

WHAT NOW?

A Teen Guide to Life
After High School



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Chapter Two

Going to College

Megan is a student at Columbia University who hopes to someday become a lawyer. Even before her senior year in high school, Megan knew that she wanted to go to a prestigious college and then an equally respected law school. Her plans influenced her decision to go to college and her choice of an Ivy League school. As she explains,

Education has always been a strong part of my life. I've always been a good student. It was one of my defining traits. . . . I became interested in law after taking some electives in high school. . . . I want to go to law school, that's my formal education, end goal. . . . I was really conscious of this when I was applying [to colleges]. I want to go to a law school that's prestigious and rigorous, so I need to attend a similar undergraduate university. The top law schools definitely consider your undergraduate degree. I want to get a foot in the door with more competitive graduate schools. . . . Columbia opens doors.⁸

The Benefits of Going to College

Like Megan, more than 60 percent of American high school graduates enroll in college immediately after high school, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Forty-three percent enroll in a four-year college, and 20 percent enroll in a two-year college.

There are many reasons why getting a college education is so popular. A bachelor's or associate's degree is required for approximately one-third of all jobs in the United States, according to Pearson Education, an educational publishing company. Even when a college degree is not required, employers are often more likely to prefer a job candidate with a degree. Therefore, having a college degree expands the number and types of jobs that candidates qualify for and makes it easier for them to find suitable work.

It is possible for individuals to earn a comfortable living without a postsecondary education, but having a college degree increases a person's earning potential. According to the BLS, people with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$64,896 per year, and those with an associate's degree averaged \$46,124 annually. In comparison, individuals with just a high school diploma earn an average of \$38,792.

Going to college offers other benefits too. It provides students with the opportunity to meet and get to know people from diverse backgrounds. It also exposes them to different viewpoints and gives them the chance to explore new interests, all of which enhance their personal growth. As college student Zakirah White explains, "This new stage of life causes a lot of things to be put into perspective, forces you to question the beliefs you always held about the world as a child, pushes you to form your own views and opinions . . . and allows you to meet so many people from so many backgrounds and cultures."⁹

In college, students are exposed to people of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. This type of exposure can lead to personal growth.



Associate's or Bachelor's Degree?

Teens who decide to pursue a college education must decide whether they want to go for an associate's or a bachelor's degree. It usually takes two years of full-time study, or about 60 credit hours, to earn an associate's degree. In comparison, students must complete about 120 credit hours to earn a bachelor's degree, which generally takes four years of full-time study.

There are different types of associate's degrees. An associate of science, applied science, or applied arts degree prepares students for specific careers. In contrast, an associate of arts degree focuses on liberal arts studies; often, the coursework may be transferred toward a bachelor's degree in the future. Most students earn an associate's degree at a community college. Community colleges are public institutions. Many offer open enrollment to anyone with a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma. Community colleges differ from four-year schools in significant ways. Only a few community colleges have on-campus housing. Most students live

at home and commute. Some are raising families and working while taking classes. To better serve a diverse student body, most community colleges offer flexible scheduling options and online classes.

Some students choose to attend a community college to save money. In fact, nearly thirty states offer tuition-free community college to students who meet specific criteria, which differ from state to state. However, the difference in future earnings potential between associate's and bachelor's degree holders helps offset the higher cost of earning a bachelor's degree.

Choosing a Four-Year College

Four-year colleges offer a more traditional college experience. There are hundreds of schools to choose from and many things to consider, including a school's size and location, whether it is public or private, and the available fields of study. The school's reputation, campus life, the cost, and an individual's chances of acceptance

Handling the Stress of Applying to College

Applying to college is stressful. Among other things, students worry about what schools to apply to, whether their dream school will accept them, and whether they will be offered sufficient financial aid. College counselor Lindsey Conger, offers teens the following tips to help them cope with the pressure:

Start early by visiting admission websites, talking to college students or representatives, and attending information sessions to figure out where you might want to attend college. The Common Application prompts are released before summer even starts, so you could get started on your personal statement as soon as possible. . . .

Luckily, the Common App makes it easier for students to apply to multiple schools a little quicker. You won't have to fill out your basic information numerous times, and you can send your personal statement to all the universities that accept the Common App. . . . As you apply to more schools, you might realize you have to write about a similar topic for multiple schools. Reuse the content when you can, but make sure that each essay is still tailored to the particular school and fully answers the specific prompt.

are other important considerations. It is typically less expensive, for example, to attend public colleges than private institutions. Data from a 2022 *U.S. News & World Report* survey found that the average cost of tuition and fees at an in-state four-year public college is about 72 percent less than for a private college. Public colleges are sometimes larger than private colleges. They may also offer more fields of study and more diverse campus activities.

Class size also varies significantly. The student-faculty ratio in large public institutions is usually greater than in smaller schools. Students attending large schools are less likely to get to know their instructors well or to receive one-on-one instruction. Moreover, many private colleges strive to foster mentoring relationships between professors and students. Zack, a student at Amherst College, admits that class size was one of the main reasons he chose the small private school. He says, “I knew that smaller classrooms and the ability to meet and form relationships with my professors were a high priority. Also, admittedly, not having the longest attention span, I knew a large lecture hall class would set me up for failure.”¹⁰

Where a college is located is another deciding factor. Rural and urban colleges have different atmospheres and offer students different recreational opportunities. Students attending an urban college can take advantage of all the resources cities have to offer,

whereas the availability of outdoor activities attracts many young people to rural schools. Jake, a student at Dartmouth College, prefers the outdoor experience. “I couldn’t imagine being somewhere I couldn’t be active,” he says. “Skiing, hiking, swimming and other hobbies would be very difficult if not impossible in a city environment. While not always the case, the more rural schools I looked at offered much more than a college campus but a lifestyle as well.”¹¹

“I knew that smaller classrooms [at a private college] and the ability to meet and form relationships with my professors were a high priority. Also, admittedly, not having the longest attention span, I knew a large lecture hall class would set me up for failure.”¹⁰

—Zack, Amherst College student

Source Notes

Introduction: At a Crossroads

1. Jessica, interview with the author, Las Cruces, New Mexico, October 13, 2022.
2. Jessica, interview.
3. Zakirah White, "Life After High School: 'It's All About Balance,'" *Vox Blog*, Vox ATL, February 13, 2020. www.voxatl.org.

Chapter One: Preparing and Exploring

4. Quoted in Children's Minnesota, "Life After High School." www.childrensmn.org.
5. Quoted in Genevieve Morgan, *Undecided: Navigating Life and Learning After High School*. Minneapolis: Zest, 2020, p. 61.
6. Eric S. Burdon, "10 Ways to Learn About Yourself," Medium, November 17, 2019. www.medium.com.
7. Indeed Editorial Team, "Job Shadowing for High School Students (and Why It Is Important)," Indeed, September 15, 2021. www.indeed.com.

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8. Quoted in Team GaryVee, "Life After High School: The Traditional Student," Gary Vee. www.garyvaynerchuk.com.
9. White, "Life After High School."
10. Quoted in Daytripper University, "Students Speak: Why I Chose My College," January 25, 2020. www.daytripperuniversity.com.
11. Quoted in Daytripper University, "Students Speak."
12. Quoted in Daytripper University, "Students Speak."
13. Quoted in Morgan, *Undecided*, p. 121.
14. Morgan, *Undecided*, p. 104.

Chapter Three: Opting for Technical and Vocational Training

15. Quoted in SkillPointe, "How a Random Email Transformed Charlie Tran's Career Plans," August 18, 2021. <https://skillpointe.com>.

Organizations and Websites

Apprenticeship.gov

www.apprenticeship.gov

Sponsored by the US government, this website connects businesses, job seekers, and educational institutions with apprenticeship opportunities.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

www.bls.gov

The BLS is a government agency that provides all sorts of information related to labor, including an *Occupational Outlook Handbook* that gives data on hundreds of occupations, including salaries, educational requirements, and more.

CareerOneStop

www.careeronestop.org

Sponsored by the US Department of Labor, CareerOneStop provides information on different careers, career training, and vocational training institutions. It also offers an interest assessment tool, job postings, and a scholarship finder, among other resources.

College Board

www.collegeboard.org

The College Board is a nonprofit organization that develops standardized tests. It houses a wealth of information about college planning, admissions, and financial aid as well as information on hundreds of colleges on its website.

Federal Student Aid

www.studentaid.gov

Federal Student Aid is the largest provider of student financial assistance in the United States. As part of the US Department of Education, it manages federal student financial aid programs and provides information and assistance to students applying for and receiving federal financial aid. The FAFSA application can be accessed on this site.

For Further Research

Books

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Brian Harris, *After High School: A Guide to Help You Plan Your Future After High School*. 3rd ed. Self-published, CGS Communications, 2020.

Kevin Ray Johnson, *Now What?* Chicago: Joshua Tree, 2020.

Katie Sharp, *College and Career Planning*. San Diego: ReferencePoint, 2021.

Kristin M. White, *The Complete Guide to the Gap Year: The Best Things to Do Between High School and College*. Darien, CT: Nota Bene, 2019.

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