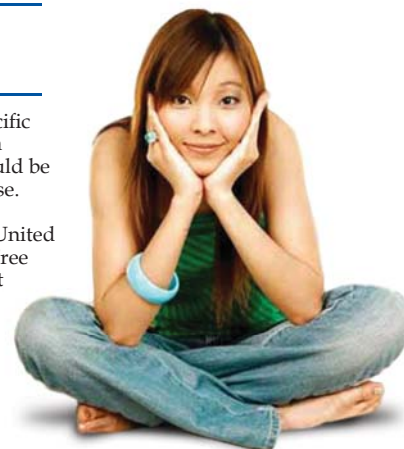


# Life After High School



“So, what are you doing after graduation?” Many juniors and seniors get bored answering that question over and over. Whether your plans include college, heading straight for the workforce, or taking a year off, here are some practical tips to prepare yourself for the journey.

## Going to College

Some people know from an early age exactly what they want to be and how they plan to get there. Rachel’s dad is a doctor and his love for his chosen career inspired her to follow in his footsteps. Rachel, who is about to start medical school, said she chose her undergraduate program with the idea of medical school in mind.

Not all of us are so sure of our plans, though, and that’s OK too. Many people start off in a liberal arts program in college and then decide on a major after a year or two. (School counselors say that 75% of students change their majors after they enter college.) School is also not just about careers and getting a high-paying job after graduation — it’s a place for learning about yourself and the world.

## Selecting a School

If college is in your future, you need to plan. Which schools appeal to you? How are you going to pay for your education?

How do you decide on a school when there are thousands to pick from? Start by asking yourself questions about your preferences:

- What are my strengths?
- Am I interested in liberal arts or science or business?
- What kind of learning environment is best for me?
- Would I be more comfortable in a small school or would I feel confined?
- Do I want to stay close to home or live far away?
- Would I prefer to be in a city environment or a small college town?
- Should I go to a school where athletics are big or where fraternities or sororities rule?
- Do I like being with people who are mostly like me or do I want to meet a diverse group?

Ask friends and older siblings who are in college about their schools and about other schools they’re familiar with. Talk to your school counselor or one of your teachers and go to college fairs when they visit your town. Once you’ve narrowed down your choices, ask the schools to send you literature. Visit their web sites. When you’ve whittled your list down to a manageable number, make arrangements to visit. Try to do this when school is in session so you can get a good idea of what life is really like on campus.

And remember: You’re not the only one making a decision. Schools are picking from a large pool of applicants. They want to know how well-rounded you are and what makes you stand out from everyone else. They will look at your grade point average, standardized test scores, class rank, personal essay, and your extracurricular activities — so it’s important to dedicate time and effort to all these things.

## Admissions Options

Most schools offer a range of admissions options. Investigate which of these your favorite schools offer:

- Regular admissions means that schools mail their decisions in April.
- Rolling admissions means that a school processes applications as they come in; you can apply at any time, but it’s best to be early because spots fill up.
- The early-decision option is for students who are really sure about the school they want to attend, and who want to know earlier than April if they have been admitted. There’s a drawback to applying under an early-decision option, though: You are promising that school that you’ll attend if you’re admitted.
- Some schools offer an early-action option, which means that students can be admitted early but don’t have to attend.

## Money, Money, Money

Don’t cross a school off your list just because the tuition is steep. Ask your school counselor about possible community scholarships. Ask the school’s financial-aid office about scholarships, grants, work-study programs, and loans. See if your parents’ employers offer scholarships. And check out organizations within your community. An amazing number of college funding sources are

out there for students with specific career goals in mind. Your high school guidance counselor should be a good resource for finding these.

To apply for federal aid in the United States, you have to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, although some schools use their own forms. Check with your school counselor to be sure you’ve covered all the bases when it comes to financial aid.

## Getting a Job

Maybe you’ve decided that college isn’t for you — right now, anyway. If you want to join the workforce, opportunities are out there for people who don’t have degrees. One path that some grads take is joining the military or a service corps. Some retail or hospitality industry organizations offer training programs to high school grads. Check out the possibilities in computing, bookkeeping and payroll, or sales.

Talk to your school counselor or a favorite teacher about the job market in your area. Make sure your parents’ friends know you’re looking. Scour the classified ads in the newspaper and do some Internet research. Most large companies list their job openings on their web sites

## Taking Time Off

For some people, the prospect of starting college, especially going away to school, is scary. It’s probably the first time that you’ll be totally responsible for your own schedule. What if you intend to go to college but just don’t feel ready to start yet — for whatever reason — and you don’t want to take on a full-time job after graduation? You might want to take a year off to pause and regroup. This practice is common in some countries, like the United Kingdom, where it’s called a “gap year.”

Taking time off doesn’t mean you should ignore the idea of applying to college. In fact, you may want to consider making your college plans before you become involved in other things, especially if you’ll be traveling. Apply to schools and make your choice, then ask for a deferred admission. Rachel took a year off and worked in New York City between college and medical school. She says that she had to be extremely well organized about planning for med school so she didn’t miss any of her deadlines. “Not only did I have to apply to schools and make plans to take my MCAT exams, I also had to make all my living arrangements and other plans for my year off!”

Even if you decide not to apply to college, it can be a great idea to take a year to do something you may not have an opportunity to do again. Lots of volunteer organizations would welcome your time and energy and would provide you with a wonderful learning experience.

If you take a year off you’ll learn some great life skills — like living on a tight budget! Plan how you’ll pay your way while you’re traveling or doing volunteer work. Can you live at home or with friends? Get a part-time job?

## Talking to Your Parents

What if your post-graduation plans differ from what your parents have in mind? Talk openly with your parents about your plans — both for the short term (like what you want to do next year) and the long term (what you think you’d like to do in life). If your parents want you to go to college but you don’t feel you’re ready or that college isn’t right for you, explain why.

## Getting Advice

Even if your parents are cool, they probably don’t know everything. For school and career guidance, visit your school counselor and talk with adult friends (for example, godparents or friends of the family). Make an effort to talk to people in the fields that interest you. If you think you want to be an accountant, call some accountants and ask them about their work. Most people are flattered to get calls like this, and they’ll usually take the time to talk to a student.

Whatever you choose to do now does not have to be what you do forever. You can always go back to school or change a career path — lots of people do.

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