LISA GARCIA WAS A MEMBER OF THE LAST CREW to serve on the USS Enterprise, America’s first nuclear powered aircraft carrier. Moving on from that historic vessel was daunting. Like many transitioning service members, the military machinist was uncertain about her civilian career.

“During the last year of my enlistment I was worried about what I was going to do for work when I separated,” she recalls. “I didn’t want to get out and go back to a minimum wage job and I didn’t see a future in being a machinist in the civilian sector. I looked into certificate programs at a local college and found interest in the pharmacy technician program.”

Garcia completed the program before separating and decided to use her GI Bill to continue her education in pharmaceuticals at the University of Rhode Island†.

“Once I got to the university I learned about another program called biotechnology, which also falls under the umbrella of pharmaceuticals,” she says. “After speaking to the director and hearing about the things companies in this field were accomplishing I decided that this is where I wanted to be.”

Garcia expects to earn her bachelor’s degree in medical laboratory science (biotechnology track) in May 2018. We asked her about her transition to campus, her experience as a student veteran, and her best advice for service members considering a post-military education.

How did you decide which school to attend?
Garcia: I was relocating to Rhode Island and I originally looked at URI because they have a great pharmacy program, which was what I originally wanted to study. I found all the information on the school’s website. I contacted the veteran student services office and they helped me take care of everything. It was a very smooth transition.

What are your goals once you’re armed with your new degree?
Garcia: I haven’t decided if I want to enter the work force right away or continue on to graduate school. Ideally, I would be able to do both, but I don’t know yet.

Do you feel that your military experience has made you a better student?
Garcia: The military made me more goal-oriented. While on the ship there are numerous qualifications we have to obtain and sometimes to get them you have to study and work on it for months. I think this has helped me be a better student because school is a big commitment.

Did you have any difficulty adjusting to campus culture?
Garcia: I think the biggest struggle was becoming a student, learning what study methods work best for me and figuring out how to manage time while juggling classes, work and a home life.
It was great to find a little bit of that here at school and I'm a sucker for war stories.

If you could redo your transition to school, what would you do differently?

Garcia: I think I would have started at the community college first and then transferred to the university. I think the classes at the community college are a little slower pace and that would have worked out for me a little better. I struggled my first semester at URI due to the time management and working. It took a while for me to get into a "student" routine.

Are there any blunders you would urge service members transitioning to a post-military education to avoid?

Garcia: I didn't have any issues school-wise; I think it was more of an emotional struggle for me. Talk to someone about it. Change can be hard, especially when you don't know what's next. I like to have a plan.

What is your best advice for such transitioning service members?

Garcia: There are A LOT of resources available to veterans. Learn them, use them. Apply for military unemployment, apply for health care through the VA; these are things I found out later. Sometimes it's hard to ask for help or information, but you have to. There is a lot out there and people want to help. Use the veteran resource centers – they are useful.