

EDUCATION/COLLEGE

Rethinking College

Successful career paths are possibilities without a degree

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Treating college as a placeholder — something to do while you figure out what you want to do — is becoming a luxury. Tuition keeps rising, and graduates are earning less. Throw in the economic risks associated with [predatory student loans \(https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1062679587/for-profit-colleges-student-loan-borrowers-fraud\)](https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1062679587/for-profit-colleges-student-loan-borrowers-fraud), and the math on a four-year degree doesn't always pencil out. These days, a bachelor's degree costs 64 percent more (<https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/college-costs-over-time/>) than it did 20 years ago, resulting in an average of \$30,000 in student debt for the degree. New college graduates have higher

unemployment rates (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/11/19/college-grads-unemployed-jobs/>) than the rest of the population, according to reporting in The Washington Post, and 40 percent of graduates land in jobs that don't require a degree.

"We're really trying to redefine what college is," says Daniel Golosman, principal at Seattle Public Schools' Skills Center. "A four-year degree might not be something that all students are aiming for, but we do want to encourage students to explore postsecondary opportunities."

Starting in high school

Other types of education can take just as much planning — and sometimes further in advance — than choosing a college. Career-focused alternative high schools throughout the Puget Sound area often accept out-of-district students. Incoming freshmen should consider Tacoma Public Schools' choice high schools (<https://www.applytoidea.com/>), which are focused on arts, engineering and physical science; Highline's Raisbeck Aviation High School (<https://rahs.highlineschools.org/>); or their own school district's career-focused alternative schools and career academies within general high schools.

Students who are already in a general high school should pay particular attention to their district's career and technical education (CTE) programs, which introduce students to real-world career options. CTE is one of the new graduation pathways (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/student-success/career-technical-education-cte/cte-program-study-and-career-clusters>) approved by the state in 2019. Seattle, which has the state's largest school district, offers CTE pathways in engineering and robotics, computers, biotechnology, nursing, early childhood education, and business and finance, to name just a few.

Skills centers (<https://www.washingtonskillscenters.org/>) are public school programs that take CTE to the next level, preparing students for a wide variety of careers, including firefighting and medical assistance alongside more familiar offerings like the construction trades. Students often become interested in the skills centers' advanced programs through CTE courses at their home high school or by taking an exploratory summer course at a skills center.

Skills centers' hands-on courses do double duty providing high school credit to meet graduation requirements and, depending on the subject, industry-recognized certification and/or college credit. For example, students of maritime vessel operations can graduate with a merchant mariner credential, while advanced-manufacturing students can earn dual high school and college credits.

In most districts, the skills centers are centralized. Seattle Public Schools' Skills Center (<https://skillscenter.seattleschools.org/>) is a half-day option high school with individual programs distributed throughout the district. Students spend half the day at the skills center and half at their home high school completing regular courses. Courses last one semester, with students taking as long as four semesters to complete a program. It's a logistical challenge, for sure.

"The counselors are brilliant at fitting it all in," says Golosman.

Besides helping students work out scheduling and graduation requirements, guidance counselors can connect students with their school's Career Connected Learning coordinator, who can help them find internships and other training opportunities outside of school.

Students who access skills center courses graduate at higher than average rates and many do continue on to college. Golosman attributes that to the individual attention that comes from small class sizes (usually fewer than 20 students) and the skills centers' focus on practical student support.

"As much as we can, we try to provide wraparound services for students," says Golosman. "We don't have any fees of any kind, and if there's a cost to take a test for industry-recognized certification, we pay for that." The center also provides transportation to and from the center and any protective gear that's needed.

Apprenticeships

"An apprenticeship combines on-the-job training with related supplemental instruction (which is the classroom component) under the supervision of a mentor who is a journey-level professional," says Peter Guzman, apprenticeship program manager with Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I). "That's a long definition. The short one is, it's an earn-while-you-learn traditional model of training. An apprenticeship is a job, and many of them pay state prevailing wages with benefits."

Apprentices who complete their programs earn professional credentials, which will include a certificate from L&I and often a state license as well.

"Those that complete the programs average \$93,000 a year once they journey out," says Guzman. He says 85 percent of apprenticeships in Washington are in the building and construction fields, but there are also many options in less traditional areas, including IT and the medical sector.

"The minimum requirement for an apprenticeship is 2,000 hours of on-the-job training with 144 hours of classroom training," says Guzman. But the completion requirements for some fields can be as rigorous as those for a university degree. For example, to become an electrician, apprentices must spend four years earning 8,000 hours of on-the-job training. Admissions to some apprenticeships can also be as competitive as those at selective universities, with interviews, entrance exams and waiting lists for enrollment.

"All of the apprenticeship programs have entrance requirements. If you want to be a laborer, you just have to be physically able to do the work and pass a drug test. If you want to be an electrician, you need a year of algebra with a C or better," says Guzman.

Pre-apprenticeships are hands-on training programs that help students prepare and qualify for selective apprenticeship programs.

"The pre-apprenticeship allows them to do some exploration," says Guzman. "If you complete that, it gives you a leg up in getting into your chosen apprenticeship." There are some 40 pre-apprenticeship programs registered with L&I that help students who may have never held a hand tool or used a measuring tape to develop the skills they need to be accepted into an apprenticeship.

Students trying to narrow down their options might start by taking [Washington Career Bridge's online quiz](https://www.careerbridge.wa.gov/) (<https://www.careerbridge.wa.gov/>) to identify career paths that match their interests. The [Apprenticeship Registration Tracking System](https://secure.lni.wa.gov/arts-public/#/) (<https://secure.lni.wa.gov/arts-public/#/>) lists all of the registered apprenticeships in Washington state, while [Career Connect Washington](https://careerconnectwa.org/) (<https://careerconnectwa.org/>) provides a broader

directory of resources, including career fairs and Try a Trade events. Hands-on trials can be invaluable. It's better to find out if you are claustrophobic, afraid of heights or not as physically fit as you thought before committing to a multiyear program.

Trade schools and technical programs

"There's all sorts of data pointing to the fact that even one or two years of college — whether it's a professional/technical certificate program or an AA degree — will ultimately lead to a student earning more money, promotional opportunities and job security," says Golosman.

Community colleges are not just an academic wading pool for university. They offer vocational programs and associate degrees that qualify students for work in myriad fields. Consider Seattle Central College's Wood Technology program, which teaches students woodworking, carpentry and boat repair. South Seattle College has programs ranging from welding fabrication (<https://southseattle.edu/programs/welding>) (anything from fine art to car bodies and commercial fishing gear) to wine marketing (<https://southseattle.edu/programs/wine-studies>). Renton Technical College (<https://rtc.edu/>) offers more than 50 career programs and boasts 85 percent job placement upon completion. For Seattle and Renton residents, the Seattle Promise program (<https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/seattle-promised-free-college-hows-it-working-out-ed-lab-revisited/>) makes community college an especially sound financial choice: Tuition is free, regardless of family income.

Trade schools (<https://www.onlytradeschools.com/washington/seattle/>) are also more diverse than many people imagine. Their programs prepare students for work in an incredible range of fields, such as commercial diving (<https://diversinstitute.edu/>), massage therapy and home inspections. Among its dozens of programs, Perry Technical Institute in Yakima prepares students to become professional truck drivers in just five weeks. Families with a Washington State 529 savings plan (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/college-savings-101-understanding-washington-states-529-plan-options>) can use their savings for many of these educational pathways.

Military service

Movie montages of boot camp aren't necessarily exaggerated, but such films rarely show the other types of training that many enlisted soldiers get. The military trains its own chefs, dental hygienists and postal workers — all of which are marketable skills once you return to civilian life. However, there is one big caveat: You don't get to choose your job, and you could end up in combat. Some branches of the military give recruits input, but actual job assignments are conditional on available positions and aptitude scores. Still, for many, the military is a lifetime career choice, and even a short stint can help young people pay for college or other training once they've left the service.

College

Even traditional universities offer more options than a bachelor's degree. The University of Washington's Professional & Continuing Education department (<https://www.pce.uw.edu/>) offers career-changing, specialized skills programs (<https://www.pce.uw.edu/news-features/articles/12-things-learn-to-do-12-weeks-or-less>), such

as grant writing and developing a UX (user experience) portfolio, which can be completed in 12 weeks or less.

And if you are not ready to give up on the holy grail of a bachelor's degree, take heart. None of these educational pathways close off the option to pursue a four-year degree program. In fact, for many students, these paths can make going to university easier by helping students earn and save money for tuition while often leading to jobs that offer the flexibility to study part-time. Skills centers and other CTE programs can help refine students' goals and provide dual college credit to help them earn a degree faster and more cheaply, as well as assist them to find and take advantage of financial aid resources to earn a degree debt-free.

Hands-on programs can also help engage bright students who don't thrive in a typical classroom environment. Once engaged, they might find goals worthy of persevering through university lectures. Golosman tells of one skills center student who decided to pursue an RN degree after passing her certified nursing exam in high school. She told him, "Now I know I'm a good student and I love this work."

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About the Author

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