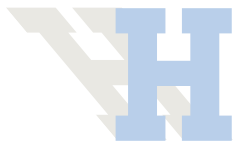


IS
COLLEGE
Right for



HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES TODAY have a multitude of choices for their next steps in life. For generations, college provided the best known path to a lucrative career. But things now are less clear.

The “great pause” provided by the pandemic created an opportunity to reevaluate career, education, and, for many, this meant rethinking the value of a college education. For decades, many high school students applied to college because it was what was expected—a given. The prevailing belief was that those who *could* go to college should, and alternative pathways such as trades (plumbing, electrical, welding, and so forth) or certificate programs were for those who couldn’t get into college, a second choice.

The story is different today. The cost of college has skyrocketed, while income growth has inched along at a much slower pace. The high cost of attending college has saddled many attendees, graduates or otherwise, with debt that continues to affect life choices such as buying a home or starting a family.

In addition, educational opportunities have grown, in large part due to computers and online learning. The growth of the tech industry has opened the way for tech “boot camps” for individuals who are interested in computer skills. Training and certificate programs are available across industries for individuals seeking alternatives in better alignment with their interests, strengths, and lifestyle.

For individuals with ADHD and/or learning differences, there are significantly more options today.

College may not be the best fit for everyone

Many students with ADHD struggle in college. As they are often also challenged with learning disabilities such as dyslexia (45% co-occurrence), completing an undergraduate degree can be difficult. Able to make it through

high school, they may find that the independence and work load at college exceeds the strengths of their executive functions.

Developmental delays of up to thirty percent for individuals with ADHD often don’t even out until their mid-to-late twenties, creating a discrepancy between structures appropriate for neurotypical college-age students and those appropriate for students with ADHD and executive function challenges. The sheer quantity of reading required in college can put many students with ADHD at a significant disadvantage.

A college experience

My friend Will, a thirty-two-year-old solar industry professional, attended college because of family expectations. His parents, siblings, and grandparents all went to college. He doesn’t recall any conversations about options and did what was expected. In a recent conversation he told me that college, for him, was not only wasted time, but incurred debt he is still paying off.

Will enjoys his current work. He recently completed certification as an electrician and excels in it. His favorite part of his college years was his work-study placement, where he worked in, and ultimately managed, the waste resource center at the school. He was so interested and engaged in this work that he created an award-winning compost program for the school. With work that was hands-on, comprising tasks in which he fully engaged and could complete, Will thrived.

Will is a bright, capable, and curious man whose story demonstrates the benefit of exploring future options with students as they consider graduation.

Everyone?

Debbie Tracht, MA, ACAC, CAGS



Research shows that one of the greatest obstacles to finding the right path is the relative lack of information parents and students have about their choices.

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A new mindset

Rather than thinking of alternatives to college as a second choice, perhaps we parents can help our children celebrate who they are. Let's allow them to thrive in a career that meets their learning and living style. Rather than view alternative options as "less than" or only for students who aren't "good enough" for college, let's come from an asset perspective of who our children are. Positive traits such as creative problem-solving, out-of-the-box thinking, curiosity, energy, and the ability to focus intensely can make individuals with ADHD valuable workers.

Trade education—a critical need

Work in the trades, such as electrical, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), and welding, can be a great fit for a person with ADHD. Many tradespeople move around throughout the day, tackle novel tasks, and utilize problem-solving skills, which all play to strengths shared by many individuals with ADHD. Training, generally with a hands-on component, is shorter and costs a fraction of a college degree. Plus, the salaries for many trades can be lucrative as well.

In an interview with Ezra Klein for a New York Times podcast, Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, stresses the need for

skilled tradespeople as our energy and infrastructure goals evolve to meet the demands of our changing climate. Projects related to infrastructure and utilities will require the participation of electricians, plumbers, welders, machinists, mechanics, carpenters, pipe fitters, and HVAC specialists. The Inflation Reduction Act includes billions of dollars for climate-friendly projects that are dependent on skilled trades.

McKibben suggests, "If you know a young person who wants to do something that's going to help the world and wants to make a good living at the same time, tell them to go become an electrician."

For someone with ADHD, this is opportunity knocking.

Exploring the paths

Research shows that one of the greatest obstacles to finding the right path is the relative lack of information parents and students have about their choices. Cindy Goldrich, MEd, ADHD-CCSP, a coach for parents of children with ADHD, suggests consulting a career coach to help support a young adult through this process. She also recommends using an interest inventory such as the Strong Interest Inventory as a tool to guide career exploration.

US News & World Report, well-known for providing in-depth information supporting the college search, also offers several articles related to alternative pathways that include resources for further exploration.

I steer many of my clients to O*NET Online, a US Department of Labor website that provides extensive descriptions of career paths, including job growth projections, training required, and average expected salaries. It contains a wealth of information about careers in skilled trades, healthcare professions, and technology fields as well as countless other job choices. Another excellent resource, Apprenticeship USA, focuses on apprenticeship programs and was created by the federal government to meet the labor needs of the Infrastructure Reduction Act.

Many state governments have created programs and partnerships aimed at training individuals to meet labor needs in various sectors. An example of one such program, a partnership within Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU), was launched in Connecticut in 2022. The Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center at Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) was created to meet the needs of the manufacturing sector, one of the top sectors in Connecticut's economy. A program at the Advanced Manufacturing Technology Center earns graduates a certificate, and around ninety-five percent obtain a manufacturing job.

The training initiatives in many states are relatively unknown and require some investigation. To find how each state is meeting the unique labor needs of the local economy, search the individual state's department of labor.

New ways to approach college

College for many is *still* a great opportunity. Students can realize dreams. A degree can break the cycle of generations of poverty. And for many high-paying professions, such as a number of STEM, healthcare, law, and various business sectors, a college education is required.

A college education has significant merits for some individuals—exposure to novel ideas and diverse perspectives can spark interests and broaden outlook, which can be life-changing. For the student with ADHD who may excel in topics of interest and tune out those they consider less relevant, it is important to consider other approaches for career education, or other approaches to increase probability of college success.

For students interested in college but not yet ready or not quite sure, a gap year can provide time for exploration and growth. There are countless programs, including volunteer and paid internship experiences as well as travel opportunities. A gap year can be a time to gain some independence before going to college or explore vocational options previously unavailable or unknown.

The Gap Year Association, a nonprofit organization, is a great place to start looking at the types of gap year experiences available.

Another approach is for a student to attend community college, potentially starting with a single class. This provides a low-risk environment in which to gain confidence and learn what is needed to succeed in a college course. Community college is considerably lower in price and, in some states, free, allowing for exploration of subjects as well.

Letting go of the stigma

There is a stigma attached to alternative career paths, particularly among parents with a college education. For many, having their child not attend college feels like an embarrassment or failure. It's time to look through a different lens.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Jill Collins, "Rethinking ADHD in the Workplace," *Forbes*, September 29, 2023. | <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2023/09/29/rethinking-adhd-in-the-workplace/?sh=48b582531d4c>

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Michelle Raz, MEd, "Your Career Blueprint Begins with Your Passion and Purpose," *Attention*, October 2019. | chadd.org/attention-article/your-career-blueprint-begins-with-your-passion-and-purpose/

Michelle Raz, MEd, "Flipping the Script on ADHD: Find Your Strength in the Workplace and Dispel the Myths Along Your Path," *Attention*, June 2019. | chadd.org/attention-article/flipping-the-script-on-adhd/

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Arlynn Roffman, PhD, "Other Avenues When Traditional College Is Not the Answer," *Attention*, August 2011. | chadd.org/attention-article/other-avenues-when-traditional-college-is-not-the-answer/

Chris A. Ziegler Dendy, MS, "Career Choices and ADHD: Helping Teens and Young Adults Find Their Path," *Attention*, April 2011. | chadd.org/attention-article/career-choices-and-adhd-helping-teens-and-young-adults-find-their-path/

Helpful Resources: Career Paths & Alternatives to College

Course Report | information on tech boot camps | <https://www.coursereport.com>

Myers-Briggs Strong Interest Inventory | www.themyersbriggs.com/en-US/Products-and-Services/Strong

"Alternatives to a 4-Year College: What to Know," US News & World Report | <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/alternatives-to-a-4-year-college-what-to-know>

O*NET Online | US Department of Labor website with extensive information on career paths | <https://www.onetonline.org/>

Apprenticeship USA | US Department of Labor website for information on apprenticeship programs | www.apprenticeship.gov

The Gap Year Association | for resources, programs, and stories about gap year experiences | <https://www.gapyearassociation.org/>

College is the right step after high school for some. But we will better serve our children if we recognize that it is one option among many, and not necessarily the best option for every child. 🗣️



Debbie Tracht is a literacy specialist and a certified ADHD/executive function coach and consultant in Middlebury, Vermont. She specializes in working with adults of college age and beyond. For the past decade, she has led local support groups for adults with ADHD and currently co-facilitates a CHADD online support group for women with ADHD with Jill Linkoff, an expert ADHD/executive function coach in the Baltimore area. In addition, Tracht provides training and resources to mental health professionals and educators in her community.