

INSPIRING POSSIBILITIES

College or Training Programs: How to Decide Tips for Youth

Your high school diploma opens the door to many exciting, new options. These might include your first full-time job, or part-time or full-time attendance at a technical school, community college, or university. You might want to obtain a certificate, an associate or bachelor's degree, or another type of credential. With so many choices, it can be challenging to decide which path to take. Here are some ideas you may want to consider before you graduate.

Choosing Your Path

It is important to explore all of the work and education options available to you when you graduate. Remember, you can return to school many times as your interests and goals change or as new employment opportunities become available.

Here are some choices you might want to discuss with family members and your Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

- *Working for a few years to save money or gain work experience before going to college or another training program.* This option might be attractive if you already have an interesting job you can continue in after high school graduation or if you have limited or no work experience.
- *Enrolling in a certificate program.* A certificate usually takes less than one or two years to complete. It can lead to job opportunities with higher pay than most first jobs or be a step toward a future degree. Some examples include carpenter, chef, cosmetologist, dental assistant, and nursing assistant. If you enter a certificate program, you can still decide to complete a degree program later.
- *Entering a technical school, community college, or university degree program.* These schools have a variety of admission requirements. Those with open admission typically accept anyone with a high school diploma or general educational development (GED) diploma. A

few colleges do not require a high school diploma or GED. In general, open colleges require applicants to take a placement exam to determine at which level to begin college course work. Students may be required to take remedial courses at the college. Two-year associate degrees are generally available along with four-year degrees. A two-year degree can be applied toward a four-year degree in the future.

Other colleges and universities require applicants to meet certain criteria. These schools tend to look for students with higher grade-point averages, rigorous academic preparation, high scores on the standardized college admissions tests such as the ACT or SAT, and personal qualities shown by volunteer and community work, in a personal essay, and sometimes in an interview.

Taking the First Steps

You have many choices to explore within each of these options. It is important to think about how the path you choose after high school will help you reach your future goals.

For some students, the path will be direct. For example, perhaps you want to work with animals and decide to complete a veterinary assistant certificate. Maybe you have already volunteered at a veterinary clinic, or worked part-time at a clinic while in high school, so you know that this career interests you. You can do an Internet search for veterinary assistant programs and learn about schools that offer this program, the entry requirements, the program cost and length, and facts about any financial support that might be available.

For others, the path will be indirect. For example, perhaps you want to do computer programming. You have taken high school computer classes and a community education class on computer programming. You are not sure, however,

if you want a two-year or four-year degree. You might start your exploration of college and university programs by doing an Internet search or receiving information from your guidance counselor or someone in the industry.

From there, you might make a list of the schools that interest you. Ask a family member to review your list with you and help you request more information.

Choosing a Program

As you collect the information, you will likely discover two or three schools with programs that especially appeal to you. If possible, arrange to visit your top three colleges and meet with a specialist at the college's Disability Resource Center. (It may be called the Disability Support Office or other similar name.) Bring your most recent special education evaluation and a list of all the accommodations you are using in high school or think you may require in college. Find out what types of academic accommodations are typically provided to students with disabilities on this campus. You may also want to ask whether this college will provide the specific accommodations that you will most likely need. Not all colleges provide the same types of accommodations.

For example, if you are using audiobooks and the college you are interested in only provides e-books, you might want to check if e-books will work for you. If they don't, ask if the school would be willing to provide your books in an audio format? Is a learning center available to all students for tutoring help? Ask the specialist other questions to help you determine if this is the right school for you.

You will also want to explore the campus. Can you reach the buildings efficiently, including when it is snowy and icy? Will you require special parking considerations? Will you be living in student housing? If so, will the housing meet your needs? What types of social activities are available on campus? Make a list of other questions you want to explore during your visit.

When you visit the Disability Resource Center, be able to describe the accommodations that work best for you in different learning situations:

- **Lecture-based learning**
- **Reading-based learning**
- **Group or collaborative learning**
- **Experiential or lab-based learning**
- **Evaluation formats (such as papers, essay tests, multiple choice tests, etc.)**

Paving the Way

You can use your IEP to help you prepare for college or other training programs. For example, your IEP could include activities such as:

- Taking an evening or weekend course that interests you at a community college or in an adult continuing education program. Doing so might help you try out transportation ideas, experience a new learning environment, use accommodations in a new setting, or explore your future career goals.
- Taking courses in high school that will help prepare you for college. If appropriate, you might take a foreign language, computer training, or additional science classes.
- Considering internships, part-time jobs, or volunteer and community service opportunities.
- Enrolling in a pre-college program specifically designed for high school students the summer before or after their senior year. You might ask your special education teacher for ideas, check out high school programs at local colleges, look for specialized summer camps, or do an Internet search for programs that interest you.
- Working on your writing and math skills while still in high school with a tutor or family member. You could keep a personal journal and practice writing essays about your life experiences, current events, or topics of interest.
- Researching and applying for scholarships. Libraries, your guidance counselor, and the Internet should all have resources on scholarship options.

Summary

After you graduate, there will be many paths you can take to explore careers, further your education, and to gain skills you will need to become employed. Some youth may choose to attend a college or training program right away while others may take time to explore what interests them. Whatever path you choose, make sure that you set your goals, research your options for programs that can help you get there, and take the time to visit the programs you may be interested in.

For more information and national resources, visit PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment at PACER.org/transition.