

Accepting That Four-Year College is No Longer a Panacea for Today's Students

Valuing students' voices in conversations about their futures...and why we must be OK with their plans including different forms of postsecondary education.



REFRAMING THE QUEST FOR “BEST”

“*I want to pursue a job in an art field. I wasn’t completely sure if going to college was the best route for me to reach my dreams.*”

11th-grader, South Carolina¹

We know that through a combination of highly personalized learning experiences in middle school, and an array of discovery and exploration activities, any student can and will find a path that works before they leave high school. In some cases that path may not include formal higher education, but a non-college path can certainly still be the best option for that student. Our view isn’t that college is a bad choice. Far from it. But **all students must be empowered to make a choice based on personal interests and aptitudes** and must be helped to understand all of their options and develop a plan. The earlier that conversation starts, the better.

“*I’m a little nervous about the future because I know I don’t want to go to college, but I want to earn good money.*”

Anonymous Student, Grade 11²

For young people entering the bill-paying world today, the global crisis of COVID-19 notwithstanding, time is always ticking and there is little room for missteps. The pressures of making a decision, whether or not it’s the right one, are often overwhelming and cause young people to act hastily. Too often, the conversation is limited to the polarity of going to college or not going to college, and all too seldom is this conversation linked to an in-depth exploration of long-term career objectives. Young people are told, implicitly and explicitly, that four-year college is the only key to unlocking a stable and rewarding life. **But adults must be open to the possibility, particularly during these turbulent times, that the desired plan for many students may not include four-year college, and even if it does, many teens can benefit from a more thoughtful exploration and consideration of their needs and goals before selecting a path.** We know that education in many shapes and forms can play a defining role in a young person’s success. But getting into college is not the end point, and education for education’s sake is no longer enough. What must be more carefully considered is why a student is making the higher education

decision they are making and what they hope to gain from it. Are they doing it because it’s just what comes next? Because it’s what their parents want? Or because it’s part of a carefully thought-out plan that will lead to long-term success and fulfillment? When carefully considering all the reasons why someone should pursue higher education, we must be more supportive of the idea that the plan may not include a four-year degree. **Two-year college, employer-funded degrees, non-degree/skill-specific certifications, bootcamps, a la carte online courses, internships, apprenticeships and vocational or technical training are just some of the higher education options that deserve a place at the table.** These options can be meaningful elements of a career path that enable young people to pursue their passions. The way we talk about students’ future choices can be deeply influential, and it is critical that viable paths are not presented as lesser.

Most people working in and around education have benefited to a great extent from various degrees and higher education credentials. Questioning the value of higher education or proposing another way—particularly by people who have benefited from it—may seem hypocritical. Yet we all must acknowledge that today’s students and young adults face a very different landscape that makes the playing field uneven. A sea-change is occurring within the education and employment landscape, exacerbated by recent events, that makes it necessary to reexamine the ways in which four-year college is presented as a timeless panacea. **We must ensure that young people understand how college may or may not help them meet their goals in life, and what other options exist.** And for those young people for whom college does make sense, we must guide them to avoid making hasty decisions in college choice by encouraging them to think of long-term

Adults must be open to the possibility that the desired plan for many students may not include four-year college.



career objectives...well *before* they decide which school to attend and what major to pursue. It is difficult for any parent or teacher to fathom advising a student against what they perceive to be the best and most lucrative path. For so long, college has been touted as the “best” path. But in reality, “best” must be fine-tuned for the individual, and for the world in which we live. And today, all signs point to the rise of a wide array of education and career choices as being acceptable and promising parts of almost any career path.

A very different college landscape then and now

“*I want to make everyone happy and have a great life and a good paying job. I just want to be happy and I’m scared about taking the extra time for extra schooling.*”

11th-grader, Ohio³

Older college graduates will likely tell you that the four-year time investment of college was well worth it. By today’s standards, however, and particularly for those with bills to pay and family members to feed, four years (or six years, as is now the case for 59% of first-time college graduates)⁴ is a long time to delay earning a livable wage, and all while costs are rising. **Rising costs mean students must be clearer than ever on the choice they are making, because the stakes are simply higher than they were for past generations.** For example, those who attended college in the late 1980s would have, on average, spent \$1,490 per year on tuition compared to \$9,970 in 2018.⁵ Textbook prices were, according to the American Enterprise Institute, 812% higher in 2017 than three decades earlier.⁶ Cost, of course, goes hand-in-hand with debt in any conversation about college. The graduating class of 2018 owed \$29,200 compared to \$12,750 in 1996.⁷ The amount of debt students now have to take on is forcing them to delay consumer choices that lead them to question the value of higher education. For example, homeownership, once considered the gateway to the American Dream, is now further out-of-reach for college graduates. (Non-homeowners with student debt are delaying home ownership by an average of seven years.)⁸ While costs are rising, salaries, adjusted for inflation,

have remained stagnant since the 1980s. (The average salary for an early-career, college-educated employee barely rose, from \$49,406 in 1987 to \$50,556 in 2016.)⁹

“*...[I worry] about being accepted into a college with other applicants fighting for the spot that I am also fighting for.*”

10th-grader, New York¹⁰

College admission is also more competitive than in years past, with more people waitlisted.¹¹ There are more people applying for spots. Some 36% of first-time college freshmen applied to at least seven colleges during the 2015 admission cycle (an increase from 17% in 2005). And while it’s true that a majority of colleges still admit most people who apply, **admission rates have actually fallen at most U.S. colleges.**¹² The often-complicated application and admission process adds to the list of pressures today’s prospective college students face.

What’s the ROI of college?

Generations of college-going students have seen that higher education can be the great equalizer; it has the ability to lift individuals and families out of poverty. For many years it was the key to accessing the middle class, and it provided access to employment opportunities that many were precluded from accessing without a college education. Even now, as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic become clearer, those 25 and older with a high school diploma and no college degree are facing 17% unemployment as a demographic, compared to 9% among those with a bachelor’s degree.¹³ The value of higher education is, without question, transformative. But it’s also true that for many people and for far too long, four-year college has been presented as the *only* real option. What is the return-on-investment for young people who attend four-year college today? At two-thirds of higher education institutions in the U.S., students are able to recoup the cost of education within five years of their average wage premium (calculated using median salaries 10 years after attendance).¹⁴ Still, *Forbes* reports that at 228 institutions it would take more than 10 years after that wage premium peak to recoup, and at 442 institutions former students will never earn back their



investment. Should high school students still be told that four-year college is the best and only path? Can a four-year college education make any person crisis-proof? Or do we need to reimagine how we think about higher education and concern ourselves less with the degree and more with the skills needed for success? After all, **while a four-year college degree may have been the panacea for previous generations, the world has changed and perhaps it's time that our views of postsecondary education change along with it.** We believe that such an important decision is worth a deeper think and a nuanced, ongoing conversation.

Pressure to attend four-year college is often misaligned with what students want

“I hated (and still do hate) school. I may have undiagnosed ADHD and no one, not my therapist, parents, teachers, anyone, recognizes that I'm trying and struggling like hell.”

8th-grader, Tennessee¹⁵

Some 61% of parents whose children are on the path to some form of higher education would consider themselves parental failures if their children didn't complete any post-high school education.¹⁶ The unwitting pressure put on today's children to attend college is often inconsiderate of what students want and need. Among students who indicate that their parents want them to go to college, half report that they worry often (20%) or sometimes (26%) that their parents' desire for them to go college outweighs their own.¹⁷ In 2019 we surveyed 1,529 college students across the country about their retrospective feelings on decisions they made in high school. Some 44% reported that they selected their college prior to considering their intended career path. And 33% reported that they selected their college major prior to considering their intended career path.¹⁸

“I worry about college, if I want to go, and if I have a choice. I tell myself to just keep going and follow the pace others go at.”

Anonymous high school student¹⁹

Last year, we looked at the drivers of college certainty among 7-12th graders. We found a subset of students who rated their certainty about going to college a 10 out of 10, but who also reported that they had done relatively little exploration of their education and career options.²⁰ These

students had good overall grades, but also reported “a lot” of parental influence in their future planning. Educators also join the chorus of voices encouraging college as the best path. Seven in 10 teachers agreed that college is a critical gateway to a child's future success. Yet, students are often encouraged to pursue this path without any real sense of how it might fit into their life plan. We found that 79% of students feel college is the appropriate next step after high school, even though 46% reported *I don't think I can financially afford to go to college.*²¹ With adults in their life advocating for a four-year college degree, a child who expresses another desire may wrongly feel like he or she has failed. That sense of failure can do untold damage to their self-esteem. **For too many children, college is not a deliberate choice based on interests and aptitudes, but instead is being used as an expensive testing ground for exploring options and career paths.** Given the high stakes involved, that discovery and exploration work clearly should not start in college, but much earlier.

Decision-making in stressful times

Young people today, particularly with the unknowns of the COVID-19 situation looming, are feeling the impacts of undue stress. A *Business Insider* article reports that from 2005 to 2015, the number of college freshmen reporting that they felt “occasionally or frequently overwhelmed” increased by 10%.²² Some 80% of college students have jobs while attending school. Many work more than 30 hours a week, often to the detriment of their studies. Stress and mental health issues are also felt intensely by younger students. Some 59% of middle school and 70% of high school teachers report that time spent on students' mental health has increased since they started teaching. The lives of young people today are marked by complexities adults can't fully grasp, and COVID-19 will certainly exacerbate many of those stressors.

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a new layer of uncertainty to an already-stressful time. We spoke to prospective college students to better understand the specific concerns and questions they have about how the college experience will be altered. Two-thirds (69%) of students report that prior to COVID-19, they were totally certain they would go to college. **Some 30% of those who were totally certain about college are now reconsidering**



their plans, while 61% of those who were not sure about college are reconsidering plans.

Students' COVID-19-related questions largely fall into the following areas:

Format: Students want to know if college will be held in-person or online starting in the fall semester. They are unsure what changes are being made to attendance policies. If online, they want to know how the online experience is materially different from an on-campus education. They're unsure about the technical and hardware challenges posed by online learning, but they also have questions about online pedagogy.

Choice: Prospective college students have had their freedom of movement restricted at a time when attending college fairs and open houses is critical. They want to know how they can best learn about their choices.

Financial considerations: Students have questions about the very practical aspects of paying for college. For example, they want to know when deposits are due, and if they will lose money if they defer. They are also questioning the financial value of online learning compared to on-campus education. They want to know if summer jobs will be available, and if they will be offered reduced tuition for attending online. Some students wonder whether parental job loss will make them eligible for increased financial aid.

Timing: Students have questions about deferring college due to the pandemic, and also about alternative options like gap years. They also want to know when they can take their SATs, and some have questions about the timing of grades.

Emotional well-being:

Some students are concerned about whether it's safe to go out into the community. Others report feeling "checked out" and want to know how they can safely reengage. Some are unsure what to do because their parents are essential

workers, and they have been asked to help with things like childcare for younger siblings. Others have broad questions about handling the stress their family is under.

The Gen Z reality: what do young people value and what do they want?

While no two young people are the same, there are some generational truths that should factor into conversations about education and employment. COVID-19 notwithstanding, we think it's worth looking at the zeitgeist facing young people today and the things they value. Here are a few broad, generational habits and attributes that may help us understand what they are thinking about higher education so that we can better support their choices:

They value happiness. A 2019 survey of 2,300 middle and high school students found that 70% value *happiness* over *success*.²³ If asked to make a trade-off, they largely prefer meaningful experiences to material things.

They are pragmatic. While Millennials were raised to follow their dreams, Gen Z youth seem to favor a practical approach to life — one that enables them to identify truths, act with intention and work to improve the world around them. Gen Z's drive to solve for X influences their attitude toward everything. For example, while most students we surveyed indicated that they are considering a college/university after they graduate from high school, with a clear majority (75%) considering a four-year school, those closest to graduation are more likely than younger students to be considering a two-year college, which may be the more financially pragmatic choice.²⁴

They don't necessarily know what they're good at. A majority of students may be interested in, or even planning to attend, college. Yet, of the 1,504 middle and high school students we surveyed in 2019, almost one-third (30%) feel they do not know enough about their skills to think about careers. When we drilled down to the specific reasons students are uncertain about their career prospects, the most-cited reason was *I don't know what I'd be good at* (46% across middle and high school), *I haven't found anything I would really love to do* (40%), *I don't know what the job opportunities are in the field I like* (39%), and *I haven't really begun thinking about a future career* (28%).

They're pursuing atypical paths...and that trend may

30% of students who were previously totally certain about college are now reconsidering their plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



grow. In 2017, 27% of all “gig workers” were ages 16-25 (compared to 12% of the traditional workforce.²⁵ The so-called gig economy—in spite of the lack of employment benefits and safety net afforded its workers—is growing three times faster than the traditional workforce. The demand for freelancers with digital, technical and creative skills is also growing, with no apparent end in sight. In 2019, consulting firm McKinsey estimated that 27% of U.S. workers are engaged in freelance work and that number is expected to rise to around 50% by 2030.²⁶

They’re in “diffusion” mode. A good deal of middle grades and high school students avoid exploring their career/education options or making future commitments (46% of 7th & 8th-graders, 44% of 9th & 10th-graders, and 42% of 11th and 12th-graders). Far more students are in this situation than those who are, for example, actively exploring and committing to options (25% of 7th & 8th-graders, 24% of 9th and 10th-graders, 31% of 11th & 12th-graders).

Virtual may be their new normal. For most young people, digital engagement has been a constant in life, but digital looks even more likely to be the norm across most areas of work and educational life. During the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, around half of internships (those that haven’t been rescinded) were reformatted to take place online.

Can “no college” be an OK choice? Yes, as long as it’s part of a plan.

“I would like to open up more options for kids coming out of high school, because college isn’t always the right path for everyone, but is considered necessary to be successful.”

Anonymous Student²⁷

In 2019 we asked 1,504 middle and high school students about their college certainty. Of that group, some 439 reported low college certainty (indicated 6 or less out of 10 on a scale of certainty about going to college). Some 126 students shared “I have no desire to go to college,” while

120 indicated “I don’t think I need to go to college for the career(s) I am thinking about.” Just 59 of them reported “My advisor told me about options other than college that interest me.”

“I’m disabled and school is incredibly difficult for me. If I get some of my health under control maybe I’ll attend college but if I don’t then I don’t see the point in putting myself through that.”

10th grader, Florida²⁸

Students have very real and pressing reasons for not attending college. It is vital that educators and parents listen to what young people are telling them about their wants, needs, fears and goals, because not having any plan is arguably more destructive than pursuing the wrong path. Young people can’t explore choices other than college if they don’t even know what “other” might look like. Students we spoke to explained their desire to become graphic designers, game designers, and to open their own clothing brand. Others shared plans to join the military. Another student simply shared a desire to travel the world. Students’ goals might at times seem detached from reality, particularly when college is not on the horizon, but it is critical that they are heard and guided to connect those desires to a real plan.

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“I just had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I was considering every possibility, like taking a gap year or immediately entering the workforce or going to a trade school.”

11th-grader, New Jersey²⁹



GUIDING STUDENTS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

How can we help each young person find their voice and their way, in spite of whatever else is happening in the world?

We can help them future-proof their skillset.

Students must be helped to crisis-proof themselves against the impending recession and the acute loss of opportunity being felt across the country. Even in non-crisis times, skills like adaptability, financial literacy, foresight and planning, communication, ability to collaborate, and creativity can help young people execute any future plan, despite new variables they encounter.

We can promote a balanced view of self and future.

The Japanese principle of *ikigai* (below) is an effective framing tool to help young people find a healthy balance in their self-perception and in their plans for the future. *Ikigai* espouses that

each person's ideal role and most harmonious way of being sits at the intersection of what they're good at, what they want, what they can be paid to do, and what society needs. *Ikigai* is a guiding framework by which students come to understand their potential role in the workforce, and even the role of work in their overall lives. It can also go a long way to counteracting feelings of self-doubt and hopelessness.

We can understand their triggers and motivators and adjust accordingly.

We know that many students are very college-certain but have not spent time exploring career paths. Yet others have spent ample time discovering and exploring, but struggle to commit to a plan. Others still are completely ambivalent about their future. Taking the time to understand each student's mindset, motivators, barriers and worldview goes a long way to helping them build a plan that is specific, realistic and achievable.

We can reach them earlier.

Every student must have the opportunity and the time to think through their plans for the future and understand the necessary steps required to achieve that goal. This is best accomplished early. While older children may think about the practicalities of cost and in terms of limitations, children in 6th-9th grades are largely basing their early career ideation on what their families and peers say.³⁰ To make the discovery and exploration process age-appropriate, middle school students need the chance to engage in experiential, discovery and career learning that is social and encouraging of their desires. Middle school is, without question, the ideal age for educators to begin earnest conversations and exploration.



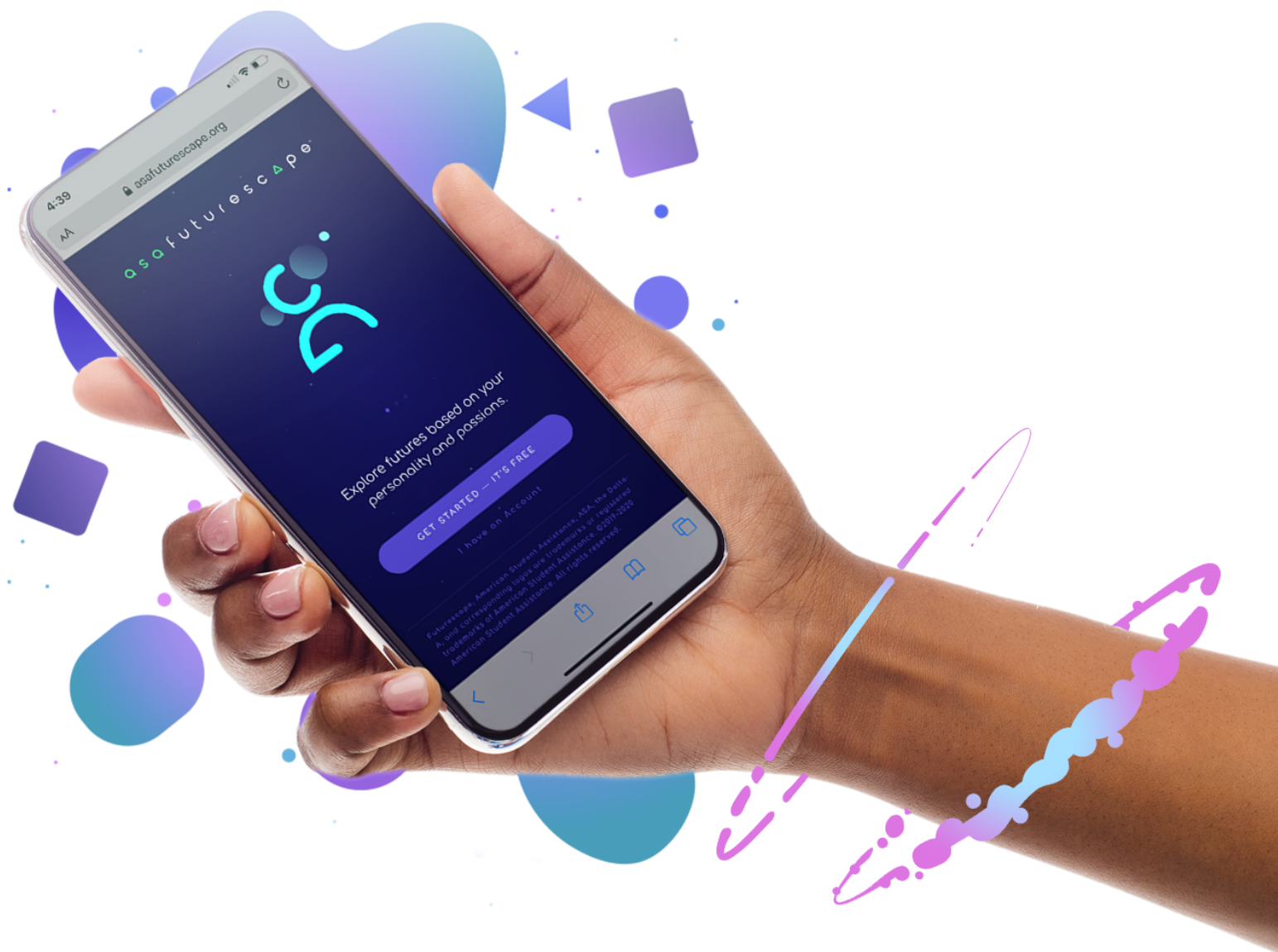
We can promote self-exploration.

The postsecondary education choices students face are diverse and ever-changing to adapt to industry and the needs of the economy. But having the initial conversation about students' options is vital and starts with helping them learn about their own skills and explore education and career pathways. Our mobile-friendly,

personalized insights platform ASA Futurescape (below) can help students better understand how their unique skills can connect to future paths.

We can help them explore their options.

The future may seem bleak as the ramifications of COVID-19 become clearer, but there will be a future. How can we help students prepare, both immediately and for the longer term? By guiding them to understand all of the options on the table.



NON-COLLEGE OPTIONS

Even if things return to “normal,” students should be encouraged to understand all of the options before them. What follows is a non-exhaustive list of viable pathways that can form the backbone, or just a small part, of any young person’s career and education plan in the Fall of 2020, and well beyond. Educators can work to begin incorporating these options into conversations about the future as they encourage young people to build a plan:

Modular Credential Programs (microcredentials, badging, MOOCs, and bootcamps)

According to [new research](#) from technology trade association CompTIA, 8 in 10 HR professionals rate certifications (such as badges) from recognized certifying bodies as “valuable” or “very valuable” in the hiring process. In these modular, low-cost and often self-paced educational programs (sometimes mentioned interchangeably), students are asked to focus on specific skill or areas of learning, and typically are challenged to “unlock” a specific credential (either in-person, as with some bootcamps, or entirely online, as with all MOOCs). While not intended to replace the college experience, if taken cumulatively (“stacked”), a rigorous sequence of microcredentials can yield the equivalent competencies as would be earned in a more traditional degree program. Microcredentials are typically designed with a decidedly real-world bent that ensures knowledge is proven by hands-on competency and “showing what you know.”

- [edX](#), in addition to offering MOOCs, provides microcredentials across a range of subjects. Their MicroBachelors programs, for example, offer stand-alone credentials in the areas of IT Management, Computer Science, Business Management and Data

Science. Students can take advantage of the program’s 3-6 month modular installments, designed in collaboration with universities and corporations, while on a pathway to earning a full bachelor’s degree.

- [Google](#) recently announced a suite of Google Career Certificates, under their [Grow with Google](#) initiative, that serve as pathways to jobs and connect learners to top employers in roles with median salaries of over \$50,000 without the need for a college degree. Certificates are in such areas as Data Analytics, Project Management and UX Design.
- [Udacity](#) (also a MOOC provider) offers nanodegree programs in Data Science, Artificial Intelligence, Programming, Autonomous Systems, Cloud Computing and Business. Personal career coaches, technical mentors and industry experts assist users in project-based learning along the way.
- [Coursera](#), in partnership with IBM, offers professional and industry-recognized certifications and career education in high-demand fields.
- [The Digital Promise](#) initiative (badging) offers more than 450 competency-based, transferable and evidence-based microcredentials that are developed, assessed and awarded by more than 50 partner organizations, including institutions of higher education. IBM and other organizations also offer skill and technology-specific badges in the areas of Analytics, Blockchain, Cloud, Security and more.
- [Free Code Camp](#), [Codecademy](#), [Skillcrush](#), [Udemy](#), and [Khan Academy](#) are among the leading bootcamp providers.



- **Digital Media Academy** provides a variety of Tech Camps, which take place at universities where students live and stay. They offer 25 different programs along six learning and career pathways for students aged 9-18.

Career Technical Education (CTE) programs

Gone are the days when CTE was limited to people pursuing hands-on, low-paid career pathways. Today, nearly every conceivable career path, including government, public administration, marketing, transportation, logistics, business administration, finance, healthcare, hospitality, agriculture and much more can be jumpstarted by a CTE program. CTE may either supplement, or form the entire basis of, a person's education and career pathway, and should be presented to students as a viable and affordable alternative to traditional four-year college programs. Interested students can be guided to explore their CTE options using the following tools, among others:

- **Applied Educational Systems** offers a certification search list by subject area and by certification providers. Those providers are AMCA, Certiport, NCHSE, NHA, NNAAP, NOCTI. Students can take exams for certification so long as they have completed coursework offered by their high schools.
- **Perkins Collaborative Resource Network** offers a 'certification crosswalk' that allows students to search for certifications for career and technical education by cluster and a sub-cluster pathway. The tool then details the credential requirements.

Employee-paid, work-based programs

A widening spectrum of employers are realizing the value in providing on-the-job certifications to employees, with a growing number offering to

fund a high school diploma equivalency or even a college degree, and others offering student loan repayment for existing debt. These programs are not limited to positions in retail, food services, and lower skilled occupations, but increasingly are available to middle skill and other occupational pathways.

- **PwC**, for example, launched a **Student Loan Paydown** program in 2016 for employees with six years of experience or less. **Aetna** and **Peloton** offer similar incentives to corporate employees.
- **Lowe's Track to the Trades** program helps employees earn a skilled trade, high school diploma or college degree, typically online.
- **Disney's Aspire** program lets employees pursue relevant higher education or vocational training, covering 100% of tuition up front and reimbursing associated material costs.
- **Starbucks' College Achievement Plan** enables every benefits-eligible employee (full- or part-time) to receive 100% tuition coverage for a first-time bachelor's degree through Arizona State University online.
- **Walmart's Guild Education** program makes available to employees over 100 educational programs with a variety of accredited universities, and includes high school, college prep, college, as well as skilled trades programs.

Virtual internships and mentorships

While internships and mentorships are certainly not intended to replace the college experience, and therefore should not be viewed as "alternatives", they can work in conjunction with any number of pathways as well as during middle



and high school years to bolster learning and give young people hands-on, practical exposure to the workplace and the ins and outs of any career. Particularly while COVID-19's impact on higher education and the workforce remains unknown, these experiences, frequently conducted virtually, can keep young people who are uncertain about their plans engaged in the interim, and motivated to work toward their goals.

- **[MENTOR](#)** enables Virtual Mentoring Portals that, especially in the age of COVID-19, allow experts to connect with students digitally. The platform provides communications between mentors and mentees. MENTOR also provides a Mentoring Connector database that allows for search based on zip code and shows programs in young peoples' communities. MENTOR explicitly encourages young people to contact mentoring programs outside of their system, in order to give them the greatest chance to connect with a mentor.
- **[iCouldBe](#)** provides e-mentoring to high school students. Students register on iCouldBe and select mentors based on personal career interest, then collaborate on structured, interactive activities grouped into "quests" to achieve outcomes in social emotional development, self-efficacy, self-direction, curiosity, problem-solving, and college and career aspirational development.
- **[Nepriis](#)** connects students to industry content with role models, workplaces, and experiences. Students are able to explore careers and dive deeper into careers of interest while getting guidance directly from industry professionals.

Apprenticeships

This age-old training pathway that benefits employers and apprentices alike has vastly

evolved since its probable inception in the Middle Ages. Apprenticeships combine education with structured, hands-on work experience, and are sometimes referred to as the "earn and learn" model. While apprentices are paid during their apprenticeship, the model is designed to lead directly to longer-term and higher-paid employment in a specific trade. Apprenticeships now span everything from construction and carpentry, to cloud computing and healthcare. Although highly popular elsewhere in the world, fewer than 5% of American students train as apprentices, and it seems that broad awareness of this option is lacking. Apprenticeships should, if they aren't already, become a common part of educators' vocabulary as they guide students to the best options available to them today.

- **[Apprenticeship.gov](#)** serves as a national database for apprenticeship-seekers, employers looking for apprentices, as well as educators hoping to learn more about apprenticeships. Those interested can search by occupation, company name or keyword, and can filter by state or city. (A simple search in a random zip code generated such real-time results as Locksmith's Apprentice, Signals Intelligence Analyst, and Front-End Developer, for example.)
- **[Apprenticeship Carolina](#)** is a state-specific program affiliated with the SC Technical College System and cites over 34,000 apprenticeships with over 1,000 registered programs, as well as 235 programs specifically designed for youth.

Resources specific to other institutions or states can similarly be found using a simple online search. For example, here are programs specific to **[California](#)**, **[Massachusetts](#)**, **[New Jersey](#)**, **[Oklahoma](#)** and **[Oregon](#)**.



Policy Recommendations

1 Fight the stigma toward alternative postsecondary paths.

A prior [ASA survey](#) found that **69% percent of school counselors were more likely to recommend a four-year college over a two-year college to their students.** Much of this is driven by school accountability metrics that encourage teachers and counselors to promote enrollment in a four-year degree over other forms of postsecondary education and training, pressure from parents for their child to enroll in a four-year program, and lack of training from counselors to be able to confidently suggest alternatives. To get past this bias for certain degree types, states need to change training standards for school counselors and require that college and career advising—and not just mental health support—be part of undergraduate and graduate school counselor certification programs so that counselors can be confident in the suggestions they are making. Additionally, states should allow and hold schools accountable for longitudinal data tracking that includes students' long-term progress into higher education and onto a career, instead of just high school graduation or college enrollment. This would **encourage schools to suggest a higher education path where the student can be most successful—not just where they can get in.** A stronger focus on all the higher education choices students are making and data about their long-term success will lead to more careful consideration and support for recommending diverse postsecondary pathways.

2 Make vital career exploration programs for young people a priority through authorizing legislation and robust funding.

In order to ensure every student is making a well-informed choice about their higher education path, they must have **access to high quality college and career exploration resources.** Policies governing career exploration as well as college and career readiness for middle and high school age youth is carried out through numerous programs governed by multiple federal laws. Congress must invest appropriately across all these laws to ensure funding for a robust U.S. education-to-workforce pipeline.

3 Increase funding and support for school counselors, mentors and third party postsecondary advisors.

School counselors play an essential role in understanding students' triggers and motivators, helping students form a balanced view of self and future, and helping them explore their interests and themselves. In the wake of COVID-19, counselors also will be needed more than ever before to deal with students' socio-emotional health. **Proper funding and support to establish comprehensive school counseling programs in middle and high schools,** led by well-trained, highly competent professionals with the recommended workload of 250 students per counselor, will have a positive impact on students' ability to align postsecondary education and career plans, as well as boost student achievement, attendance, discipline, graduation, post-high school planning, and attaining skills proficiency. Federal, state and local leaders should also boost funding and support for third-party mentors and postsecondary advisors from youth-



serving nonprofits and community organizations, who can help fill gaps when in-school counseling resources are strained.

4 Increase career-focused training opportunities for teachers and other education professionals.

Many teachers may feel underprepared to lead self-discovery and career exploration lessons in the classroom. The federal government and states should **commit to the expansion of teacher externships and other professional development opportunities** that allow teachers to obtain behind-the-scenes experience in local industries, bring that knowledge back to the classroom, and add real-world relevance to their lessons so that students can make better informed choices.

5 Study the effectiveness of mandating a post-high school plan as a graduation requirement.

State and local policymakers should closely study the implementation and early results of Chicago's first-ever "Learn. Plan. Succeed." program, which **mandates that high school seniors show they've secured a job or acceptance to a college, a trade apprenticeship program, a gap year program or the military before they can graduate**. In addition to the Chicago plan, Individualized Learning Plans (ILP) can serve as flexible models for states, cities and districts looking to formalize postsecondary plans as a high school graduation requirement.

6 Expand opportunities for experiential and work-based learning.

Hands-on learning, such as internships, apprenticeships and worksite learning, can help students explore their likes and dislikes, and better align postsecondary education plans with career goals. But limited availability of quality work, age restrictions, inability to earn school credit, lack of social connections, and no or limited pay can all curb the ability and/or inclination of students, particularly those younger than 18, to experience work-based learning. **Policymakers should look to create financial incentives for employers to expand work-based learning opportunities**, establish statewide work-based learning coordination systems, and encourage greater public-private partnership between employers and schools.

7 Expand funding for all forms of high-quality postsecondary education.

If we want students and families to consider various forms of higher education, we must ensure they have high-quality options to choose from. Education researchers and advocates must thoroughly assess student outcomes for traditional and nontraditional postsecondary programs, to better inform policymaker decisions on funding, student enrollment choices and counselor guidance. Policymakers can also **broaden support for alternative paths through higher education** by encouraging private sector participation in developing postsecondary curriculum and credentials and expanding federal and state funding to quality short-term certificate programs.

Read more [here](#).



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