and that each one must be passed exactly as it is set forth.

Upon encountering any merit badge program where BSA standards are not upheld, unit leaders are strongly encouraged to report the incident to the council advancement committee, preferably using the form found in the appendix (see “Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns,” 11.1.0.0).

7.0.4.8 Unofficial Worksheets and Learning Aids

Worksheets and other materials that may be of assistance in earning merit badges are available from a variety of places including unofficial sources on the internet and even troop libraries. Use of these aids is permissible as long as the materials can be correlated with the current requirements that Scouts must fulfill. Completing “worksheets” may suffice where a requirement calls for something in writing, but this would not work for a requirement where the Scout must discuss, tell, show, or demonstrate, etc. Note that Scouts shall not be required to use these learning aids in order to complete a merit badge.

7.0.4.9 Merit Badge Opportunities With Non-Scouting Organizations or Businesses

There may be opportunities for Scouts to earn merit badges through participation in activities presented by organizations or businesses not affiliated with the BSA. Zoos, museums, recreation centers, major home improvement stores, and even individuals may be involved. There are, however, a number of important considerations council advancement committees should keep in mind.



It is permissible for outside organizations or businesses to present various programs where fulfilling merit badge requirements is *incidental*. For example, a youth recreation center or school could present a computer camp for the purpose of teaching computer coding skills—even charge a participation fee—and mention in promotional material that participants may fulfill some of the requirements for the Programming merit badge. That some merit badge requirements might be fulfilled during such an activity does not make it a Scouting activity, and therefore the activity would not require BSA approval. A registered and approved merit badge counselor, however, would have to sign off on each requirement passed.

Even when merit badge opportunities are incidental to the programs presented, outside organizations are not allowed to use protected BSA trade names, images, logos, or artwork without the express written consent of the Boy Scouts of America. If registered and approved merit badge counselors are available within the organization, then merit badges may be signed off according to BSA policies and procedures. That counselors are present, however, and approving completions, does not make the program a Scouting activity.

Outside organizations and businesses are not allowed to present classes, events, or similar activities that are largely for the purpose of offering merit badges—even if no fee is involved—without approval from the local council. For example, the recreation center mentioned above would not be allowed to present a “Sports merit badge camp” without permission. A written agreement should be involved in approving such a merit badge opportunity. The council must assure compliance with applicable BSA policies and procedures, including those related to Youth Protection and safety, National Council consent to use protected brand images, and the merit badge counseling and approval process.

The council advancement committee should be involved in the approval. However, because there are issues beyond advancement, the Scout executive should be the one to grant final permission. Council approval should not be granted if it is believed merit badge opportunities will generate a profit or revenue that is surplus to recovering costs related to presenting the opportunity.

7.0.4.10 Charging Fees for Merit Badge Opportunities

Council, district, and multiunit merit badge fairs have become increasingly popular over the past several years. While they provide a service to our Scouts, they should not be presented as fundraisers. There are many other methods available to raise the funds necessary to operate the Scouting programs at any level.

Although charging fees for merit badge fairs, clinics, or similar events is not prohibited, any fees charged should be limited to recovering the costs related to presenting the

opportunity. Local councils and districts may also include in the fee a reasonable contribution to the council’s overhead and administrative costs. Using merit badge events as fundraisers, however, is discouraged, and councils may exercise their authority not to approve them.

In considering whether to approve outside organizations, businesses, or individuals for the presentation of merit badge opportunities, the same limitations should be placed on fees. Any fees should cover only those costs directly related to presenting the opportunity.

Such costs could include wages an organization or business pays to employees who present classes. However, if employees are to serve as merit badge counselors, they must be registered and approved (see topics 7.0.1.2, 7.0.1.3, and 7.0.1.4).

The Boy Scouts of America is proud of its tradition of volunteer service. It does not endorse merit badge opportunities where fees are paid directly to individuals, or to groups of individuals, especially if the individuals are looking to Scouting as a source of income that could be considered taxable. The council advancement committee should not approve merit badge counselors who will not honor the tradition of volunteer service.

7.0.4.11 About Merit Badge Prerequisites

Some merit badges appear to have “prerequisites.” The Emergency Preparedness merit badge, for example, requires the earning of the First Aid merit badge. But since the requirement does not state that First Aid must be earned before beginning work on the other Emergency Preparedness requirements, it is not, by definition, a prerequisite. It is just another requirement. Even though “Earn the First Aid Merit badge” is the first requirement, it need not be the first requirement fulfilled. It is just that the Emergency Preparedness merit badge is not finished until after the First Aid merit badge is completed.

The First Aid merit badge, too, has a requirement that reads a little like a prerequisite. It calls for current knowledge of the first-aid requirements for Tenderfoot through First Class ranks. It would make sense that a counselor and a Scout would explore this knowledge first, but doing so is not mandated. Other requirements could be learned and tested before this one.

On the other hand, the Swimming merit badge, for all practical purposes, is a very real prerequisite for the Scuba Diving merit badge. Requirement 2 for Scuba Diving clearly states that the Scout must earn the Swimming merit badge before completing the remaining requirements.