

Quintessential Careers: Next Step After High School? Some Alternatives to College



by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

As a former college professor, I see the drive for most students to complete a college education. I'm not sure how many would be in college if not for the pressure and expectations from family members, and while that is good for some students, others obviously might be better off pursuing options other than college. The reality is that college is not for everyone -- nor is it truly needed for everyone -- and forcing teens to attend college only to have them flunk out is doing a disservice to them.

A generation or two ago high-school graduates rarely went on to college, yet somehow through the years, college has almost become a rite of passage for teens to pass into adulthood and a good career. But teens do not need to attend college to become adults and they certainly do not need to attend to land a good career.

Education is critical; college is not. There are numerous careers -- in healthcare, technology, operations, transportation, and the building trades -- that do not require a four-year degree. And as you advance in these careers, there is also nothing stopping you from pursuing a college degree at a later age -- when it better suits you; some people are just not ready for college until a little later in life.

So, if you are not college-bound after high school, what are some of your alternatives?

Learn a Trade

Apprenticeships, at one time, were the only way for young people to get a foot in the door to their careers. If you have an interest in a particular trade, such as technology or construction, seek out jobs in the trade that will not only give you valuable experience but guide you toward advancement by helping you with the certifications or licenses you need to succeed. For example, one high-school graduate worked for a pool construction company for several years, learning every aspect of the business before earning her swimming pool contractor's license and starting her own business. Another tool to learning a trade is to obtain your certification in that field. Learn more in this section of Quintessential Careers: [Hot Fields in Which Certification May Boost Your Career](#). And [find job leads here](#).

Get Job

Nothing helps more with that transition to adulthood than holding down a full-time job. Your goal should be to move away from the companies that typically hire teens for part-time work to employers that can provide a future. Often larger employers have more opportunities, so start your search there. Also identify employers whose product or service interests you and whose culture you respect. For example, the person who started working for AT&T in the mailroom because he knew it would be a foot in the door, and now, years later, still with just a high school education, is a highly valued member of the company's corporate technology staff. Use our [Job-Search 101 Tutorial](#) for tools and strategies in finding a job.

Volunteer

While you are trying to find your place in the world, why not spend those first few years after high school making a difference? While you may be familiar with the Peace Corps, they actually prefer college graduates, so you might instead consider looking locally to make a difference or consider such national programs as [Americorps](#), which offers 17-24 year-olds the chance to make a difference through a national network of hundreds of programs throughout the U.S., as well as the [Student Conservation Association](#), which has conservation programs (jobs and internships) throughout the U.S. for adults 18 or older.

Travel

If all you can think about is getting out of your town and exploring some other part of the world, then traveling may be for you. Traveling to one or more foreign countries is a great way to experience other cultures, learn more about yourself, and equip yourself with cultural knowledge to apply in the global economy. If you have some money, you can find innovative and cheap ways to explore the world. If you don't have the money, look into student exchange programs, employment on cruise ships, or becoming an au pair or nanny for a family in another country. Go to [Cool, Unusual, and Seasonal Jobs](#).

Attend Community College or Vocational School

A great way to ease into college and explore more about who you are and what you want to do in life is taking one or more classes at your local community (or technical) college. Classes are cheaper and admission much easier -- and many students work at least part-time to pay their way. You can either take a few classes, follow a diploma or certification track, or advance toward your associate's degree. Many community colleges have agreements with four-year colleges, so that if you decide college IS right for you, you can then transfer those credits. Read about one high school grad's plan in [Johnny Goes to College: Part I -- Choosing a College](#). For learning more about vocational school opportunities, read [Another Option After High School: Trade/Vocational Schools](#).

Join the Military

While not always a popular -- or safe choice -- joining the military is often a great way to learn more about yourself. Joining the military offers you a chance to serve your country, make a career in the service, and/or earn money toward a future college education. You'll also earn valuable work experience that can you can apply to civilian jobs once you get discharged. Read more here: [Today's Military](#).

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

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Take advantage of all the tools and resources in our [Teenage Jobs, Careers, and College -- Including College and Career Choices](#), as well as in our [Critical Issues and Resources for High School Students](#).

