

2026



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PATHWAYS

AFTER HIGH SCHOOL



**TRADE SCHOOL
VS. COLLEGE:**

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GAP YEARS WITH A PURPOSE:
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A NOTE FROM THE TEENLIFE TEAM

We know that for many high school students, the question, “What’s next?” often defaults to “What colleges am I applying to?” But the TeenLife team believes that a four-year university isn’t the only, or even the best, path for every high school grad, and that’s perfectly okay! Today’s world offers more exciting, fulfilling professions than ever, especially given the interest in — and critical need for — skilled tradespeople. Trade schools and technical colleges are stepping up brilliantly to fill this demand, offering incredible opportunities for hands-on learning and direct entry into high-demand careers. And if you need a break from education? Consider taking a gap year to work, travel, or volunteer. Or maybe the military is calling you (and bonus: if you serve for three years, you become fully eligible for the GI bill to pay for college or other training once you finish your service).

This guide includes valuable information to help you navigate these diverse pathways. You’ll find details on different careers in the trades, salaries you can expect, and the resources to help you get the training you need. We invite you to explore the differences between trade school and traditional college and learn the value of apprenticeships. We also debunk the common myths about attending trade schools versus traditional colleges. Make sure you visit the listings section, which includes dozens of organizations offering different pathways after high school. Click on each organization’s name or **this handy form** to connect. Use this guide as your roadmap to discovering the many exciting possibilities that await you after graduation!



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2026 PATHWAYS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

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TECH

WITHOUT A TRADITIONAL DEGREE

BY STEFANIE TEDARDS

What do tech titans like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and the founders of Spotify and Twitter all have in common? For one thing, they've all managed to build successful careers — and companies — without a college degree.

If the idea of joining the list of successful tech innovators who dropped out of (or never attended) college sounds appealing, remember to be realistic. Reaching their level of success isn't the norm, and skipping

college isn't a shortcut to a successful career. However, their stories remind us college isn't for everyone, and that plenty of other pathways toward building a career in tech exist.

From bootcamps and certification programs to free online courses, many resources can boost your credentials. If you're thinking about a future in tech, here are three steps to start your career on the right track.

WEIGH THE BENEFITS (AND DRAWBACKS) OF ATTENDING COLLEGE

Before making a big decision about your future — like whether or not to go to college — make a list of pros and cons. It might look something like this:

PROS OF EARNING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

- **Strong foundational knowledge:** Required classes give you the essentials you might miss with self-learning.
- **Built-in connections:** Attending college gives you access to industry experts, internships, research facilities, project funding, and networking groups that can help you find job opportunities after graduation.
- **Wider range of job prospects:** A degree can make you more attractive to hiring managers; a lack might limit your options, especially for more advanced roles.

CONS OF EARNING A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

- **Cost:** A degree doesn't guarantee a job or financial stability, and student loans create debt you must repay.
- **Opportunity cost:** Rather than spending years in a classroom, you could be gaining practical, hands-on experience and strengthening your resume in the workplace.
- **Outdated curriculum:** Some programs may lag behind the latest languages, tools, or frameworks; other programs may focus too much on theory over practical applications.

As you build your own list, consider your future career goals, learning style, flexibility, and financial situation. Investigate different types of colleges, including online degree programs and your local community college. An online associate program's structured format can benefit students who struggle with self-directed learning; community colleges offer a great option for those who prefer in-person instruction. But if college in any form feels “off” for you, it's time to start exploring other options!

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PATHS: BOOTCAMPS, CERTIFICATIONS, AND ONLINE COURSES

The beauty of non-degree programs is their flexibility and affordability. Plus, they're varied enough that you'll likely find one that fits your needs. Here are seven types of non-degree programs:

- **Bootcamps:** Intensive, short-term programs that teach key skills in a specific area (coding, UX design, data science, etc.) so you can quickly move from a beginner-level to a higher level of competency.
- **Certificate programs:** Structured programs from companies or universities that award a

certificate upon completion, demonstrating expertise in specific, job-ready skills. They typically take a few months to a year to complete.

- **MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses):** Free, online courses created by companies, universities, and learning platforms and designed for anyone to access, anywhere in the world.
- **Professional certifications:** Industry-recognized credentials earned by passing an exam. They include foundational skills and fundamentals, and more advanced, associate-level specializations in areas like cloud computing, security, or networking.
- **Microcredentials:** Compact, skill-specific programs designed to elevate your expertise in a niche area. “Stack” them with other programs or certificates to develop a more comprehensive skill set.
- **Workshops:** Short, hands-on sessions covering specific tools, frameworks, or topics. They're typically held over a few hours or days, often with opportunities for discussion and networking.



- **Online Courses:** On-demand courses with video lectures, readings, assignments, and varying degrees of step-by-step guidance and support. Most are asynchronous, so you can complete them at your own pace around your schedule.

While workshops and professional certifications often have a fee, many free and low-cost online learning opportunities covering coding, cybersecurity, IT, programming, data analytics, cloud infrastructure, and more exist. Check out these online learning platforms and resources to start:

COURSERA

Coursera is a subscription-based online learning platform. It also offers free courses to begin exploring new topics, skills, and fundamentals. Interested in a particular paid course? Apply for Coursera financial aid and enroll at a discount. Sample courses in computer science, data science, and information technology include:

- **Python for Data Science, AI & Development**, IBM (Beginner, 1-3 months)
- **Meta Front-End Developer**, Meta (Beginner, 3-6 months)
- **Learn to Program: The Fundamentals**, University of Toronto (Beginner, 1-3 months)
- **Introduction to Networking**, NVIDIA (Beginner, 1-4 weeks)
- **System Administration and IT Infrastructure Services**, Google, (Beginner, 1-3 months)

freeCODECAMP

Want to join a community of coders and access free tools to enhance your learning? Check out freeCodeCamp. This nonprofit offers free courses and certifications in data visualization, back-end development, information security, machine learning (you name it!). The platform has other free online courses and bootcamps, helpful resources for the job search (including interview prep), and forums to share your questions and connect with fellow programmers.

HARVARD ONLINE COURSES

One of Harvard's most well-known online tech courses is CS50: Introduction to Computer Science, an 11-week course covering computer science basics. This introductory course might be challenging for new programmers, so consider dipping your toes into some shorter, beginner-friendly courses before trying this one. Once you've mastered the fundamentals, explore more specialized topics in Scratch, Python, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence.

YOUTUBE

YouTube can feel like a bottomless pit of random videos, but it's actually a great tool for learning new things in an easy, relatable way. If you're just beginning your tech exploration, try a few YouTube rabbit holes and look for a creator who explains things in a way that clicks

for you. When you're ready to get a certification, check out these channels:

Professor Messer

The CompTIA A+ certification is an essential qualification in the IT world. It's a challenging test, covering hardware, networks, and computer systems, *and* it costs \$265. But you know what's free? Professor Messer's videos and lectures. These courses will familiarize you with the test content, and if you want additional resources, you can buy digital notes, practice tests, and more on his website.

Network Chuck

The Cisco CCNA certification covers networks, IP, security fundamentals, and more, for \$300 per test. Studying for your CCNA certification? Check out Network Chuck's free CCNA course, a playlist of 24 videos, covering everything from "What is a router?" to "What is an IP address?" to familiarize you with the CCNA exam material.

PRO TIP

One thing an online course or bootcamp can't teach you? How to learn. Be honest with yourself

about the type of structure, resources, and environment you need to stay committed and learn successfully.

DEVELOP YOUR MOST VALUABLE SKILL: INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

While some people may call curiosity an intrinsic character trait, I'd argue that it's a skill — one you can practice, grow, and apply to every area of your life. When building a career in tech, it's one of the most valuable skills in your toolbox.

Technology constantly evolves, and it takes commitment to keep pace. Of course, gaining the required hard skills and technical knowledge is paramount to landing your first tech role. Regardless of your path, embracing lifelong learning helps you adapt and stay motivated and ready for whatever challenges and opportunities come your way.

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Debunking myths about attending a **TECHNICAL COLLEGE OR TRADE SCHOOL**

BY JODI IRELAND

For decades, the prevailing philosophy among many parents, students, and even counselors has been that the best path after high school graduation involves attending a four-year college. Yet, that conventional wisdom is outdated and inaccurate. Here's why.

1. MYTH: College grads earn more than tradespeople

It's a common misconception that a four-year college degree guarantees a higher income. While some college grads may earn more on average over their careers, many skilled trades offer competitive — and even superior — salaries, without the added burden of high student loan debt.

Electricians, plumbers, HVAC technicians, and welders, for example, often earn high wages immediately after completing their training and apprenticeships. These trades offer clear paths for career advancement and even entrepreneurship. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2024 national average salary for an electrician was over \$62,000, as was a plumber's annual salary.

2. MYTH: College is the only path to a successful career

There's no guarantee that a college degree will

automatically result in a high-paying job and a successful career. Trade schools and technical colleges offer specialized training directly addressing the needs of today's job market. In fact, the demand for skilled tradespeople has surged, making these graduates essential to our economy.

The escalating cost of traditional college also leaves more graduates with substantial debt. In contrast, trade school programs are typically shorter and more affordable, enabling graduates to enter the workforce quickly with minimal or no debt and begin earning a good salary earlier.

3. MYTH: A career in the trades is dangerous and dirty

Depending on the trade, grime goes with the territory. And yes, some jobs are more physically demanding than others and inherently more dangerous. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is responsible for implementing measures to ensure that workers and working conditions are safe and clean. Insurance regulations also play a part. Construction companies, for example, with poor safety records must pay much higher

insurance premiums, and some companies with egregious records may not qualify for insurance coverage at all.

4. MYTH: Trade work is seasonal and unpredictable

This outdated myth doesn't hold true for most trade careers. Essential services are always needed, regardless of the season or economic climate. HVAC systems and cars can break down whenever. Leaks, clogged drains, and water heater issues don't take holidays. Hospitals and clinics operate 24/7, and they rely on fully functional equipment.

Other skilled trades, like industrial maintenance, manufacturing, and welding in fabrication shops, work indoors. Large-scale infrastructure projects (roads, bridges, utilities, public buildings) and the ongoing need to maintain and modernize existing infrastructure provide consistent work for many trades, often spanning multiple seasons or years.

While some highly specialized outdoor construction roles may experience busier periods during warmer months, smart planning by companies (e.g., staggering projects, cross-training employees, and seeking indoor work) helps avoid seasonal slowdowns.

5. MYTH: Only students who struggled academically should attend trade school or technical college

Some think that trade school is merely a fallback for those choosing not to pursue a four-year degree. But trade schools and technical colleges provide specialized training in high-demand fields requiring a unique and often sophisticated skill set. These schools give students hands-on experience from industry experts — a practical, career-focused approach that's a strategic decision for high school grads who want to avoid debt, secure stable employment, and start earning sooner.

6. MYTH: Trade school or technical college training limits career growth

A trade school or technical college education

often provides a solid foundation for diverse and substantial career growth, offering paths just as rewarding as those stemming from a college degree.

Trade careers typically have clear ladders for advancement, from apprentice to journeyman to master, in the electrical, plumbing, and HVAC industries, for example. Tradespeople can specialize in particular niches, which increases their value and earning potential. Experienced tradespeople promote to team leads, foremen, superintendents, and project and operations managers.

One of the most significant avenues for growth in the trades? Starting your own business. Many successful tradespeople began in the field and then leveraged their skills and experience to launch their own companies.

7. MYTH: Trade schools and technical colleges don't offer financial aid

Finances are certainly a key factor to consider when choosing your post-high school educational path. But trade schools aren't reserved for students on a tight budget. They're a great choice for anyone seeking specific, career-focused training. Many trade schools and technical colleges offer scholarships, grants, and flexible payment options to increase their training programs' accessibility.

8. MYTH: Trade schools lack academic rigor and don't challenge students

Traditional university programs have a long-standing reputation for academic excellence, lending them a certain prestige. However, it's a popular misconception that trade school and technical college courses are less demanding or rigorous. In reality, these schools prepare students to become licensed professionals — a path requiring a thorough grasp of core concepts, solid problem-solving skills, and the ability to adapt to evolving technologies.

The hands-on nature of technical curricula can make them more challenging than college degree programs. This practical approach

particularly benefits students who thrive with tactile learning experiences.

9. MYTH: It's hard to find a job if you attend trade school or technical college

Not at all! The economy has a shortage of skilled tradespeople. Construction, manufacturing, health-care support, and automotive services (to name a few) need qualified individuals. This high demand means graduates are a highly sought-after commodity.

Trade schools and technical colleges design their curricula to address the skills gaps employers identify, developing programs in collaboration with industry partners to ensure graduates have the right skills and hands-on abilities businesses want.

Many programs have established robust relationships with local businesses, often resulting in internships, apprenticeships, and direct job placement opportunities for their students and graduates. These schools often have dedicated career services departments working to connect graduates with employers seeking their skills.

10. MYTH: Potential employers don't value a trade school education as much as a college degree

This myth couldn't be further from the truth. Employers value a trade school education equally if not more than a college degree because its graduates are prepared with highly specialized, immediately applicable, high-demand skills.

Many skilled trades require specific certifications and licences. Trade schools and technical colleges prepare students to pass these critical exams, which are the true "credentials" valued by employers in these fields.

Hiring a trade school graduate often represents a better return on investment for an employer. They get a productive employee sooner, who may command a competitive (but not inflated) starting salary and who can contribute directly to the bottom line without the extensive onboarding sometimes required for graduates with less experience.

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GAP YEARS WITH A PURPOSE:

Exploring yourself and the world

■■■■■■■■■■ BY STEFANIE TEDARDS ■■■■■■■■■■

Your teen years include countless opportunities to learn, grow, and explore new horizons. These years also come with intense pressure to define your identity and career path. As your high school years wind down, it's natural to feel some anxiety about what comes next. College? Trade school? No school? The sheer number of options can make the decision-making process intimidating.

Instead of rushing into a job or degree program, consider taking time to discover what really matters to you with a gap year! Gap years offer more than a break from schooling. They're meant to inspire you by offering a chance for meaningful self-exploration, helping you learn more about yourself and the world. Think of a gap year not as an extended summer break, but more like the first chapter of your adult life.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE TAKING A GAP YEAR

The first step? Taking a clear-eyed self-assessment: understanding where you are now and how a gap

year can help you achieve your goals. Ask:

- **When you think about the future, how does it make you feel?** Are you excited about pursuing one of your interests or exploring new places? Or worried about living independently or choosing a career that interests you? Sit with your feelings, without judgment.
- **What are you most looking forward to?** Even if you can't exactly envision your future, think about the good things coming your way! Maybe it's making new friends, dedicating more time to a hobby, or even moving to a different city.
- **Do you have anxieties about the future?** Realistically, everyone experiences at least a little anxiety about the future. It's totally normal, but try not to spiral or let your anxieties define what comes next. Writing down your worries or fears can reduce the intimidation factor and help you identify which ones you can actively address.
- **What do you hope to gain from your gap year?** Think of these as your "gap year goals." Instead of "visit every continent" or "write the next great American novel," focus on the

qualities you hope to develop, like confidence or independence, or what you want to gain clarity about by the end.

- **What is the best-case scenario? What is the worst?** Any gap year, structured or not, has unexpected highs and lows. Anticipating these moments may help you feel more prepared for challenges and ready to embrace the good times.
- **What do you imagine yourself doing after your gap year?** Gap years are meant to be temporary, so think about what happens after your gap year, too. Applying to school, jobs, and other training programs takes time, and some have specific deadlines. A realistic post-gap year plan can make you (and your parents) feel more confident about taking one.

MEANINGFUL WAYS TO SPEND YOUR GAP YEAR

Once you've decided to take a gap year, the next step is figuring out how to spend it.

SKILL-BUILDING AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Just because you've graduated doesn't mean the learning must stop. Many gap year programs encourage continuing your education, whether you want to focus on a particular skill or take a full course load for credit. You could study:

- A foreign language or culture
- Coding
- Fashion design
- Filmmaking
- Sound engineering
- How to create a business
- Global leadership
- Human anatomy
- ...the sky's the limit!

Imagine taking a semester of classes in Spain with students from around the world, conducting marine biology field research in South Africa, or exploring the ethics of AI with a 1-on-1 mentor in your own home. The key to a meaningful program? Choosing an experience that feels like it'll be enjoyable and a stepping stone to college or a future career.

If you want to become a professional artist, a gap year program like Idyllwild Arts might be perfect — students attend classes, receive mentoring, and create a professional portfolio. Want to boost your GPA and strengthen your academic record? Laurel Springs School's programs include college-level, honors, and AP courses. Thinking about a tech career? Try a coding bootcamp or free MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that you can access anytime and complete asynchronously.

CAREER EXPLORATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many gap year programs are designed to help students explore potential careers. These programs aim to develop crucial skills, like self-awareness, communication, and resilience, while also exposing you to potential careers through panels, workplace tours, and work experience.

Some gap year programs are internship-based; others combine structured learning with hands-on projects and experiences. Niche training programs have a specific focus, like the International Culinary Center or The Apprenticeship's boatbuilding and sailing program.

Need to support yourself financially or save money during your gap year? Look for paid work experiences. You could work on a farm in Australia or New Zealand, complete an internship in Daegu, South Korea, or join AmeriCorps and become a student mentor in your own city.

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Another meaningful way to spend your gap year? Participating in a service program or volunteer organization. Volunteer work offers a range of opportunities, from teaching and building to leading and collaborating. The time commitment can be flexible, from a few hours a week at a local community garden to a full-time, year-long immersion in another country. You can also combine your desire to volunteer with your other interests, like surfing or sports.

No matter the scale, location, or type of volunteering you choose, prioritize opportunities encouraging

sustained engagement. A one-week volunteer trip abroad is often less meaningful and transformative than a longer commitment with the same organization or community.

CULTURAL IMMERSION

While gap years and travel often go hand in hand, opt for the less-touristy, more immersive experiences when traveling abroad. What's cultural immersion? Deeply engaging with a culture different from your own, including its language, cuisine, arts, and general way of life. Many immersion-focused programs are also purpose-driven, with an overarching focus on helping others, whether that be human rights, environmental conservation, or public health.

Cultural immersion programs frequently combine volunteering, language learning, and personal development. As you research programs, consider the experiences they offer and how they integrate participants into local communities. Avoid the country-hopping, sightseeing itineraries and look for community- or education-centered programs.

PLANNING A MEANINGFUL GAP YEAR

However you spend your gap year, plan it with intention. If you choose a structured program, think carefully about its cost, logistics, and how its length aligns with your goals for the year. A DIY gap year requires meticulous planning from the start. You're responsible for every detail, from budgeting and booking your travel and housing to deciding where to go, what to eat, and what to do.

Traveling abroad? Be mindful of your own safety and show respect for the culture you're visiting. Familiarize yourself with the country's language, cuisine, and customs. Staying close to home? Create a weekly schedule and set monthly goals to maintain your momentum.

No matter what you do, document your journey! Take photos, keep a journal, create a vlog or blog, and spend some time reflecting on what you've learned along the way.



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IN MY OWN WORDS

EF

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Before my EF gap year, I was curious about the world but unsure of myself. I knew I wanted to travel, learn, and see more than the familiar, but I didn't know how ready I was to step away from home. The idea of living abroad — speaking other languages, adapting to new customs, and making friends from around the globe — thrilled *and* terrified me. Signing up with EF felt like a leap into the unknown. What I couldn't imagine then was how much this experience would shape me into the person I am today.

From the very beginning, EF gave me the chance to fully immerse myself in another culture, not as a tourist but as a participant. I didn't just sit in a classroom memorizing vocabulary — I practiced new languages in real life, ordered coffee at the corner café, navigated the train system, and laughed with new friends over dinner. At first, everything was awkward, and I made mistakes constantly. But those small challenges became turning points. They taught me that communication isn't about perfection but about connection, patience, and the courage to try again. That realization changed the way I approach not only language but people in general.

As the weeks turned into months, my confidence grew in ways I didn't expect. I learned to say yes more often: to weekend trips with new friends, to joining local activities, to stepping into situations that made me nervous. Every time I said yes, I discovered more about my strengths, resilience, and ability to adapt. I evolved into someone confident about finding my way in a new city, starting a conversation with a stranger, or laughing at myself when things didn't go as planned. I'll carry those gifts of independence and self-assurance with me for life.

The friendships I built during my EF gap year are among the most meaningful I've ever had. I met people from every corner of the world, and together we created a community that felt like family. We shared stories about our cultures, supported each other when we felt overwhelmed, and celebrated our journey's big and small milestones. Those relationships showed me the world's interconnectedness and how much we can learn from one another when we're open to it.

When I came home after my gap year, I felt transformed. While I returned with memories of travel and adventure, I also had a new sense of my identity and capabilities. I felt more confident, independent, and open-minded than ever. My EF gap year gave me more than a break between high school and what came next. I gained the perspective and confidence to know that I can belong anywhere in the world. Looking back, that year abroad was more than a trip; it was the year that changed everything.



ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS:

Blending trade school, community college, and work experience

BY JODI IRELAND

High school graduation marks a huge milestone for teens and their families, and for a long time, the *best* path forward was clear: attending a four-year college or university. But the world has changed, and so have the options for life after high school. A growing movement recognizes and celebrates that not every high school graduate needs to (or even *should*) immediately attend a traditional college. In fact, some of the most in-demand, financially and personally rewarding career paths come from taking a different approach.

Looking for a fast track to a great job, prefer hands-on learning, or want to gain more specialized skills?

Trade schools, vocational programs at community colleges, and apprenticeships provide focused, hands-on training for specific skilled trades like:

- Automotive mechanics
- Cybersecurity specialists
- Electricians
- HVAC technicians
- Medical assistants
- Veterinary technicians
- Welders

These programs shorten the time it takes to earn a degree, launching you into the workforce with less debt and earning a good salary faster.

RESEARCHING CAREER OPTIONS

High school is perfect for researching your career options, whether you know what you'd like to do or not. You *don't* have to pick your "forever job" right now, but a little career exploration can help you figure out your preferences, talents, and choices.

START WITH SELF-REFLECTION

Before you look outwards, look inwards. What are your interests? What do you love in school? What do you do in your free time that makes you lose track of time because it's fun (e.g., building things, playing games, practicing an instrument, helping people, creating art, solving puzzles)?

Think about your strengths and skills. Are you a good communicator? Detail-oriented? Like working with your hands, data, or people? Ask adults you trust (your parents, teachers, coaches) to identify your strengths.

What do you value? Want a job that helps others? One that's creative? Also, consider how your job will affect your lifestyle. Want one that offers a lot of stability or high pay? Want to travel every week, work weekends, or work from home?

TAKE CAREER QUIZZES AND ASSESSMENTS

Another fun way to get ideas and connect your interests to potential careers is to try an online quiz or assessment:

- **O*NET Interest Profile** (sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor) is a comprehensive tool that helps you explore careers based on your interests.
- **CareerOneStop** has assessments, job market trends, and videos.
- **ASVAB's Career Exploration Program**, a free career planning resource you can often access through your school, includes aptitude tests and an interest inventory.

TALK TO PEOPLE

Try an informal conversation with someone working in a field that interests you. Start with family, friends, neighbors, teachers, or your school counselor and ask them if they know anyone working in a field you're curious about.

Send a polite email or ask a mutual contact for an introduction. Explain that you're a high school student researching careers and would love 15-30 minutes of their time. Once you connect, ask questions like: How did you get into this field? What does a typical day look like? What do you enjoy most/least? What skills are most important? What advice would you give to someone just starting out?

GET HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Nothing beats actually trying things out.

- **Job shadowing** lets you spend a few hours or a day with someone at their job. You learn firsthand what they do and observe their work environment and typical interactions.
- **Volunteer** in an area related to your interests. Curious about healthcare? Volunteer at a hospital. Love animals? Volunteer at a shelter.
- **Part-time jobs** teach skills like responsibility, time management, and teamwork. A part-time job can help you understand what you like (or don't like) in a work environment.
- **Internships** may be an option, too. These short-term, paid or unpaid opportunities provide real-world experience in a specific field.
- **School clubs and projects** like robotics, debate, art club, auto shop, computer programming/coding club, or culinary arts give you hands-on experience and a chance to explore.

WHY CHOOSE TRADE SCHOOL

While a four-year college or community college is right for many high school grads, trade school is another viable option, especially if you:

- **Learn by doing.** Thrive with hands-on learning, practical application, and working directly with tools and equipment? Instead of spending years in lecture halls, you'll actively practice the skills needed for a specific career.
- **Want (or need) to start working and earning sooner.** Trade school programs are generally shorter than four-year college degrees (a few months to 2 years). Faster training gets you into the workforce quicker.

- **Want to avoid (or minimize) student loan debt.**

Trade schools cost significantly less than traditional colleges and universities. By choosing a skilled trade, you can often graduate with little (if any) loan debt, gaining a considerable head start on your financial future. Need a little help affording the training? Many schools offer scholarships and other financial aid.

- **Seek job security and high demand.** Because many skilled trades have a worker shortage nationwide, numerous career options offer excellent job prospects and long-term security. Many of these trades are essential jobs you can't outsource or replace with automation.

- **Prefer a smaller, focused learning environment.** Trade school classes typically have fewer students than university lectures, enabling more individualized instructor attention and a more personalized experience. You often join a cohort of other students pursuing the same educational goals.

- **Want direct job placement support.** Many trade schools have strong connections with local businesses and industries. These schools offer dedicated career services to help you find internships, apprenticeships, and job opportunities immediately after graduation.

WHY CHOOSE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Community college is another viable (and affordable) option for high school graduates. In 2025, undergraduate enrollment grew by 5.4%; community colleges with a primary focus on vocational training experienced an 11.7% growth in enrollment. This pathway offers a great alternative to a traditional four-year college:

- Community colleges are generally less expensive than four-year colleges, and you can live at home to save on room and board.
- Need to work while attending school or have family responsibilities? Community colleges offer flexible schedules with online, evening, and weekend classes to help balance your education with other commitments.
- This lower-pressure environment lets you explore different subjects and career options without

incurring massive debt. You can even enroll and try out a course or two before committing to a full degree program.

- Community colleges have career-focused programs leading to certificates or associate degrees in high-demand fields, like healthcare, skilled trades, and technology. Many jobs require only an associate's degree but still offer very competitive pay.
- Community colleges have smaller class sizes, so you get more personalized attention from your professors and can really connect with them and your classmates.
- Think you *might* want a four-year degree eventually? Most community college credits will transfer to a four-year university, so you can earn your general education credits (or certificate) for less, transfer your credits, and earn your bachelor's degree later.
- Want to get a head start before you graduate? High schools often partner with community colleges to offer dual enrollment programs where you can take college classes before graduation. The college credits you earn count toward your future degree, reducing future college credit requirements and saving you money.

THE VALUE OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Beyond training, actual work experience helps you develop your “professional muscles” and gives you skills like:

- **Responsibility and reliability.** Showing up on time, following instructions, and completing tasks (even the not-so-fun ones) teach accountability.
- **Time management.** Juggling school, a social life, and a job forces you to become a pro at managing your time efficiently.
- **A solid work ethic.** Working requires effort, dedication, hard work, perseverance, and diligence.
- **Communication skills.** By interacting with customers, co-workers, and managers, you develop communication, customer service, and teamwork skills.
- **Financial literacy.** Earning money teaches budgeting, saving, and understanding a dollar's value.
- **Confidence and independence.** Successfully handling job responsibilities (even the small ones) boosts self-esteem and confidence.

- **Career exposure.** A part-time job gives you insight into workplace operations. You'll see different roles, learn about workplace dynamics, and start to figure out what you like (and don't like) in a work environment.

THE APPRENTICESHIP OPTION

In the skilled trades, apprenticeships take work experience to the next level by offering:

- **Hands-on, real-world training.** You work on projects, use tools, and learn the practical side of the job from experienced professionals.
- **A chance to earn while you learn.** Many apprenticeship programs include a salary, so you earn a paycheck *while* learning and training.
- **Direct mentoring.** You learn from skilled professionals and master craftspeople who guide and teach you the tricks of the trade and provide personalized feedback.
- **The environment to develop specialized skills.** Unlike general education classes, apprenticeships focus specifically on the technical skills, knowledge, tools, and safety protocols for a career.

- **Access to a professional network.** You'll meet people in the industry (supervisors, coworkers, clients). These connections can lead to future job opportunities, recommendations, and ongoing mentorship.
- **Industry-recognized credentials.** Apprenticeship programs can lead to nationally recognized certifications or journeyman status, which employers value (and require), opening doors to more opportunities and higher salaries.

Figuring out what you like, what you're good at, and how you want to support yourself doesn't come easily. But remember: What you *think* you want to do when you're 17 or 18 may evolve as you grow, and that's totally okay! Career paths are a dynamic journey of continuous learning and growth, not just one fixed job. There are plenty of paths you can take toward a successful career, so long as you keep learning, growing, and taking advantage of the next opportunity.

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APPRENTICESHIPS:

Earn while you learn and master a skill

BY JODI IRELAND

People have learned a craft through hands-on experience for centuries. Apprenticeships offer a system of training new generations of practitioners in a trade or profession. The earliest civilizations — ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome — used apprenticeships to train their artisans, scribes, and engineers.

A (BRIEF) HISTORY OF APPRENTICESHIPS

Medieval Europe implemented a guild system, and with the emergence of these craft guilds, generations of stonemasons, blacksmiths, weavers, and other trades learned from their masters. The guilds ensured that people trained, worked, and promoted at the appropriate level. Apprentices lived with their masters and learned the basics. They earned little (if any) pay as they began developing their skills. Once their apprenticeship ended, they'd become journeymen, traveling and working in various towns and workshops to gain experience and earn a living. Eventually, they became masters who might own their own workshops and train apprentices.

The Industrial Revolution marked a shift from craft-based to factory-based production; the traditional guild system declined. Specialized, repetitive tasks became the norm. By the early 20th century,

factories began introducing vestibule schools. These schools emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional on-the-job training and apprenticeships. Vestibule training gained prominence during times of high demand for skilled labor, such as during World War I and World War II, when thousands of workers needed rapid training to fill factory roles.

While the idea of living with a master and being paid in food and lodging remains in the past, the concept of apprenticeships is very much alive today. 21st-century apprenticeships remain valuable for helping potential tradespeople develop the skills and experience needed for a successful career.

WHAT IS AN APPRENTICESHIP?

An apprenticeship is a structured training program blending practical work experience with theoretical knowledge. It's more formal than an internship. Apprentices are employed, earning a salary and benefits, while working with and learning from experienced professionals.

Unlike internships, which typically last a few months or a semester, apprenticeship programs can last a year or longer. Apprentices also spend a good chunk of their time in class working

toward earning specific certifications or credentials upon completing their program. These comprehensive training programs include:

- **Paid employment:** Salary and benefits, including vacations and health insurance.
- **On-the-job training:** Working with a skilled mentor in a real-world environment.
- **Classroom instruction:** Formal education (in-person, online, or a combination), to build foundational knowledge.
- **Nationally recognized credentials:** Upon completion, earning certifications that validate skills and qualifications, thus increasing earning potential.

HOW APPRENTICESHIPS WORK

Apprenticeships are structured training programs that pay a salary while you learn on the job and work toward a recognized certification. Program lengths vary by industry and occupation, typically ranging from one to six years.

Generally, these programs follow one of three structures.

- A **competency-based program** supports advancement as you demonstrate mastery of specific skills and achieve performance milestones.
- A **time-based program** determines progression by the set number of hours you complete.
- A **hybrid program** combines both, requiring you to fulfill a certain number of hours and prove you've met key skill objectives.

Employers, labor unions, and professional associations regulate and support apprenticeships to ensure training and expertise meet high standards. Some companies offer their own in-house training, while others may cover the cost for you to attend classes at a community college or technical school.

An apprenticeship may blend classroom instruction, on-the-job training, and supervised independent work. A key part of the process involves working closely with a mentor, where you complete tasks under their supervision and guidance until you're ready to work independently.

Employers also benefit from apprenticeship programs, gaining the ability to train and shape a workforce that meets specific business needs. Apprentices contribute to the company's output while learning. Those who complete apprenticeship programs often exhibit greater loyalty to their employer. Apprenticeship programs allow companies to develop talent from within, potentially reducing the need for external hiring.

WHO CAN APPLY?

If you're at least 16, you can start applying for apprenticeships. Some programs have specific entry requirements, including education, age, or prior experience. But many offer pathways for those early in their careers, looking to upskill or seeking a career change.

These programs are a great fit if you're:

- A tactile or kinesthetic learner (you thrive in hands-on learning environments)
- Self-motivated
- Hoping to earn money while training

Typically, those who pursue an apprenticeship are pretty self-motivated and have a strong leaning toward a specific career path. Apprentice candidates have done their homework on the role and may have begun exploring ways to show their aptitude for an apprenticeship. In some professions, apprenticeships are the gold standard for training new employees. Other fields may offer aspiring professionals the option to attend a trade school or pursue an apprenticeship.

Interested in a skilled trade? Apprenticing in that area might be a great strategy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, EXPLORE RESOURCES FROM:

- » [Apprenticeship.gov](https://www.apprenticeship.gov)
- » [indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com)
- » U.S. Department of Labor: Apprenticeships
- » U.S. Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration
- » What is an apprenticeship? ASVAB Career Exploration Program

15 HIGH-PAYING JOBS

That Don't Require a College Degree

BY STEFANIE TEDARDS

Think you can't find good-paying jobs without a degree? Think again! Between 2020 and 2030, the B.L.S. estimates that approximately 60% of new roles won't require an associate's or bachelor's degree to start, with growth expected in construction, installation, maintenance, repair, transportation, and other industries. And these jobs don't cap out at a \$50K salary, either. With the right training, expertise, and business savvy, you can earn well over three figures in a career without a college degree.

Are there downsides to skipping college? Potentially, yes. Some employers use degrees to filter applicants, which could cost you an interview. But over time, your experience will matter more than your education level, allowing the quality of your work to speak for itself.

Finding a high-paying, enjoyable job that doesn't require a degree can feel like looking for a needle in a haystack. Yet nearly two-thirds of Americans lack college degrees, and still have meaningful and lucrative careers.

TOP 15 JOBS: NO COLLEGE DEGREE REQUIRED

Unconvinced? Check out these jobs that don't require a college degree (average annual salaries reported by ZipRecruiter):

1.	WIND TURBINE TECHNICIANS	Install, inspect, and maintain wind turbines to keep them operating efficiently. With a 60% growth rate expected by 2033, thousands of new positions are anticipated for wind techs over the next decade. (Average annual salary: \$54,230)
2.	TRUCK DRIVERS	Transport goods across short or long distances using commercial trucks. Depending on geography, seniority level, and whether you're a long- or short-haul driver, you may spend plenty of long nights, weekends, and holidays behind the wheel. (Average annual salary: \$56,348)
3.	CRANE OPERATORS	Control heavy machinery to lift and move materials on construction and industrial sites. These operators undergo specialized training to handle complex equipment and maintain safety protocols on busy job sites. (Average annual salary: \$58,350)
4.	HVAC TECHNICIANS	Install, service, and repair heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems. With steady demand, HVAC technicians help keep homes and businesses comfortable year round. (Average annual salary: \$58,782)
5.	FIREFIIGHTERS	Respond to emergencies, extinguish fires, and perform rescues to protect people and property. With unpredictable shifts and high-pressure situations, firefighters need to stay ready for anything at a moment's notice. (Average annual salary: \$59,606)
6.	SECURITY SYSTEMS TECHNICIANS	Install and maintain alarms, surveillance equipment, and access control systems. These professionals may troubleshoot technical issues and upgrade equipment to keep security systems working reliably 24/7. (Average annual salary: \$60,700)

7.	LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSES (LPNS)	Provide basic nursing care and support for patients under the supervision of registered nurses or doctors. Becoming an LPN requires completing a state-approved training program and passing a licensing exam. (Average annual salary: \$62,140)
8.	GENERAL CONTRACTORS	Manage construction projects, overseeing crews, timelines, permits, and budgets. They coordinate subcontractors, maintain schedules, and ensure projects meet all building codes and client expectations. (Average annual salary: \$63,175)
9.	BOILERMAKERS	Assemble, install, and repair boilers, tanks, and large metal vessels used in industrial settings. They often work on-site in factories or power plants. (Average annual salary: \$66,858)
10.	ELEVATOR TECHNICIANS	Install, repair, and maintain elevators, escalators, and other lift systems. They inspect cables, motors, and control systems, fix malfunctions, and ensure compliance with safety regulations. (Average annual salary: \$71,967)
11.	DISTRIBUTION MANAGERS	Coordinate product movement, storage, and delivery in supply chains. Most distribution managers without a college degree start in entry-level roles as warehouse associates or logistics coordinators. (Average annual salary: \$74,699)
12.	SALES REPRESENTATIVES	Sell products or services in specialized fields like tech, pharma, or industrial supply. Unlike many of the other jobs on this list, sales reps earn a commission; the total value of their sales directly impacts their annual earnings. (Average annual salary: \$76,681)
13.	STENOGRAPHERS	Transcribe spoken words into written form using shorthand or stenotype machines, often in courtrooms or legal settings. They need sharp listening skills and a fast typing speed to capture every word accurately in real time. (Average annual salary: \$84,999)
14.	COMMERCIAL PILOTS	Fly aircraft for charter services, cargo transport, private travel, and passenger flights for commercial airlines. For people who can handle the responsibility and stay calm under pressure, piloting commercial planes is one of the highest-paying, no-degree jobs out there. (Average annual salary: \$87,144)
15.	POWER PLANT OPERATORS	Control and monitor equipment that generates and distributes electricity. When problems arise, operators must swiftly assess the situation and decide when to enact emergency procedures to protect the plant. (Average annual salary: \$93,004)

FINDING A JOB AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Finding a good-paying job without a degree takes time. You'll likely need to start on the ground floor in an entry-level job and work your way up. Think of it this way: you wouldn't learn to run before you learn to walk, right? For example, if your goal is to become a contractor, you might first work as a construction laborer or trade apprentice before promoting to journeyman and then crew leader.

Ask your high school counselor if they know of any relevant resources, such as career fairs and local job boards, you can use to find open positions. Most

job sites allow you to filter results by experience. Apprenticeship USA has an online Apprenticeship Finder tool you can use to search for opportunities in your area.

Not sure what career you want? Think about the skills you want to cultivate. Customer service, computer literacy, project management, and communication are highly transferrable and useful in a range of jobs. It's also okay to try different companies or roles to zero in on what you enjoy — and that's a perfectly normal part of the process! Don't be afraid to try something new and explore outside of your comfort zone.



PATHWAYS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

We know that some people would rather walk a different path than a four-year college after high school. This section includes a curated list of diverse opportunities available, from trade schools and technical colleges to gap years and more. Explore these organizations to learn about the numerous training and career paths for a variety of interests. We've organized this section by program type and included details on each program's offerings to help you compare your options at a glance.

CENTRO MUNDOLENGUA GAP YEAR IN SEVILLA, SPAIN

Program Category: Gap Program
centromundolengua.com/product/gap-year-in-spain

Fill your gap year with purpose: Develop key skills for a global future, connect with local culture, and give your college application a boost with international experience. Master Spanish through real-life immersion, including educational travel and volunteer service. MundoLengua Gap Year Program in Seville, Spain immerses you in Spanish life with cultural activities, semester seminars (up to 5), language classes (4 hrs/week), community work, and the chance to live authentically in one of Europe's most historical and cultural cities.

[Learn More »](#)

CIEE FIRST YEAR ABROAD

Program Category: Gap Program
ciee.org/go-abroad/first-year-abroad/launch-your-future-ciee-first-year-abroad-and-gap-lp-26

CIEE has two exciting options for your post-high school adventure. With First Year Abroad, you'll stand out from the crowd by completing your first semester or year of college abroad, earning credit in the process. Choose from destinations like London, Paris, Kyoto, and more. With a Gap Year Abroad, you'll defer college and explore the world before diving into university life. Destinations include places like Seoul, Barcelona, and Florence. Return refreshed, motivated, and ready to hit the ground running. [Learn More »](#)



COLLEGE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION: SEMESTER IN THE CITY

Program Category: Gap Program
collegeforsocialinnovation.org/gap-semester
Semester in the City (SITC) is a Boston-based program that immerses gap semester and college students in 15 weeks of professional, personal, and civic skill development. The heart of SITC is a hand-matched, well-supported internship at one of 200+ partner organizations across the social sector. Student Fellows also have the opportunity to live in program apartments, receive ~\$3,850 in financial benefits, and take two weekly classes in social innovation and professional development topics. [Learn More »](#)

CONTEMPLATIVE SEMESTER

Program Category: Gap Program
contemplativesemester.org
"An education for the soul." Contemplative Semester (CS) is a three-month immersion in mindfulness meditation, community living & nature connection, nestled in the foothills of Vermont's Green Mountains. It's a contemplative laboratory where we learn and practice how to be at peace with ourselves, each other, and the earth — something we need now more than ever in this time of political, ecological, and social crises. The program is for 18-25 year-olds, and runs February 1 to May 8, 2026. [Learn More »](#)

EA SKI AND SNOWBOARD TRAINING: BECOME A SKI OR SNOWBOARD INSTRUCTOR – EXPERIENCE A WINTER GAP YEAR!

Program Category: Internship
easkiandsnowboard.com

Join EA Ski and Snowboard Training on a ski or snowboard instructor training course or internship, and you'll get world-class training, an internationally recognized qualification, and a guaranteed paid job offer (Internship Program) at your chosen resort for a real winter season gap year experience. EA Ski and Snowboard Training helps keen riders enter the Snowsports industry. We provide world-class ski and snowboard instructor training and job placements at the best global resorts in the USA, Canada, Japan, New Zealand & Switzerland. [Learn More »](#)

EF GAP YEAR

Program Category: Gap Program
ef.edu/local-campaign/us/ef-language-abroad-overview

EF Gap Year is a once-in-a-lifetime journey combining travel, language learning, and cultural immersion. Students gain global perspectives, confidence, and independence while exploring multiple countries. With EF's expert support, every step is safe, structured, and transformative — preparing students for college, career, and life. [Learn More »](#)



EF LANGUAGE YEAR ABROAD

Program Category: Gap Program
ef.edu/local-campaign/us/ef-language-abroad-overview

EF Language Year Abroad: Achieve true fluency while living and learning in one of 11 global destinations. EF's immersive long-term programs combine language study with cultural experiences, helping build confidence, independence, and international friendships. With flexible start dates, academic tracks tailored to your goals, and all-inclusive support — from tuition & housing to activities and 24/7 guidance — you'll return significantly more fluent and culturally connected. When you learn a language where it's spoken by locals you don't just learn it, you live it. [Learn More »](#)

GIVE AND SURF GAP YEAR IN PANAMA!

Program Category: Gap Program
giveandsurf.org/gap-year-program

Spend your gap year making a real difference in the beautiful islands of Bocas del Toro, Panama! You will be immersed in the indigenous and Afro-Caribbean communities and help the Give and Surf teachers with various educational programs. Share your passions with local kids by leading activities such as English classes, sports, STEM, arts, music, and more! Your free time can be spent surfing, snorkeling, hiking, biking, and exploring our diverse archipelago! Choose your start date and length of stay!

[Learn More »](#)

IDYLLWILD ARTS ACADEMY GAP YEAR PROGRAM

Program Category: Gap Program
idyllwildarts.org/postgraduate-gap-year

Idyllwild Arts Academy Postgraduate Gap Year students receive the unique opportunity to work closely with our arts faculty and college counselors, who have connections with top conservatories and art schools around the world. Students receive a customized curriculum to prepare for college auditions, portfolios, and professional life as an artist, facilitating their individual goals beyond high school. Highlights include: dorm life experience providing independence away from home, masterclasses with renowned guest artists, and networking opportunities with fellow student artists.

[Learn More »](#)

IMG ACADEMY: POST-GRADUATE PROGRAM

Program Category: Gap Program
imgacademy.com/boarding-school/academics

IMG Academy's Post-Grad University Year, in partnership with the University of South Florida, helps student-athletes boost their academics and athletics without affecting their NCAA eligibility. Students benefit from small classes, subject-specific tutors, college advising, and SAT/ACT prep. The Post-Grad High School Year offers honors/AP courses, test prep, and a demanding athletic schedule for those seeking to strengthen academics and athletic skills before college. [Learn More »](#)

INTEREXCHANGE: PROGRAMS ABROAD FOR US CITIZENS

Program Category: Gap Program
interexchange.org

InterExchange offers U.S. citizens the opportunity to embark on the adventure of a lifetime. Take part in a group tour through Europe or South Asia, or hone your Spanish skills in an immersive learning environment. If that doesn't grab you, you could Work & Travel through Canada or Australia for a year! Whatever you choose, we offer the expertise and support you need to learn about the world by actually experiencing it.

[Learn More »](#)

MERCHANT MARINE: THE MARITIME ACADEMIES

Program Category: Community College | Military Paid Work Experience | Trade School
maritime.dot.gov/maritime-workforce/maritime-education

The nation's seven maritime academies provide a pathway to earn a bachelor's degree while training to become a licensed merchant marine officer. They offer opportunities for hands-on shipboard experience and leadership development. Their graduates find challenging responsibilities in the commercial maritime industry and may also serve in the Armed Forces or federal agencies. The academies emphasize discipline, technical skills, and professional networking opportunities to support successful careers in maritime service with starting salaries over \$130K. [Learn More »](#)

METAMORPHOSIS GAP SEMESTER

Program Category: Gap Program
thoreaucollege.org

The Metamorphosis Gap Semester is a full time residential program based in rural Wisconsin incorporating philosophical discussion, fine arts and traditional crafts, homesteading skills, participatory self-governance, wilderness expeditions, and engaged community life. Together with an intimate cohort of up to 14 fellow students, participants embark on an immersive, four-month long journey of discovery and growth through the changing seasons in the beautiful Driftless Region, home to many organic farms, biodiverse wild spaces, and vibrant small towns. [Learn More »](#)

READING PARTNERS AMERICORPS MEMBER (PAID OPPORTUNITY!)

Program Category: Gap Program
readingpartners.org

Reading Partners is a national nonprofit dedicated to helping students become confident readers. Volunteers and AmeriCorps members use individualized tutoring to support students in building essential literacy skills that open doors to future opportunities. Serving with Reading Partners means making a direct impact in your community — whether by tutoring a student for an hour a week or dedicating a year of service as an AmeriCorps member. Join us to empower students, foster equity in education, and transform futures through reading.

[Learn More »](#)

ROOTED LIFE ADVENTURES' SUPPORTED GAP YEAR FOR WOMEN - BYRON BAY, AUSTRALIA

Program Category: Gap Program
rootedlifeadventures.com

Rooted Life Adventures' gap year programs go beyond adventure — they combine thrilling experiences with intentional personal growth. Students engage in cultural immersion, community volunteering, bucket list adventures, and purposeful entrepreneurship internships — like running a sheep farm or a pottery studio — while also learning to manage a home. You'll live with a 24/7 therapeutic coach and dedicate time each week to plan your future through college and career guidance. Every week is designed to build independence, resilience, and lifelong connections in a supportive, fun community. [Learn More »](#)

SCHOOL OF FASHION DESIGN

Program Category: Trade School
schooloffashiondesign.org

Your fashion education begins here! The School of Fashion Design is the only educational institution in New England dedicated exclusively to the study of fashion design. We provide students with a solid foundation in apparel design and construction, and the skills required for a successful career in fashion. Convenient Back Bay location, accessible by public transportation. New semesters begin September, January, and June. Courses are offered day, evening, and online. [Learn More »](#)

SEA|MESTER – ADVENTURE & ACADEMIC GAP YEAR AT SEA

Program Category: Internship
seamester.com

Sea|mester offers a powerful next step after high school. Living aboard our sailing vessels, students explore the world while earning college credit and gaining skills employers value — teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and global communication. Along the way, they earn sailing and scuba certifications, master seamanship, and build confidence through real responsibility. Whether or not college is the next step, Sea|mester provides a transformative experience that prepares young adults for lives, careers, and adventures beyond the classroom. [Learn More »](#)



THE BLACKBIRD ACADEMY GAP YEAR

Program Category: Gap Program
theblackbirdacademy.com

The Blackbird Academy — Professional School of Audio is consistently ranked in the top 5 audio/engineering schools in the nation. We have a world-renowned reputation for our outstanding graduates in both our Live Sound and Studio Engineering Programs. We emphasize a mentor-based, hands-on education. With over 700+ hours of hands-on training, our students graduate with not only the technical skills needed to work in audio but also the art of production from the industry's top creative names. [Learn More »](#)

TILTING FUTURES: TAKE ACTION LAB

Program Category: Gap Program | Internship
tiltingfutures.org

With Take Action Lab, you'll get to work with experienced human rights advocates in Cape Town, South Africa, or climate experts in Penang, Malaysia, who are addressing the global challenges that matter most. Expand your global perspective and sense of purpose with our apprenticeships, cultural immersion, and dynamic curriculum. Make friends and mentors for life and become part of a network of changemakers from across the world. Develop the skills, network, and insights to create an impactful future. Take Action Lab: Human Rights is now credit-eligible through the University of Pittsburgh. [Learn More »](#)

TIVNU: BUILDING JUSTICE GAP YEAR PROGRAM

Program Category: Gap Program | Internship
tivnu.org

Tivnu is the only Jewish gap year in America. It's nine months of hands-on social change internships, vibrant Jewish community, and self-discovery — all based in Portland, Oregon. Whether hiking through the forests of the Pacific Northwest, cooking dinner with housemates, or having thoughtful conversations about identity, Tivnu participants grow in ways that traditional paths often don't allow. With mentorship, real-world experience, and friendships, Tivnu gives young adults direction, connection, and a deeper sense of self. [Learn More »](#)

VOGUE CERTIFICATE IN FASHION MARKETING

Program Category: Trade School
voguecollege.com

The BA (Hons) Fashion Communication & Industry Practice at Vogue College of Fashion is an accredited three-year programme that equips you for a career in the fashion business, media or luxury sectors. Whether your strengths lie in creative areas like styling and image-making, or in business-related areas such as strategy and communication, this programme is designed to match your specific interests and career goals. Learning goes beyond traditional classrooms with access to industry professionals from Vogue and the wider fashion industry. [Learn More »](#)

WHERE THERE BE DRAGONS: GAP SEMESTER PROGRAMS

Program Category: Gap Program
wheretherebedragons.com

For over 30 years, Dragons has run the most immersive travel programs available. Offering meaningful — and real — opportunities to engage as travelers rather than tourists, students are able to truly connect with the people and places they visit. Dragons programs are for curious students, who want to experience new realities and go beyond mainstream experiences. Through expert mentorship and support, students ultimately return home with new perspectives and essential life skills. Travel with purpose this year. [Learn More »](#)

SMART SKILLS TO LEARN

for Your First Job (and Every Job After)

BY STEFANIE TEDARDS

Starting your first job, or any new job, can be scary! But don't worry, we've all been there. You can ease through the learning period by developing good work skills before stressing because you need and don't have them.

SKILLS EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR

The modern workplace evolves constantly. Here are the top skills worth learning and polishing now.

- **The World Economic Forum's** Future of Jobs Report lists analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, leadership, and social influence.
- **The National Association of Colleges and Employers'** recent Job Outlook survey highlights problem-solving, teamwork, written communication skills, initiative, and a strong work ethic.
- **Indeed's** Top 11 Skills Employers Look For identifies communication, leadership, teamwork, interpersonal, and learning/adaptability skills.

These lists overlap because some skills are universally important. Another universally important skill? Knowing *how* to learn. When you're new to a role, your ability to quickly acquire new skills and adapt to different workflows helps make a great first impression and successfully integrate into the team.

10 SKILLS TO LEARN FOR THE FUTURE

Learn these skills for success in any career:

1. **Communication.** Written and verbal communication skills are the glue holding everything together and keeping everyone on the same page.
2. **Critical thinking and problem solving.** Critical thinking includes knowing how to ask the right questions and diagnose an issue before it balloons. Knowing how to break down work problems, find solutions, and make decisions facilitates faster, more effective resolutions.
3. **Collaboration and teamwork.** Even if you work mostly solo, you should also work well with others. Good team members complete their part of a project, share ideas, listen to different perspectives, and assume extra responsibilities when needed.
4. **Technological literacy.** As more jobs rely on digital tools for efficiency and connectivity, tech-savviness has become a basic requirement. Tech skills can include navigating workplace software and communication platforms, and using data tools and scheduling systems.
5. **Adaptability and flexibility.** Even the best-laid plans sometimes derail. An adaptable mindset lets you roll with changes, acquire new skills, and persevere.
6. **Leadership and management.** Effective leadership means more than being in charge; it's the ability to guide a group and unite everyone toward a shared objective. Proficient leaders listen, organize, and motivate to achieve results.
7. **Emotional intelligence.** Understanding your and your colleagues' emotions and feelings can inform your interactions. Emotional intelligence helps you handle conflicts, support teammates, stay calm under pressure, and build trust and respect in the workplace.
8. **Creative thinking.** Creative thinking helps solve problems by brainstorming solutions or approaching a challenge from a new angle. It involves generating new ideas and discovering better approaches.
9. **Professionalism.** Professionalism encompasses reliability, politeness, and responsibility. It's your ability to be prepared, treat others respectfully, perform your duties effectively, and remain composed — even when things don't go your way.

- 10. Self-management.** This skill involves setting clear goals and holding yourself accountable, even when it's hard. Self-management hinges on self-awareness — knowing your strengths and weaknesses helps you make better decisions.

HOW TO LEARN A NEW SKILL

Whether you like Malcom Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule for becoming a master or John Kaufman's 20-hour method for gaining proficiency, there aren't shortcuts for learning new skills.

- **Start with the basics.** Do your research and break down your desired skill into its most basic elements. If you want to learn how to play the piano, you don't jump right into Bach. First, you learn to read music and then teach your fingers muscle memory through scales and exercises.
- **Determine your learning style.** Honing your ability to learn new skills starts by understanding how you learn. Are you a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner? Do you learn better alone or by talking things out with others?

Next, consider your motivations. How much structure do you need to stay committed? Can you set your own practice schedule and goals, or do you need a structured class with assignments and deadlines to stay on track?

- **Consider your environment.** You can learn hard skills like knitting, playing an instrument, or coding at home, with structured courses, video tutorials, and lots of practice. Learning soft skills like teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication benefits from group settings, where you can practice reading social cues, managing different personalities, and solving problems in real-time.

TIPS FOR PRACTICING CAREER SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Your skills list is your toolkit — what tools might a specific job or project need? Identify which you're missing (or need to practice).

If your palms sweat when it's your turn to speak in class, public speaking may top your "skills to learn" list. Constantly running late to class, practice, or dinner? Work



on time management. Want a skill to cultivate at home? Arts and crafts, like crocheting, drawing, or painting, can help you unwind and feed your creative side.

Unsure of your career path? The most valuable skills to acquire are those that benefit all jobs: communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. An easy way to gain these skills? Extracurriculars.

- Join a club
- Try out for a sports team
- Run for student government
- Volunteer
- Get an internship or part-time job
- Take a pre-college summer program

You can also develop your soft skills through daily interactions with peers, teachers, and family. Group projects and dinner conversations let you practice empathy and strengthen your communication skills.

Develop your technical skills with a community college class. Prefer to learn at your own pace from home? Check out free or low-cost resources online, like YouTube tutorials or MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

Challenging yourself to learn new skills can build confidence and open up new possibilities, but no one gets everything right on the first try. Keep a growth mindset, remember that progress takes time, and don't stress about failure — that's how you learn.



WHAT CAN YOU EARN IN THE TRADES

■■■■■■■■■■ BY JODI IRELAND ■■■■■■■■■■

Many high school graduates don't envision a bachelor's degree as their next step. The skilled trades are more important than ever and offer career opportunities that don't always require a traditional four-year college degree. These hands-on professions, from electricians and plumbers to HVAC techs, morticians, and carpenters, are important and form the backbone of our infrastructure and daily lives.

Curious about what you can earn in a skilled trade? We sourced most of our data from ZipRecruiter, which has the most up-to-date information on national average salaries, whether annual or hourly. We also included cities or states with the highest salaries and, where appropriate, included related jobs.

1. AESTHETICIAN

Average annual salary: \$45,374

High: \$73,000 | **Low:** \$19,000

Top-paying city: Santa Cruz County, CA - \$62,961

Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Master Esthetician: \$66,900
- Holistic Skin Care Specialist: \$62,017
- Licensed Esthetician: \$58,205
- Microdermabrasion: \$50,757
- Med Spa Esthetician: \$45,374

3. ELECTRICAL LINEMAN

Average annual salary: \$118,560

High: \$59.86 hourly | **Low:** \$34.86 hourly

Top-paying city: Corcoran, CA - \$190,489

Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Power Lineman: \$87,915
- Aerial Lineman: \$55,795

4. ELECTRICIAN

Average annual salary: \$61,391

High: \$98,000 | **Low:** \$32,000

State with the highest salary: Washington - \$69,531

5. ELECTRONICS TECHNICIAN

Average annual salary: \$60,843

High: \$95,500 | **Low:** \$29,500

Top-paying city: Scotts Valley, CA - \$78,737

2. AUTOMOTIVE MECHANIC

Average annual salary: \$52,000

High: \$36.54 hourly | **Low:** \$12.26 hourly

Top-paying city: Scotts Valley, CA - \$66,793

Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Director Auto Mechanic: \$68,439
- Automotive Maintenance: \$65,662
- Automotive Welding: \$53,788
- Automotive Machinist: \$49,499

6. FUNERAL DIRECTOR/MORTICIAN

Average annual salary: \$65,886
High: \$88,500 | **Low:** \$32,500
Top-paying city: Nome, AK - \$81,732

7. HOME INSPECTOR

Average annual salary: \$60,345
High: \$89,500 | **Low:** \$29,500
Top-paying city: Portola Valley, CA - \$84,110
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Foreclosure Field Inspector: \$56,872
- Independent Property Inspector: \$49,683

8. INDUSTRIAL MECHANIC

Average annual salary: \$58,240
High: \$38.22 hourly | **Low:** \$14.90 hourly
State with the highest salary: Nome, AK - \$71,449
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Plant Mechanic: \$66,248
- Manufacturing Mechanic: \$56,800
- Building Mechanic: \$50,010

9. MASSEUR/MASSAGE THERAPIST

Average annual salary: \$72,800
High: \$59.62 hourly | **Low:** \$9.62 hourly
Top-paying city: Mineral, VA - \$104,177
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Prenatal Massage Therapist: \$71,679
- Aromatherapy: \$66,461
- Spa Therapist: \$53,236

10. MRI TECHNOLOGIST

Average annual salary: \$110,240
High: \$78.85 hourly | **Low:** \$19.48 hourly
Top-paying city: Corcoran, CA - \$175,801
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- MRI Manager: \$83,482
- Lead Radiology Tech: \$78,874
- MRI Scheduler: \$53,874

11. PARALEGAL

Average annual salary: \$59,731
High: \$89,000 | **Low:** \$33,000
Top-paying city: Surry, VA - \$85,906
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Senior Litigation Paralegal: \$86,176
- Commercial Litigation Paralegal: \$78,599
- Senior Paralegal: \$75,187
- Paralegal Office Manager: \$71,376

12. PLUMBER

Average annual salary: \$62,400
High: \$48.08 hourly | **Low:** \$14.18 hourly
Top-paying city: Soledad, CA - \$94,564
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Residential Plumber: \$71,534
- Service Plumber: \$65,552
- Pipe Fitter Apprentice: \$59,574
- Commercial Plumber: \$58,820

13. POLICE OFFICER

Average annual salary: \$62,148
High: \$103,500 | **Low:** \$32,500
Top-paying city: San Mateo County, CA - \$91,480
Related high-paying jobs (annual salary):

- Police Chief: \$124,409
- Environmental Police: \$74,487
- Motorcycle Police Officer: \$60,629
- Police Recruiter: \$60,477
- Court Enforcement Officer: \$59,965

13. WEB DEVELOPER

Average annual salary: \$94,149
High: \$161,500 | **Low:** \$32,000
Top-paying city: Bumpass, VA - \$126,020



**CHECK OUT OUR BLOG
FOR EVEN MORE OPTIONS**



PAYING FOR YOUR ALTERNATIVE PATH:

Scholarships, Grants, and Financial Aid Options



BY STEFANIE TEDARDS

Cost is a major factor for anyone considering college. For many students, the expense is a key reason they choose to explore other paths. Vocational school, training programs, and gap years are great alternatives to a four-year degree, but each has its own expenses. So, how can you afford them?

Calculating how to pay for your post-high school plans may present a challenge, but it's not impossible. A little research can uncover some surprising financial resources.

GRANTS AND AID FOR TRADE SCHOOLS AND TECHNICAL TRAINING

Trade schools, also known as vocational or technical schools, offer short-term training programs that give students the knowledge and skills required to find employment in a specific job or field. Programs last anywhere from a few months to two years, and many offer both full- and part-time enrollment options.

You can finance your technical training program with these strategies:

- **Federal aid:** Submitting the FAFSA gives you access to federal grants, work-study opportunities, and student loans.
- **State-specific aid:** Many states offer their own scholarships and workforce development

programs, such as the Washington College Grant or Virginia's G3 Initiative.

- **Private scholarships:** Community organizations, including businesses, nonprofits, and membership associations, often award scholarships based on merit, need, or specific interests.
- **Institutional scholarships:** Many trade and technical schools offer their own scholarships to support incoming or current students.

As you explore these options, consider that each comes with its own type of limitations. Students nationwide can access **federal aid**, but it may have minimum enrollment requirements, such as a certain number of credits or hours. **State-specific aid** is usually limited to in-state residents and may require attending a state-approved school. **Private and institutional scholarships** often have specific eligibility criteria, such as background or field of study. Because their awarded amounts are typically smaller, you may need several to fully cover your costs.

EARNING MONEY THROUGH APPRENTICESHIPS AND SERVICE PROGRAMS

Apprenticeships and service programs offer a way to earn an income while you learn and train. Apprenticeships blend on-the-job training, work experience, and supplemental instruction under the supervision of a trained professional. This

education is typically reserved for skills-based trades (but there are lots of options!). The U.S. Department of Labor recognizes over 950 occupations as apprenticeship fields. You could complete an apprenticeship to become a carpenter, building inspector, heavy truck driver, barber, or firefighter. Apprenticeship training is typically tuition-free; however, you may need to pay for tools, books, and other materials.

If you aren't interested in a specific trade, service programs are a great way to develop your professional and personal skills.

- **AmeriCorps:** Offers a modest living stipend during service and an education award upon completion.
- **City Year:** Provides a biweekly stipend and an education award through AmeriCorps.
- **Peace Corps:** Covers living expenses abroad and provides a readjustment allowance after service.
- **Job Corps:** Provides free career training, housing, meals, basic healthcare, and a small stipend.
- **National Health Service Corps:** Offers loan repayment or scholarships in exchange for working in underserved areas.
- **Military service:** Pays a full salary with benefits and offers education funding through programs like the GI Bill.

Different programs require varying levels of commitment, ranging from a few months to several years. City Year and AmeriCorps are typically one-year roles; the Peace Corps or military service generally require multi-year commitments and relocation. Research each program's expectations — including commitments like time, training, location, and responsibilities — and weigh them against their potential benefits.

HOW TO AFFORD A GAP YEAR PROGRAM

A gap year is a great alternative for transitioning between high school and college, especially if you're not ready to go straight into a four-year program. Gap year programs can cost thousands of dollars, however, and the longer the program, the higher the price tag. But you can also apply for scholarships designed specifically to help fund a gap year.

While some gap year programs suggest fundraising, others offer specific scholarships, like these:

- **EF Gap Year:** Global Citizens Scholarship
- **Manna Project:** Amaguaña Social Service Fund
- **NOLS:** Need-based scholarships
- **Amigos de las Americas:** Leadership Award
- **ARCC:** Scholarships and financial aid application
- **Tilting Futures:** Need-based financial aid and merit scholarships

Additionally, you can opt for gap year programs that combine travel or outdoor adventure with paid work experience. YMCA of the Rockies' Elevate Gap Program offers seasonal jobs that include housing, meals, and the chance to live and work in a national park setting. Adventure-EXP connects students with employers in New Zealand for a "cost-positive" gap experience, and this organization has destination work programs across the U.S., too.

TIPS FOR FINDING NON-TRADITIONAL FUNDING

Paying for your next step — whether school, a training program, or a gap year — is possible if you're willing to put in the work and think creatively. No matter what type of program or experience you choose, here are three tips to find funding:

1. **Start by contacting your program provider.** Ask if they offer any institutional scholarships and if they can recommend local organizations that provide financial support.
2. **Search for industry-specific resources.** For example, Beauty Changes Lives offers scholarships for cosmetology students; the California Bureau of Automotive Repair lists opportunities for those entering the automotive field.
3. **Watch out for scholarship scams.** Legitimate scholarships do not require application fees. If you're asked to pay to apply, move on to the next opportunity.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Many people think that only “traditional” college students can qualify for scholarships, but that’s far from the truth! Below is just a small list of scholarships available for students pursuing a career in the trades. It’s by no means comprehensive, and we didn’t include regional or local options, either. When you decide where you’re taking classes — whether it’s a trade school, community college, or online program — check your area and the organization, too!

GENERAL/OTHER

- The 1st Financial Bank Financial Goals Scholarship
- American Postal Workers Union (APWU) Vocational Scholarship
- Asphalt Pavement Association of Oregon (APAO) Scholarship
- AWS Foundation National Scholarships
- Blue Collar Brain Trade School Scholarship
- Chime Scholarships
- Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Scholarship
- Floor Covering Education Foundation (FCEF) Floor Your Future Scholarship
- Home Depot Foundation’s Path to Pro Scholarship
- “Follow Your Own Path” Essay Scholarship
- Horatio Alger Career & Technical Education (CTE) Scholarship
- IMA Foundation Scholarship
- The Kevin Phillips Scholarship
- Metallica Scholars
- Mike Rowe WORKS Foundation Scholarships
- National Association of State Contractors Licensing Agencies (NASCLA) Scholarship Program
- National Propane Gas Association Scholarship
- New Jersey Governor’s Industry Vocations Scholarship for Women & Minorities
- Niche \$10,000 “No Essay” Scholarship
- Nut, Bolts, and Thingamajigs Foundation Scholarships
- Pride Foundation Scholarships
- SkillPointe Foundation Scholarship
- Society of Vacuum Coaters (SVC) Foundation College Scholarship
- United Transportation Insurance Association (UTIA) Trade Scholarships
- Uniball’s Skilled Trades Scholarship
- Women Rock Trades Scholarship
- \$2,000 No Essay Scholarship by Sallie

AUTOMOTIVE

- AmericanMuscle Automotive Scholarships
- AmericanTrucks Student Scholarships
- Automotive Aftermarket Scholarships
- Automotive Hall of Fame Scholarship
- Piston Fund Scholarship

BEAUTY & COSMETOLOGY

- Beauty & Wellness Professionals Scholarship
- Joe Francis Haircare Scholarship Foundation
- Sport Clips Scholarships

CONSTRUCTION

- Castagra Roofing Scholarship Program
- Caterpillar US Student Trainee Program
- DEWALT Trades Scholarship
- National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) Construction Trades Scholarship
- Professional Women in Building Scholarships
- Roofing Alliance Melvin Kruger Scholarship Program

CULINARY

- American Culinary Foundation Scholarships
- National Restaurant Association Scholarships

DENTAL

- American Culinary Foundation Scholarships
- National Restaurant Association Scholarship

ENERGY

- DEED Scholarships
- SOLV Energy PowerUp! Renewable Energy Scholarship

HVAC

- A&J Duct Cleaning Scholarship
- HVAC Hero Scholarship
- Women in HVACR Scholarship

MANUFACTURING

- Fabricators and Manufacturers Association Scholarship
- Precision Metalforming Association Scholarships

PLUMBING

- Fluidmaster Plumbing Scholarship
- IWSH Scholarship Essay Contest
- PHCC Scholarship Program

WELDING

- American Welding Society National Scholarship
- Golden West Plumbing, Heating and Air Conditioning Scholarship

 [FOR AN EVEN MORE COMPREHENSIVE LIST, VISIT OUR BLOG.](#)

RESOURCES

Looking for more opportunities and professional organizations associated with the trades? Check out these resources! Many of these organizations offer student memberships, too.

AVIATION

- The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA)
- Association of Flight Attendants-CWA (AFA-CWA)
- Professional Aviation Maintenance Association (PAMA)
- The Professional Pilots Association (PPA)

AUTOMOTIVE

- Automotive Industry Action Group (AIAG)
- FISITA
- Society of Automotive Analysts (SAA)
- Society of Automotive Engineering International

BEAUTY & COSMETOLOGY

- Associated Skin Care Professionals
- Beauty Biz Club
- Professional Beauty Association
- Salon Spa Professional Association

CONSTRUCTION

- American Road & Transportation Builders Association
- American Society of Professional Estimators
- National Association of Minority Contractors
- National Association of Women in Construction

CULINARY

- American Culinary Federation (ACF)
- Bread Bakers Guild of America
- Culinary Institute of America
- WORLDCHEFS

DENTAL

- Academy of General Dentistry
- American Student Dental Association (ASDA)
- American Dental Hygienists' Association (ADHA)
- International Association of Dental Research

ELECTRIC

- Electrical Training Alliance (ETA)
- Independent Alliance of the Electrical Industry (IAEI)
- National Association of Electrical Distributors (NAED)
- National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA)

ENERGY

- American Energy Society
- American Solar Energy Society (ASES)
- Association of Energy Service Professionals
- Student Energy

HVAC

- Air Conditioning Trade Association (ACTA)
- HVAC Excellence
- North American Technician Excellence (NATE)
- Women in HVACR

IT

- Association for Women in Computing (AWC)
- CompTIA
- Information Systems Audit and Control Association (ISACA)
- Information Systems Security Association (ISSA)

MANUFACTURING

- American Society for Quality (ASQ)
- Association for Manufacturing Excellence (AME)
- Fabricators & Manufacturers Association (FMA)
- Manufacturer's Alliance

MEDICAL

- American Association of Medical Assistants (AAMA)
- American Association for Respiratory Care (AARC)
- American Society of Radiologic Technologists (ASRT)
- The Pharmacy Technician Society (TPTS)

MISCELLANEOUS

- American Association of Meat Processors
- American Beekeeping Association
- International Society of Arboriculture
- National Dog Groomers Association of America

WELDING

- American Welding Society (AWS)
- International Institute of Welding (IIW)
- United Association - Welders
- Women Who Weld



FOR AN EVEN MORE COMPREHENSIVE LIST, VISIT OUR BLOG.

TRADE SCHOOL COLLEGE:

Which path is right for you?

BY JODI IRELAND

Choosing between trade school and college is a pretty big decision for a high school student, as both paths offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. Here's a breakdown to help you determine which might be the best fit.

TRADE SCHOOL

Also called vocational or technical schools, trade schools offer specialized, hands-on training for specific skilled occupations. Their programs and curricula are practical and job-specific, focused on preparing students directly for the workforce.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- **Duration:** Generally much shorter than traditional college, ranging from a few months to two years, facilitating quicker entry into a career.
- **Cost:** More affordable, with programs typically costing between \$5,000 and \$15,000, which can keep student debt more manageable.
- **Career focus:** Concentrates on practical skills for particular skilled trades (e.g., automotive repair, cosmetology, culinary arts, HVAC, nursing, plumbing, welding).
- **Earning potential:** Can offer competitive salaries, especially in high-demand trades. The return on investment (ROI) may be more immediate because you can start working sooner.
- **Job security:** Often high, as jobs in the skilled trades are frequently in demand.
- **Career flexibility:** Specialized skills may limit flexibility in switching fields, although shorter training programs can make career changes less costly and time-consuming for anyone seeking additional training (or who wants to change industries entirely).

COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

Higher education institutions offer two-year (associate) or four-year (bachelor's) degrees across a broader range of subjects, like the arts, business, engineering, the humanities, or the sciences. Their curricula include education in a chosen major and additional coursework for a more comprehensive education.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- **Duration:** A longer commitment, typically two years for an associate degree (earned from a community college) or four years for a bachelor's degree.
- **Cost:** Significantly more expensive than trade or technical school, with tuition ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000 or more per year, potentially leading to substantial loan debt.
- **Career focus:** Provides a more extensive academic education and opens doors to more diverse career paths.
- **Earning potential:** College graduates can have higher earning potential over their lifetime.
- **Job security:** Generally strong, with a higher employment rate for college graduates than those with only a high school diploma.
- **Career flexibility:** A broader education can offer more flexibility to change careers, although switching paths partway through a four-year degree can be expensive and time-consuming.

WHICH PATH SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Your path depends on your individual preferences, financial situation, long-term career goals, learning style, and what you love (or like enough to want to turn into a career).

Consider trade school if: You prefer hands-on learning, want or need to enter the workforce more quickly, are looking for a more affordable education, or gravitate toward a specific, high-demand skilled trade.

After a multi-year project to modernize the National Career Clusters Framework, the National Association

for State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium created 16 career clusters, subdivided into 79 career pathways, that trade school students can choose from. In other words, you have lots of options. A career in the skilled trades has far more opportunities than ever before.

Consider college if: You want a deeper college education, with the opportunity to study subjects

that won't necessarily be part of your career, want more diverse career options, or are seeking jobs that require a bachelor's degree.

If variety is *your* spice of life, you have many different interests, and want to explore all you can, stretching your mind and intellect. Colleges and universities worldwide offer over 2,000 majors. With all these options, there's something for everyone.

KEY TAKEAWAYS		
	TRADE SCHOOL	COLLEGES
Rolling admissions/ start-when-you're- ready	YES	LIMITED
Specialized classes	YES	YES
Option to take classes outside of your field	LIMITED	YES
Small class sizes	YES	DEPENDS (Lower-level required classes may have 50 - 300 students)
Rigorous class schedule with limited flexibility	YES	NO
Good if you have a clear career path in mind	YES	YES
Career counseling	YES	YES
Job placement services	YES	SOMETIMES
Cost	MORE COST-EFFECTIVE (total: \$5,000 to \$15,000 on average)	MORE EXPENSIVE (\$38,270 per year, including books, supplies, living expenses)
Can use FAFSA to qualify for financial aid	YES	YES
Can use a 529 to pay for tuition	YES	YES
Most up-to-date curricula	YES, because of certification requirements	DEPENDS
Hands-on training	YES	DEPENDS
Quick path to a career	YES, typically 1-2 years	NO, typically 4 years
Earning potential over a career	GOOD, but often less than a degree holder, depending on the trade	GENERALLY HIGHER than a trade school credential, though not guaranteed

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