

SCOUTING AMERICA GOLDEN EMPIRE COUNCIL PLACER DISTRICT

Following up on our January discussion of a potential District Merit Badge Fair, here are my notes and additional comments:

There is nothing on the GEC site on this. I am attaching pp. 47-48 of the 2025 *Guide to Advancement* that deals with group instruction. However, that's mostly a summary of the separate document *Merit Badge Group Instruction Guide*, so I'm attaching that as well.

District Leadership:

As I'd indicated, the bandwidth of District Key3 plus is pretty much at its limit, particularly with a new major calendar event, the Cub summer camp, added. We would need (3?, 4?) units to lead this event.

First United Methodist is very generous with facilities use. Assuming there is not a conflict, we should be able to secure the hall, the adjacent large room with partition, and two meeting rooms in the adjacent building. Also, large outdoor spaces, weather permitting.

Considerations Offered at Our Last Session

Thanks again to T121 for leading the discussion. In addition to the considerations in the two attached documents, they offered the following:

General:

- Didactic MBs only, but mix in some fun ones, e.g., geology or pets, with suitable Eagle-required, such as citizenship MBs.
- About 10 badges are manageable.

Prepping for the Day:

- Announce 6 mos. in advance
- Attendees to be instructed that worksheets are completed to the extent possible & prerequisites completed
- Set class limits in consultation with counselors light of preference, experience, & complexity.

Prepping for the Day (contd.):

- Set 2 hr. sessions
- Attendees to bring blue cards prepped.

Day of:

- Have ASMs on hand to open blue cards
- Post/provide a map to show session locations
- Beyond that, T121 is following the practices, such as the importance of requiring participation from each attendee, that are set out in the appended materials, so please review those and I won't recap them here.

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.

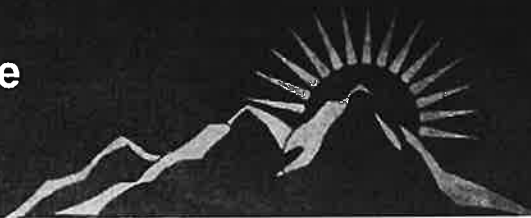
7.0.3.3 Partial Completions

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.

Merit Badge Group Instruction Guide

A Guide for Units, Districts, and Councils



Introduction

This document is designed to help Scouting volunteers and approved community organizations apply the characteristics of a high-quality merit badge program when planning any merit badge event where group instruction will take place. A careful reading of section 7 of the *Guide to Advancement*, No. 33088, will provide further information and will support compliance with BSA merit badge policies and safety guidelines. Additional resources, such as information on how to be an effective merit badge counselor, are available online at www.scouting.org/advancement, and through local district and council advancement committees.

Per topic 7.0.3.2 of the *Guide to Advancement*, it is acceptable to provide group instruction for merit badges, but “group instruction should be focused on those scenarios where the benefits are compelling.” The term “group” is left open-ended in the *Guide to Advancement*, as merit badges, resources, circumstances, and counselor experience can lend themselves to a wide range of instructional scenarios. In some cases, a group may be as small as three or four Scouts, while in other cases, groups may be larger. Regardless of group size, each Scout must still “actually and personally” fulfill each requirement. This guidance makes clear that the focus must be on the quality of each Scout’s counseling experience, and not on the number of Scouts who can take a class or complete a badge.

In instances where group instruction is necessary or attractive as part of the learning process, care must be taken to ensure that each Scout still receives personal counseling to support individual efforts. Simply taking notes, completing a workbook, or listening during a group instruction session does not constitute completing a requirement. To award merit badges in such a manner takes away from the Scout’s opportunity for learning and personal growth through exploring the merit badge topic.

It is important to note that 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. See the *Guide to Advancement*, topic 7.0.4.9, for details.

Planning a Merit Badge Event

Below are several points that event organizers should consider carefully while planning a high-quality merit badge event. Volunteers are encouraged to think critically about each topic, and consider which approach would provide the highest quality of experience to the Scouts.

- **Event Planning.** Carefully consider the purpose of the event, which merit badges will be offered, and whether they lend themselves to group instruction. Assess the benefits for Scouts of offering selected badges at the event instead of through direct counseling. Factors to consider in determining which badges to offer may include strong interest from the Scouts in a subject area, access to counselors who may otherwise be difficult to source, availability of special resources that enhance the learning experience, or simply badges needed by Scouts to continue their Scouting journey.
- **Facilities and Materials.** Assess what facilities, special materials, or resources are needed and available to support instruction of the selected badges. Understand how many Scouts the facilities and resources can appropriately support for each badge.
- **Securing Experienced Counselors.** Group instruction is best done by experienced counselors who are comfortable in such a setting. Experience is valuable in determining which requirements to address, estimating how much time is required for instruction, and managing individual testing. **The only persons authorized to sign off on a merit badge are adult members of the BSA who are registered as merit badge counselors (registration code 42), current in Youth Protection training, and approved for that specific badge.** Additional experts or support volunteers may serve as instructors under the direction of the merit badge counselor to facilitate greater personal attention to each Scout, if needed. Offering the national BSA advancement education presentation, “The Essentials of Merit Badge Counseling,” to all volunteers staffing the event is highly recommended before group merit badge functions. See www.scouting.org/advancement.

- **Council Approval and Costs.** Local council advancement committees have the responsibility to review plans and budgets to ensure compliance with local and national policies before authorizing an event to be held within the council's jurisdiction. Topic 7.0.4.10 of the *Guide to Advancement* states that local councils and districts may also include in the fee a reasonable contribution to the council's actual overhead and administrative costs resulting from the event. However, the events themselves—whether Scouting- or community-sponsored—should not be fundraisers.
- **Registration.** Web-based registration may be convenient to use, but care must be taken to ensure that personal information concerning a youth is well protected. Before a Web-based registration application is used, the local Scout executive should review the licensing agreement and grant approval after reasonably ensuring the protection of personal identification data.
- **Setting Expectations in Advance.** Merit badges are intended to encourage individual initiative as each Scout selects topics they will pursue as they advance. Merit badge events may provide a means to support those interests through access to counselors and resources, but they do not guarantee the badge can be completed on-site. For each merit badge, consult with the selected counselors to determine which requirements should be completed before, during, or after the event. **For many badges—perhaps even most of them—partial completion is not only acceptable but expected from a merit badge event.** Communicate these expectations to participants, parents, counselors, and leaders prior to registration, and provide a means for the Scouts electing to finish the badge to contact counselors after the event as they complete additional requirements.
- **Smaller Groups Are Preferred.** Class sizes should be set appropriately to ensure each Scout receives high-quality, personal instruction and benefits from the counselor's unique knowledge. This suggests that **most classes should be small**—perhaps no larger than a patrol in size. For larger groups, qualified instructors assigned to smaller groups should assist the merit badge counselor in order to ensure Scouts receive individual attention. Instructors should be knowledgeable about the merit badge subject, but they do not necessarily need to be registered as merit badge counselors.
- **Differentiate Between Instruction and Completing Requirements.** Some events present opportunities for Scouts to learn skills without being able to actually and personally demonstrate or discuss a requirement. In these cases, the requirement must not be marked as completed. Clarify this before the event, and provide instructions for Scouts to complete the requirements with a properly registered merit badge counselor after the event.
- **Make Certain Each Scout Personally Completes Each Requirement.** Group instruction does not mean group testing. **Each Scout must complete each requirement as written, without exception.** For example, if the requirement says to discuss or demonstrate, then each Scout must individually discuss or demonstrate whatever is required. It is not acceptable for the Scout to listen to someone else discuss or demonstrate the subject. There are no exceptions due to lack of facilities, materials, appropriate weather, or time. "Group tasks" do not fulfill requirements except in those cases where a group is needed to perform a specific task as stated in the requirement. While Scouts are welcome and encouraged to explore topics beyond the merit badge requirements, the requirements as written are the only factors to be evaluated in determining whether to award the badge.
- **Notes and Worksheets.** At the counselor's discretion, Scouts may use worksheets for note-taking, but shall not be required to use them. Worksheets may be used by a Scout to refresh their memory while being tested for specific requirements. However, **completing a worksheet does not constitute completing a requirement.**
- **Record Keeping.** A signed Application for Merit Badge, No. 34124, commonly known as a "blue card," is provided to each Scout before the event by their Scoutmaster, per the process described in topics 7.0.0.2 and 7.0.0.3 of the *Guide to Advancement*. The Application for Merit Badge is the only BSA-recognized record of a Scout's work toward completing a merit badge.
- **Event Guide.** Organizers should publish an event guide at the time that registration is opened. Information should include classes offered, prerequisites for the classes, requirements that will NOT be covered, items needed or supplied by the participant, fees to cover the event, and unique fees for specific merit badges.

Evaluating the Event

After the event, use feedback to identify opportunities for improvement.

- Collect feedback from the Scouts about their satisfaction with the event and the quality of their experiences. Did they have enough time to learn the material presented? Do they understand how to follow up on partial completions?
- Speak to the merit badge counselors about their experience. Do they believe the event was effective? What changes would they recommend to improve the quality of instruction for the Scouts?
- Ask unit leaders to provide their thoughts on the quality of the event. Do they believe the Scouts received quality instruction? Are they satisfied that each Scout completed the requirements signed off on the blue cards? Did the event help them in supporting a quality Scouting program in their unit?
- It is recommended that the form Reporting Merit Badge Counseling Concerns, *Guide to Advancement*, topic 11.1.0.0, be distributed to unit volunteers, along with advancement committee contact information. Unit leaders can use the form to report any concerns about merit badge instruction, whether at the event, through individual counseling, at summer camp, or through any other avenue by which Scouts pursue merit badges.

The event organizers should use this feedback as well as their personal observations to discuss subjects such as the following:

- What worked? What didn't work?
- Which merit badges should be offered in the future? Which badges should not be offered?
- Were the class sizes appropriate for each badge? Were prerequisites well defined in advance?
- Were the merit badge counselors and instructors well prepared? Did they accomplish the expected outcomes for each badge offered?
- Did each Scout perform the requirements that were signed off? Were there any concerns about the quality of work or Scouts receiving credit for work they did not personally complete?
- Were follow-up instructions for partial completions provided to participants, and were the instructions reasonable for completing the badges if Scouts elect to do so?
- How can council and district advancement committees better assist in planning, developing, and implementing the merit badge program at future events?

Again, the foremost concern is with the quality of the experience for each individual Scout. An event that provides access to excellent instruction and plenty of personal learning should be considered a success, even if few merit badges are completed; Scouts can choose to follow up after the event to work on unfinished requirements. However, the event itself might just be the inspiration needed for a Scout to take that first step toward a new skill, hobby, lifelong interest, or even a career.

The *Guide to Advancement* and other educational materials may be viewed online or downloaded at www.scouting.org/advancement.

