

Demand is rising for career and technical education

A four-year college degree is not necessarily the next step for students after they graduate from high school. The rising cost of college tuition has revitalized interest in career and technical education (CTE).

According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, enrollment at community colleges rose 2.6 percent in 2023 compared with a year earlier, enhanced by a 16 percent surge at schools with a focus on CTE. Similarly, a survey by Edge Research commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found on-the-job training seems to be more valuable to both high school students and non-enrolled graduates than a four-year degree, with 83 percent of the former stating it is excellent or good in value, compared to 80 percent for college. Favor for CTE schools is up 63 percent from the previous year.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges says CTE has evolved from a traditional vocational school model to one that offers academics and skills for higher education and careers in skilled trades, technology and applied sciences. Demand for this

type of education continues to grow, with various state superintendents and directors of CTE programs indicating they can only accommodate a fraction of the applicants they get for CTE programs.

"Since 2004, Vermont has seen a decrease in its overall student population, however we have had an increase in CTE students in that same period," says Jay Ramsey, Vermont State Director for Career and Technical Education.

While a traditional four-year university might be the right path for some individuals, CTE has proven ideal for many others. New York City schools Chancellor David Banks has said it's a sentiment being shared across the nation, that there is another way and another track for students to be successful. CTE may help students get more excited about school and view themselves in careers they may not otherwise be exposed to.

The National Center for Education Statistics puts the average annual tuition for a four-year degree at a private institution in the United States at roughly \$35,000 (and public at approximately



\$10,000. Room and board costs also must be considered, and those can increase the overall cost by a significant amount. The average tuition for a trade school can be around \$17,600 a year, but rates vary based on the trade. Most of the CTE schools do not require students to reside on campus, which helps to save money.

Exploring the Career and Technical Education route can be highly satisfying and financially rewarding. Careers are diverse, and students can find a track that enables them to start training and working by investing less than they would if they were to attend a traditional college.

Taking a gap year? Some things to consider

Many high school students tend to enjoy a few months of summer vacation after they graduate, and then embark on new adventures at college or trade school. Graduating college seniors follow a similar path of joining the workforce or beginning post-graduate work after earning their degrees. But such paths are not the only ones available to students. Some students may want to consider a gap year.

A gap year is a break from academia to pursue other interests or even experiential learning, according to Forbes. It's more than just a time to relax, and can prove especially helpful to self-development and discovery. If time and budget allows, taking a gap year can be a worthwhile and productive endeavor. Here are a few ideas and benefits relating to gap years.

- Hone skills: Some see a gap year as a chance to goof off or lounge around. Instead, this break provides an opportunity to sample the workforce and gain experience.

Individuals can seek opportunities that will be relevant to the careers they intend to pursue in the future. A future certified public accountant, for example, may want to spend tax season working with an accounting firm to learn the ropes.

- Learn a language: Students may think a gap year is the perfect opportunity to become more proficient in a foreign language or two. Bilingualism can be a key advantage in one's job search and future career. Traveling to a country where a studied language is spoken and learning it while immersed in the culture can be a particularly effective means to acquiring language skills.

- Engage in a passion project: There are many projects that may be put on hold because of lack of time or resources while in school. A gap year can be the ideal time to write more or explore an innovative new business idea.

- Perform service work: A gap year can be an opportunity to engage in social change or to help a cause. Certain people

may want to travel to underprivileged areas on humanitarian missions or teach English to students overseas. These are experiences that will promote personal growth and help boost a résumé when it comes time to find a job.

- Improve academic performance: A study by Colorado College's Gap Year Research Consortium reported that those who participate in gap years exceeded their predicted GPAs by roughly 0.15 points. A gap year may help a person become a better student.

- Land an internship: Some companies may want to extend internship offerings beyond the standard semester. Many professionals land their jobs through networking, so taking time away from school to participate in a lengthy internship can make for a smoother entry into that company should one want to work with them in the future.

Taking a gap year may not be the traditional route for students, but the benefits of time away can be profound.

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