

7.0.0.0 Section 7.

The Merit Badge Program

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 provide a number of benefits, blue cards can support the intended interaction between Scout, unit leader, and merit badge counselor, and provide a hard copy for evidence and reference. Councils are encouraged to take advantage of innovations such as Scouting America’s Scoutbook Plus system, spreadsheets, etc. Units and other councils must accept these alternative forms of documentation as long as it provides the information necessary to track and record the Scout’s progress and all steps of the merit badge process were followed.

Since blue cards support the merit badge process as it is intended to function, the [Guide to Advancement](#) continues to reference them. It is required that when alternatives to blue cards are used, advancement administrators at all levels will carry on the processes, adult interactions, documentation, and other nuances that make the merit badge process such a critical element in Scouting America mission achievement.

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 and growth opportunities from association with enthusiastic subject matter experts. 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.

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 _____

Scouting America

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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 essential. Whichever system is used, completion of individual 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 and celebrate their success. Note that this discussion is not to be a retesting on the requirements, as the merit badge counselor has done the testing (4.2.1.2). If the unit leader believes the badge was unearned, they may conduct a review as outlined in 7.0.4.7. If they believe the counselor did not uphold BSA standards, this should be reported (see 11.1.0.0). 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 must meet with their unit leader or their delegate. 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 meeting is a required part of the merit badge process, and that it should be documented either by the unit leader’s signature (or their delegate’s) on the Application for Merit Badge (blue card) or in Scoutbook Plus or other method.

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. Units must not impose rank or age requirements for merit badge work.

The Scout may want to take advantage of opportunities at merit badge fairs or midways, or at rock-climbing gyms or whitewater rafting trips, etc. This is acceptable, but must be discussed with the unit leader well before the event. Group instruction has advantages and disadvantages (see “Group Instruction,” 7.0.3.2 and related topics 7.0.4.9, 7.0.4.12, and 7.0.4.10). Another discussion with the unit leader must 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 contacts 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 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.

A Scout who avoids or ignores the unit leader’s role and completes a badge without first discussing it with the leader should be counseled about the proper way to start a merit badge, and the discussion should be documented. If the Scout (or the parents) continue to ignore the established process, merit badges will not be recorded as “earned” until the Scout has demonstrated, told, shown, etc. that they have met all the requirements to the satisfaction of a merit badge counselor acceptable to the unit leader.

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 counselor to be used.

Lacking agreement, the Scout must be allowed to work with the registered and approved counselor of their choice.

To ensure they understand what needs to be done, 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. Scouts may work on any merit badge at any time, regardless of how many other merit badges they are working on, rank, age, or other circumstances. It is the counselor's decision whether to accept prior work.

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, but work that did not meet the requirement as written must not be accepted. The Scout should be gently informed as to why the requirement was not met, and how they can rectify the issue (up to and including repeating the activity, if necessary).

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

It is acceptable for a registered counselor to approve merit badges for Scouts in any council. This is important in areas where counselors are scarce, when Scouts are away from home and want to continue advancing, or when merit badge experiences include high-quality online components provided in another council. However, they must still follow all procedures, including the conversation between Scout and unit leader prior to working with a counselor.

Earning a large number of merit badges from a small number of counselors, or only from counselors known to the Scout, robs the Scout of the opportunity to learn and grow.

Counselors may work with and pass any member, including their own children, wards, or relatives. However, association with adults is one of the methods of Scouting, and working with family members and known adults can deprive Scouts of the opportunity to learn and grow. Scouts meeting with counselors beyond their families and beyond own units will benefit from the perspectives of many "teachers" and will learn more as a result. Scouts should be encouraged to reach out if at all possible.

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.

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 Scouting 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 safety requirements may use the services of helpers who do. Details can be found below, in the *Guide to Safe Scouting*, and in merit badge pamphlets.

General Supervision Requirements

- All merit badge activities must be conducted in accordance with Scouting America safety strategies, and be supervised by mature and conscientious adults at least 21 years old and trained in the applicable program. For example, Safe Swim Defense for swimming, Safety Afloat for watercraft, and Winter Activities (www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss12/#b) for snow sports. Counselors 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. Counselors and advancement administrators should consult the merit badge pamphlets for details and to maintain awareness of changes and updates as pamphlets are revised.

Citizenship in Society. Completion of the [DEI volunteer training](#) is strongly recommended for all counselors; it includes integral information on key concepts the Scouts will be studying: training.scouting.org/courses/SCO_1800/.

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 Climb On Safely training and who understands the risks inherent to these activities. Training as a Scouting America 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 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. All counselors should have formal training in the knowledge and skills indicated by the requirements, experience in teaching such skills to youth, and experience in identifying and managing risks associated with the activities involved. Current policies are found at www.scouting.org/health-and-safety/gss/gss02 and supersede any other publications or literature.

Canoeing. Appropriate credentials include: current or previous certification as Scouting America Aquatics Instructor, designation as an instructor or successful completion of council sponsored or council approved training courses in canoeing such as the Scouting America Paddlecraft Safety course or current or previous certification as an instructor in canoeing by the American Canoe Association Level One. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Kayaking. Appropriate credentials include: current or previous certification as Scouting America Aquatics Instructor, designation as an instructor or successful completion of council sponsored or council approved training courses in kayaking such as the Scouting America Paddlecraft Safety, current American Canoe Association Level One Kayak Instructor Certification or a higher level of ACA Kayak Instructor Certification. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Lifesaving. An appropriate credential is current or previous certification as BSA Aquatics Instructor. Persons trained as instructors for Aquatics Supervision: Swimming & Water Rescue or as lifeguard instructors (e.g. BSA, American Red Cross, or YMCA) are also qualified provided they self-study and practice the material in the pamphlet. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Motor Boating. Appropriate credentials include: current or previous certification by an organization (such as the National Safe Boating Council, the U.S. Power Squadrons, the US Coast Guard Auxiliary or the U.S. Powerboating

component of U.S. Sailing) that meets the voluntary National On-Water Standards for Powerboating or the NASBLA National Boating Education Standards for Powerboating. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Rowing. Appropriate credentials include: current or previous certification as Aquatics Instructor, Scouting America or U.S. Rowing provided they self-study and practice material in the pamphlet. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Scuba Diving. Appropriate credentials include an Open Water Scuba Certification (or higher rating) for all requirements except Requirement #4. Requirement #4 must be accomplished by a Scuba Instructor from a certification agency recognized by Scouting America and verified by the counselor. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Small Boat Sailing. Appropriate credentials include instructor certification with a recognized sailing agency or school, U.S. Sailing, American Sailing Association for sailing experience with different hull types including the rig being used for instruction. Counselors should also be familiar with the requirements for the Small Boat Sailing Merit Badge and be able to perform the skills associated with each requirement. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Swimming. At a minimum, current or previous certification as Aquatics Instructor, Scouting America or instructors from the American Red Cross or YMCA. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Water Sports. Appropriate credentials include: current or previous certification by an organization (such as the National Safe Boating Council, the U.S. Power Squadrons, the US Coast Guard Auxiliary, BoatUS or the U.S. Powerboating component of US Sailing that meets the voluntary National On-Water Standards for Powerboating or the NASBLA National Boating Education Standards for Powerboating. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

Whitewater. Appropriate credentials include American Canoe Association Level Three River Kayak or River Canoe Instructor Certification, or a higher level of ACA River Kayak or River Canoe Instructor Certification. The council advancement committee may approve counselors with similar experience and training in knowledge, skill, safety, and instruction.

The qualifications for range and target activities 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 National Range & Target Activities Manual* for further details.

Archery. Archery activities must be supervised by a National Camping School-trained Range & Target Activities Director, a USA Archery Instructor, a National Field Archery Association instructor, or an Archery Rangemaster. To qualify as an Archery Rangemaster, the individual must be at least 18 and trained by a National Camping School-trained Range & Target Activities Director or a USA Archery/NFAA Instructor using the syllabus found in the National Range & Target Activities Manual.

Rifle Shooting. The merit badge counselor is responsible for ensuring all instruction or other activities involving the handling of firearms or live ammunition is consistent with state and federal law and supervised by a certified National Camping School (NCS) Range & Target Activities Director, or National Rifle Association (NRA) Rifle Shooting Instructor. Instruction or other activities involving handling muzzleloaders must be supervised by an NCS Range & Target Activities Director or NRA/National Muzzleloader Rifle Association (NMLRA)-certified Muzzleloader Firearms Instructor. Live fire must be supervised by an NRA-certified Range Safety Officer (RSO) and an NRA/NMLRA-certified Instructor in the discipline of the firearm being shot. The Instructor and the RSO may not be the same person. Note: commercial shooting ranges may provide properly certified RSOs. Please reference the National Range & Target Activities Manual for required range supervision ratios.

Shotgun Shooting. The merit badge counselor is responsible for ensuring 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 Range & Target Activities Director or NRA Shotgun Instructor or Coach. Instruction or other activities involving handling muzzle-loading shotguns must be supervised by an NCS Range & Target Activities Director or NRA/NMLRA-certified Muzzleloading Shotgun Instructor. Live fire must be supervised by an NRA-certified Range Safety Officer (RSO) and an NRA-certified Instructor in the discipline of the firearm being shot. The Instructor and the RSO may not be the same person. Commercial shooting ranges may provide properly certified RSOs. Please reference the National Range & Target Activities Manual for required range supervision ratios.

All certifications listed above must be current.

7.0.1.2 Merit Badge Counselor Registration

There are two aspects to merit badge counselor registration: 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, are permitted to register as merit badge counselors. It is important too, that potential counselors have a good rapport with unit leaders and Scout youth. Counselors register using Scouting America's standard adult registration form with position code 42, and they must reregister annually.

Council advancement committees determine who at the council or district level approves 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, education, and training to offer safe, quality experiences in the badges they counsel. The intent is for Scouts to learn from those with an appropriate level of expertise and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Counselors are approved for specific merit badges, and may only sign off on those for which they have been approved by the Council Advancement Committee or their designee.

A well-qualified and enthusiastic 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.

Anyone who desires to serve as a merit badge counselor, whether currently unregistered or registered in another position, must complete an adult application.

Scoutmasters serving as merit badge counselors.

Scoutmasters wishing to counsel and sign off on merit badges must qualify and register in the position of merit badge counselor and be approved according to council procedures just like any other adult leader.

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.

7.0.1.5 Counselor Reregistration

Merit badge counselors will receive an email from national around the annual anniversary of their registration date, reminding them to renew their membership for the next year. If they do not renew, they will be dropped from the roles and will no longer be approved to verify completion of requirements.

Addition and deletion of specific merit badges for individual merit badge counselors will be handled by the local council.

7.0.1.6 Training for Counselors

The council or district advancement committee must assure counselors understand Scouting 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 training.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 must 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 available from official council websites or tools such as Scoutbook Plus 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 must not have access. Their interaction with the Scoutmaster in discussing work on a badge, and obtaining a counselor's name and contact information, 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 must 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 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 must 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 must 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 must first confirm with the Scout that they have discussed with the unit leader their 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 or with a very small group, generally no more than three Scouts, and always following all current Youth Protection guidelines. Thus, this small-scale approach is the recommended best practice for merit badge instruction and requirement fulfillment. Units,

The 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 and the counselor meet, as many times as necessary. The counselor reviews work, to verify that the Scout has **actually and personally** completed each requirement exactly as written. For merit badge counselor meetings only, the Scout, parent or guardian, and counselor can meet. In a group setting with two or more Scouts, there must be at least two registered leaders present, in accordance with the [Guide to Safe Scouting](#).
7. Partial progress is recorded as requirements are completed.
8. The Scout finishes the requirements.
9. The counselor approves completion and signs the blue card or other documentation.
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.

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.

7.0.3.1 Counseling Sessions and Certifying Completion

A youth member must never 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. If merit badge counseling includes any web-based interaction, it must be conducted in accordance with the 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. The counselor and Scout then discuss what was done, and how. 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," allowing them to reach more Scouts while 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 the specific Scout has 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 while the youth was a registered Scouts BSA or qualified Venturer or Sea Scout. Pictures, initialed partial blue cards from other counselors, 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 Scouting America 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 Program Committee. 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 Scouting America policies and procedures—including those related to 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 their 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 registered and approved 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. Partial completions have no expiration except the Scout’s 18th birthday. Units, districts, or councils must 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 Scouting America 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

Requirements for each merit badge are reviewed at least every two years 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 appear there, any Scout beginning work on a merit badge must use the new or revised requirement. Scouts who have started work on a merit badge under the old requirements may finish using the old requirements.

Changes may also be introduced in a revised merit badge pamphlet, youth handbook, or other official Scouting America 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.

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. When Scouting America announces updated requirements for a merit badge, Scouts may continue working on the version they have started, unless the announcement specifically says otherwise (e.g. because of a safety concern). Merit badge versions that are no longer available for advancement recording on a digital application (i.e. Scoutbook Plus, Scouting App, etc.) will have to be tracked independently. When all requirements from that version have been completed, users may record a final completion date without recording work on individual requirements.

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 Scouting America 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 their choice.

7.0.4.7 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 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 must 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 Scouting America 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 unofficial sources. 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 not for a requirement where the Scout must discuss, tell, show, or demonstrate, etc. Note that Scouts must 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 Scouting America. 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 Scouting America 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 Scouting America trade names, images, logos, or artwork without the express written consent of Scouting America. If registered and approved merit badge counselors are available within the organization, then merit badges may be signed off according to Scouting America 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 Scouting America 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 must not be used 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 must be limited to recovering the direct costs related to presenting the opportunity. Local councils and districts may include in the fee a reasonable contribution to the council's overhead and administrative costs. Using merit badge events as fundraisers, however, is prohibited, and councils must not 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).

Scouting America is proud of its tradition of volunteer service. It does not allow 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.

7.0.4.12 Online Merit Badge Classes

Merit badges are meant to be a personal activity, involving real interaction between a Scout and an enthusiastic expert in the subject at hand. Group instruction, online meetings, etc., may, depending on the implementation, dilute the value of this experience. While some merit badges easily lend themselves to virtual interaction, others are better conducted in an in-person environment. While the lack of merit badge counselors in some areas and advances in technology have increased use of virtual platforms, care must be taken that this does not diminish the learning experience.

Councils may implement guidance for virtual options, with specific policies based on availability of counselors, Scout's medical conditions, and so on. The following guidance will help determine whether or not virtual options should be authorized. As discussed in 5.0.8.0, requirements to show, tell, discuss, explain, or demonstrate must not be substituted with checklists or forms under any circumstances.

- Just registering and being logged in is not sufficient. The Scout must be engaged, and must actually and personally complete all requirements exactly as written, just as they would for an in-person class.
- Chat options should be disabled, to prevent one-on-one contact with Scouts.
- Cameras should be on, and a parent or guardian present with the Scout. Requirements to show, tell, or demonstrate may not be substituted with checklists or forms under any circumstances.
- Any merit badge counselors not following all procedures and policies outlined by this document and local councils, including but not limited to all youth protection policies, must be reported to their local council advancement committee for investigation.

Online Merit Badge Class Guidelines At A Glance

	GOOD	CONCERNING	AVOID
Number in class	1 to 3 Scouts	4 to 8 Scouts	More than 8 Scouts
Counselor-to-Scout ratio	1:3 or lower	1:4 or higher	1:10 or higher
Sign-up	Scout initiated	Unclear	Parent initiated
Requirements covered	Expressly addressed	Not addressed or unclear	Altered or deleted requirements
Partials	Expressly addressed	Not addressed or unclear	Completion guaranteed
Cost	\$0 to minimal	Any unexplained amount	Amount clearly exceeds costs
Cost explanation	Clearly provided	Not clear	Refuse to provide

Note: For merit badge counselor meetings only, the Scout and counselor may meet as long as a parent or guardian also is present. In a group setting with at least two Scouts, there must be at least two registered leaders present. All merit badge classes and counseling sessions must always be conducted in accordance with the Guide to Safe Scouting. See also section 7.0.3.1.