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SOCIAL SKILLS

Guide to education after high school: Here's what you need to know

Once your teen has decided to pursue education after high school, you may have a lot of questions. Here's a guide to all of your options.



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Continuing education after high school is a path that many students take. However, what may seem natural for some students may be completely wrong for others. Gone are the days of specific grade-by-grade guidelines of where your student should be in their studies. The options can seem overwhelming. Once your teen has decided to pursue education after high school, you may have a lot of questions. What is right for them? Is there a difference between colleges and universities? How do I know if my teen should pursue an associate or bachelor's degree? And what does technical education even mean? Let's break it down.

Undergraduate degrees

When continuing education after high school, earning a degree or some sort of certification is widely required in pursuing many careers.

According to the Parent Toolkit State of Parenting Poll, 86% of parents say children need more than a high school degree to achieve the American Dream. Parents are not the only ones who see value in education after high school. The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults found that 80% of adults ages 18 to 29 say that education and/or training past high school “is more important than ever.” Undergraduate degrees are common for students pursuing two and four-year college programs.

Associate degree

An associate degree is a two-year degree, which means it usually takes two years to complete. Generally, an associate degree is 60 credits, which is equivalent to about 20 courses. Associate degrees typically focus on preparing students for entry-level work, basic skills and knowledge in their field of study. Students may complete general education requirements, and then transfer to a four-year degree at a different college or university.

Associate degrees are a good option for many students, including the most academically advanced ones. Depending on the school and program, associate degrees can be extremely rigorous. Some students who want to eventually go on to a four-year college or university may want to start in an associate degree program first. This can both help prove that the student is capable to thrive in a higher education environment and also save on costs. Many students, regardless of grades or scores, will start in an associate degree program to save money.

Many jobs require an associate degree. Engineering technicians, web developers, nurses, and nuclear technicians are career paths that students may consider when pursuing an associate degree.

2+2 programs

Many colleges and universities have 2+2 programs, partnering with local community colleges. These programs allow students to earn an associate degree from the community college and then enroll for their last two years at a four-year university or college to earn their bachelor's degree. These programs are great for students who are looking to minimize costs and still pursue a four-year degree.

Bachelor's Degree

A bachelor's degree is a four-year degree, which means it generally takes four years to complete, although not always. Some students may take five or six years to complete a bachelor's degree, which many people colloquially refer to as “super seniors.” This degree is generally 120 credits, or about 40 courses. Often, a bachelor's degree is considered the minimum level of education to work in many fields. Bachelor's degrees are also sometimes called baccalaureate degrees. The most common bachelor's degrees are:

- 1 Bachelor of Arts (BA degree)
- 2 Bachelor of Science (BS degree)
- 3 Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA degree)

Bachelor's degrees require a wide breadth of general education and liberal arts classes. Each student will have to complete a set of required courses for graduation, not all from the student's chosen major. These classes may include English, psychology, history, math and elective courses. A bachelor's degree not only aims to equip graduates with the skills and knowledge for their professional field, but also provides a well-rounded education.

Beyond an undergraduate degree, there are other certification options for students pursuing education after high school. We will be discussing these options shortly.

Four-year colleges and universities

You'll likely refer to your student entering either a college or a university program as a “college student” and share the news with family and friends as, “my daughter is going to college.” This is a normal way to refer to this stage of life. Colleges and universities are often talked about interchangeably, and while they are very similar educational institutions, there are a few key differences.

College

A college is a post-secondary institution that usually provides only undergraduate education, as opposed to offering graduate programs as well. This is not *always* the case, however this is the typical distinction from a university. Colleges also tend to be smaller than universities and have smaller class sizes. Depending on your student, smaller class sizes may be a good reason to choose a college over a university, as they can provide more personal learning opportunities.

Each individual college will vary depending on type and region, so additional research is necessary to find the best fit for your teen.

University

Universities are post-secondary institutions that provide undergraduate and graduate programs. They will often have medical or law schools as well. Universities tend to be bigger than colleges, with more diverse curriculum because of the larger student body. Usually, universities divide up their different programs into schools like the “College of Engineering” or the “College of Education,” through which specific programs can be completed. Universities will often dedicate quite a bit of time and resources to research. Professors at universities typically are conducting this research while also teaching classes. It is common to have a TA (teaching assistant), who is also a graduate student, teaching smaller, discussion-based classes, while the professor teaches several large lectures during the week.

Most states have what are known as “flagship” universities. This refers to the main public college in the state, which is likely quite large (i.e. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ohio State University, University of Texas, etc.). These universities typically draw students from both in-state and out-of-state, and often internationally as well. States will also have smaller public schools, usually drawing the majority of the student body from the region. In-state versus out-of-state universities (and colleges) can be a big financial determinant for where your teen goes to school, as state schools tend to be less expensive for students who are currently residents of that state.

Not all universities will operate in the same way. Additional research about each individual university is necessary to choose the best fit for your student. Students who enjoy environments where there are lots of degree options and people will likely find value in a university education.

Public vs. private schools

What mainly determines a public or private school (college or university) is how they are funded. Public colleges or universities are largely supported by state and some federal funding, in addition to student tuition. Private colleges or universities are supported by student tuition, endowment (which is the total value of the institution’s investments), and donations from alumni and other private donors. Public colleges or universities will often receive donations as well, but private colleges depend on these donations to operate. Because of this funding structure, private colleges tend to be more expensive than public colleges and universities, although this is not always the case. Because of the private contributions and endowments of private college, there often can be very good financial aid packages offered to students.

For more information on public vs. private schools, please see [Public vs. Private 101](#).

Four-year institutions can differ greatly from school-to-school. And although students pursuing undergraduate degrees from these schools typically complete them in four years, it is important to note that not all students will spend just four years at the institution. Taking the time to compare and contrast different schools based on location, tuition, professors, class-size, educational opportunities, major offerings, and more is essential to deciding which four-year school your student should attend.

Nonprofit vs. for-profit schools

Whether your student goes to a nonprofit or for-profit school, it is important to ensure that the school is accredited.

Nonprofit schools are the schools you likely picture when you think of college: four-year colleges and universities, community colleges, and private colleges. These schools receive funding from the state and/or federal government, tuition, and/or donations, and the money often goes directly back into the schools themselves. For-profit colleges function more like a business with investors who make money on their investment in the college. For-profit colleges tend to focus on job-specific curricula, often technical programs. You generally won't find English or History majors at for-profit colleges, but rather welding, manufacturing or technology fields.

Whether your student goes to a nonprofit or for-profit school, it is important to ensure that the school is accredited, meaning it is officially authorized and recognized by the [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) or another private educational association recognized by the government. Schools can receive accreditation from either national or regional accreditors. Most nationally accredited schools are for-profit, whereas most regionally accredited schools are nonprofit. If the schools are not accredited, most experts agree that students should avoid them. Degrees from these institutions can cause difficulties in the future.

When looking for schools, pay attention to what type of school it is you and your student are researching. Some for-profit schools can be a good option for students. Others struggle with enrollment, poor job placement, and accreditation issues. ITT Tech, a large chain of for-profit technical schools across the country, [shut down all of its schools recently](#) due to some of these issues. If your student does decide to attend a for-profit, nationally accredited school, note that in some cases, regionally accredited schools will not accept transfer credits from a nationally accredited school. This has to do with differing academic standards and course studies. Be aware of these distinctions when researching schools with your student.

Community college

An undergraduate associate degree is usually completed at a community college.

An undergraduate associate degree is usually completed at a community college, although sometimes it can be earned at a four-year college or university. Like four-year programs, students can still get some general education credits at a community college. This might be good for students who don't have a specific idea of what they want to do in the future, as it allows them to get a well-rounded education, explore options and hone in on a specialty.

There are many reasons students would want to choose a community college over a four-year institution. One of the biggest reasons students choose community college is financial. Community colleges tend to cost a lot less than four-year institutions, making it less expensive for students to acquire an associate degree or attain general education credits before transferring.

Community colleges also tend to have many part-time students, allowing students to work and take classes at the same time. For students with real financial barriers, starting slow and earning credits can be a successful route to earning a degree.

The class sizes at community colleges are generally significantly smaller than four-year institutions, although not always. Smaller class sizes allow for more personalized attention and one-on-one time with instructors, which is helpful for students who need extra help or like to learn at their own pace.

Professional certification

Community colleges provide professional certificates in many fields. These programs can quickly track students into a career at a lower cost. Some of these programs have been set up with local businesses; others are specifically designed with the industries in the region in mind. Some of the most popular certificate programs are in the healthcare, manufacturing, business and technology fields. Researching certification programs is important to find the best fit. Look for programs that address specific needs of businesses in the area, how well past students perform on state certification tests, and if these programs place students in the field as interns or apprentices for on-the-job training.

Professional certification is different from earning a degree because it provides specific skills that are required in a particular job. Some community colleges provide this type of certification, others do not. If students are looking for education that will more specifically focus on job training, apprenticeship programs are a good option.

For more information about community colleges, check out the content below.

Career and technical education

Career and technical education is a broad field that includes programs in high school, career centers, community and technical colleges, four-year universities and more.

After high school, this type of education is typically found in a technical program at community colleges or a specific technical school. Technical programs offer students hands-on experience related to a specific career. If your student graduates high school and already knows they want to pursue a career in a skilled profession, a technical program is a good option. Technical programs and schools provide programs to pursue careers like electricians, mechanics, pharmacy technicians, dental hygienists, nuclear technicians, machinists, and more. Compared to a four-year education, which requires general education credits and electives, this route is more streamlined and focuses on developing specific skills and knowledge for a chosen career path. Generally, upon completing these programs, a student will earn either a certification in their field or trade, or an associate degree. Usually, the programs that are highly skilled will earn your student certification in that field or trade.

There are other terms you may hear or see when researching career and technical education options. You will sometimes hear “trade school,” which refers to students studying a specific field like manufacturing; they are considered to be studying a trade. You may also hear “vocational training.” Vocational means education or training that is directed at a particular occupation and its skill set. Formerly, this was a common way to refer to these types of education options, however now, most schools and experts in the field are shifting away from the term “vocational.”

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is the process of learning a skilled occupation through paid, on-the-job training. Apprentices train under experienced workers in the occupation they are pursuing. Many technical schools and programs require students to complete some kind of apprenticeship so they have the opportunity work with a professional and learn more about the job they will be doing. Apprenticeship programs are often accompanied with classroom study through local community colleges or technical programs. This is a great way for students to explore their career path and learn more about the job they are pursuing while gaining experience from trained professionals.

Military

If your teen is interested in joining the military, there are many options for continuing education after high school.

First, it's important to find out more about each branch of the military and discuss where your teen's skills and interests align. These branches include the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy. The military can provide young adults with valuable job training and education. Students can work towards a college degree while serving in the military, and the military will provide tuition assistance for those who go on to pursue college or certification.

ROTC programs

ROTC stand for Reserve Officer Training Corps, which is a college program offered by over 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States. ROTC programs prepare young adults to become officers in the U.S. Military. The program exists in most military branches, including the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and the Air Force. These programs provide a mix of academic education on-campus as well as military training. Students who are interested in the military and pursuing a college education will find a structured career path through the ROTC. Students receive a ROTC scholarship to help cover the costs of attending a college and earning a bachelor's degree. It is important to remember that ROTC scholarships are in exchange for mandatory active duty service after completing your bachelor's program.

If your teen is seriously considered the military, meet with a recruiter to learn more. They can screen applicants to see if they are qualified for the military and provide you with more information about each specific branch.

Sorting through the options

While there are many options to pursue in continuing education after high school, after doing research, you and your teen will start to get a better idea of what the best fit is for them. The process can be challenging, but there are many people out there dedicated to helping ease the process. School counselors can be extremely helpful and provide you and your student with a wealth of information. It can be tempting to cave into social pressures and pursue the most prestigious degree, but at the end of the day, what could be better for your teen than pursuing a career through an education where they feel happy and fulfilled? That, after all, is what makes the education worth it.

Parent Toolkit resources were developed by NBC News Learn with the help of subject-matter experts, including Wendy Rock, Assistant Professor, Southeastern Louisiana University and Sharon Sevier, Director of Advocacy, Missouri School Counselor Association.

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