



There's More than One Road to Success: Alternatives to the Ivy League

Trapped in a myth

American society is trapped in a myth: the myth that a college or university diploma is the one and only key to success. Look at a few facts:

- More than 95% of high school graduates say they expect to get more education after high school. About 80% say they expect to go earn a four-year college or university degree.
- About 60% of high school seniors actually go to college (either two-year or four-year).
- About one-third of college students drop out before their second year.
- Only half of those who start a four-year degree program actually complete a degree.

Obviously there is a gap—a great, huge, costly gap—between expectation and reality here.

The truth is that far too many students get into a college or university only to crash and burn—and drop out—after a year or so. They end up with few skills and no diploma, and probably a load of debt to pay off. Not the best way to start out in adult life!

Not everybody goes to college or university. Not everybody *has to* or *ought to* go to college or university. What we have to remind ourselves, over and over again, is *college itself is not the goal*. The goal is for our children to get the skills and abilities they need for a successful life that interests them. There are plenty of ways for them to reach that

goal. First, we need to help them ask the right questions, in the right order.

Planning is the key

Every child's road to success will be different because it starts with his or her own interests, abilities, and passions. Think about those first, and *then* explore the career possibilities that match them, and *then* think about the skills and training needed to get started in those career fields and how to get them.

It may well be that more education after high school will be part of the plan. That's fine. Just don't start out thinking "college diploma" and assuming that a job, success, and a happy life will automatically follow from it. That would be starting at the wrong end of things!

So: what are some of the alternatives to the Ivy League route? There are lots of choices. Make sure your children know about *all* the possibilities as they think about who they are, and what they want to do with their lives.

Alternative roads

Technical training

Community and technical colleges offer a wonderful deal in technical training. There are many certificates and technical degrees a student can earn. These programs are fast, focused, and inexpensive.

The schools work with industry advisors to keep the training up-to-date, so that students are ready for real jobs in the real world when they're finished.

A lot of parents would say that technical schools are just great—for *somebody else's kids*. Maybe you think going to a “junior” college isn't quite good enough for your son or daughter? Consider this: at some community and technical colleges, students in high-demand technical programs like information technology or media communications are being recruited for cutting-edge, high-paying jobs while they're still taking classes!

Tech Prep. ➤ One of the best things about technical training is that students can get started while in still in high school. In Tech Prep programs, high schools and community or technical colleges coordinate the skills and information taught at each level. Students who earn B's or better in the high school's Tech Prep classes can get community/technical college credit for that work (at no cost!). This means that a student can get a head start on training while in high school and move smoothly to more advanced work at the community or technical college, with no gaps to fill in and no needless repetition of material. Students finish early, with the training they need to go on to their chosen next step.

Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship is a great way to get hands-on training and real work experience in challenging jobs. After all, if you know the kind of work you want to do, why not start doing it right away?

Apprenticeships are generally sponsored by a company or an industry group in cooperation with a labor union or employee association. The apprentice is a paid employee who is learning a skilled trade under a specific agreement spelling out standards and requirements (such as minimum age for the apprentice, types of skills to be practiced, etc.). Some apprenticeships also include specific classroom training as well.

Apprenticeships are available in a wide variety of fields, some traditional and some emerging. Most of the building trades (carpentry, masonry, etc.) offer apprenticeship opportunities. A few of the many other choices are listed in the box to the right.

Other choices

Other possibilities for getting skills and training are:

- enlisting in military service to obtain training and GI Bill benefits;
- joining a national service program, such as AmeriCorps, that will provide valuable work experience and subsidize college education;
- internships or entry-level jobs in an organization with good training and education benefits.

Conclusion

There's more than one road to success. College and university education isn't a one-size-fits-all answer, isn't always and automatically the best choice. There are many alternative paths our children can take to successful and happy lives.

Our children don't need the burden of our expectations and assumptions. Instead, they need our help in figuring out what they want to be and do, and how to get there.

Resources:

Kenneth C. Gray and Edwin L. Herr, *Other Ways to Win: Creating Alternatives for High School Graduates*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1995.

Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. *Washington State Apprenticeship Programs*. Olympia, June 1999.

Apprenticeship programs currently available in Washington State

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| ▪ Accounting clerks | ▪ Hydroelectric machinists/hydro electricians |
| ▪ Automotive machinists | ▪ Industrial mechanics |
| ▪ Barbers | ▪ Locksmiths/access control technicians |
| ▪ Building repair & maintenance workers | ▪ Metalworkers |
| ▪ Communications technicians | ▪ Shipwrights |
| ▪ Corrections workers | ▪ Sound technicians |
| ▪ Dispensing opticians | ▪ Surveyors |
| ▪ Electrical workers | ▪ Telephone technicians |
| ▪ Firefighters | ▪ Tile setters |
| ▪ Glass workers | |
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