

A key part in helping students build a life after high school includes an introduction to choices they could make to continue their education—and that isn't always as easy as it sounds.

Many students begin their postsecondary exploration with all kinds of impressions that can limit their search. This includes:

- Students who are sure they can't go to college, because they can't afford it, weren't successful in high school or think college "isn't for them"
- Student who aren't sure if college is worth the cost of attendance
- Students whose only postsecondary interest is the college(s) from which both parents graduated
- Parents who come in with a copy of the latest mass-produced "best college" rankings and insist their child only focus on these "good" colleges
- Students whose perception of college is shaped largely by the success of a college's athletic programs
- Students who see no need for college, since their parents have had successful careers without ever attending college.

Because this pre-existing knowledge can prevent a comprehensive review of postsecondary possibilities, it's important to create an approach to the exploration of these possibilities that allows students to engage in what Lee (2002) refers to as "unlearning," or going beyond what they think they know, in order to have a greater understanding of the myriad options that exist.

A vital first step in this unlearning involves introducing the student to available postsecondary options, including an understanding of the different kinds of four-year colleges; two-year colleges; vocational and technical training programs; training available through the military; post-graduate study before entry into college, and taking time off before entering college, also known as a "gap" year.

FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

With more than 2,200 options (College Board, 2014), four-year colleges represent the largest group of postsecondary institutions in the United States. While each four-year college creates its own degree requirements, most gener-

ally, degrees and programs are designed with two components:

1. *General education requirements.* In order to have a strong understanding of all parts of the world around them, students have to take a prescribed number of introductory courses in English, math, science, social sciences, and the humanities and arts.
2. *Major requirements.* Students are then required to complete courses in the field of study they want to focus on at a more in-depth level. This study can include courses designed to prepare students for specific careers (such as accounting or education); courses that build on general education knowledge to give the student a greater understanding of a particular academic area (like history or biology), or courses that provide more information on a number of subjects (like general studies).

With so many choices, students often wonder how to find the colleges that will best meet their interests and needs. A number of online tools help students structure their college search; they ask students to define their college interests by categories that can include the size of the college, the majors offered, the athletic options at each college, and more.

In order to make sure the student's preconceived notions about college don't put artificial limits on these search engines, a good first step is to make sure students have challenged their assumptions involving each of the major parameters of a search for four-year colleges before heading to the computer. These major parameters include:

Cost

Many students and parents begin the college selection process convinced some colleges are simply out of reach because they cost too much, or because the student will not qualify for financial aid. Too often, this prevents a student from applying to a college that offers significant financial aid based solely on the student's high school grades and test scores, factors that can lead to scholarships that will make a more expensive college more affordable—and, in some cases, free.

Students and parents are wise to consider cost—and the issue of student debt after college—as one factor in choosing a college, but writing a college off in the early

part of the process as “too expensive” can artificially limit the student’s options. Students should develop a list of colleges that include several choices where significant financial aid would not be needed to attend, but that should by no means be the only factor in developing the list.

Major

Students often feel they can’t begin the college search process without knowing what they will study in college. This can be particularly relevant when the student is feeling pressure to go to college to “get a good job,” even though the student’s interests or talents may not align with the careers that are in high demand, according to current employment projections.

If a student’s career or academic interests are well-defined in high school, major can be an important factor in exploring four-year colleges. Concurrently, if the student is certain he/she has no idea what he/she wants to major in, this information is just as useful in the college exploration process, since many colleges encourage students to spend up to two years exploring different areas of study before declaring a major.

Counselors can help students complete a wide array of career exploration activities in high school and use those results in the college search—even, and especially, if the answer to, “What do you want to study?” is “I don’t know.” Students should also consider how committed they are to their major; a student who is convinced engineering (or music) is his/her field of study will probably want to include technical colleges (or music conservatories) in his/her college search, while a student torn between engineering and music (or wanting to study both) will have a very different list of schools.

Location

Unlike these other categories, many students begin the college search with strong assumptions about what they don’t want. More than one student has started the exploration process with statements like, “I’m certainly not going to a college in the middle of a cornfield,” and “Of course I won’t be living at home when I go to college. I want this experience to be mine!”

Students often assume that colleges located in or near big cities offer more to do than colleges in rural areas,

when the opposite is often true. Many students return from visiting an urban college having discovered the city and the college are combined in a way that there isn’t enough of a sense of campus for the student. On the other hand, a college that is hours away from a major city may have more student events on any given weekend than one student could possibly attend, since the college knows that if the campus doesn’t meet the extracurricular needs of the students, students won’t enroll.

Distance from home is another factor that needs to be broached with both care and clarity. Some students may have so strong a desire to strike out on their own that they overlook a college five miles away that has everything the student is looking for. At the same time, the student may have economic or personal needs that require him/her to begin college by staying at home. Maximizing personal autonomy is an important goal in the college selection process, but that goal can be achieved in many ways for the same student.

Size of College

Many students begin their college search convinced that the only place they can get individualized attention is at a small college. On the other hand, some students are unwilling to look at any college with fewer than tens of thousands of students because they want a college with lots of “school spirit.”

In both cases, students are talking about the qualities they are looking for in a college, and this quality-based approach to the college search usually helps students look past many preconceived notions about colleges—except when it comes to the size of the college. Students often need help considering the many limited-enrollment programs at big colleges that offer personalized attention, as well as the smaller college campuses with rich traditions that create a strong sense of community surpassing that of much larger schools. Getting past the assumptions about colleges based on size can be challenging, but it is in the student’s best interest to make the effort.

Research Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges

This same quality-based approach to choosing a college is important in understanding the wide array of options at research and liberal arts institutions. There are several definitions of what constitutes a research university

(see, for example, Carnegie Foundation, 2014), but most of them suggest that one of the top priorities of these institutions is a commitment to graduate education and research led by professors. There are just as many definitions for a liberal arts college (see, for example, My College Guide, 2014), and these definitions suggest students attending a liberal arts college will receive a broad exposure to the humanities, arts, sciences, social sciences, and mathematics fields while also majoring in one or more areas of interest.

Students will want to look past these labels and look at the qualities and offerings of each individual college associated with either group. Research universities have the reputation of being large schools where professors are focused more on research or graduate students, but many of these schools require full professors to teach undergraduates, and many are able to use the strength of their research programs to offer research opportunities to undergraduates. In addition, many research universities have programs or majors that offer undergraduate students the same breadth and depth of study as liberal arts colleges.

Liberal arts colleges are often considered schools that offer a wide array of majors with fewer opportunities for research, but students will want to look past this generalization as well. Many liberal arts colleges require students to engage in some kind of research (often in the form of a senior project) under the supervision of one or more full professors, where the research can span more than one area of interest.

Research universities and liberal arts colleges work from their strengths to offer learning opportunities tailored to meet the needs of a wide array of students. College-bound students should investigate these opportunities and evaluate them on how well they meet the student's goals for going to college, not on the historic labels attached to the school.

Length of Program

Finally, students and parents will want to make sure they understand that many students are staying at four-year colleges for more than four years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reports that 59 percent of the students who enrolled at a four-year college in 2006 had a bachelor's degree by 2012—that's six years later.

While there are a number of personal factors involved in the time it takes for a student to complete a degree (the economy, family circumstances), some colleges have expanded the requirements in some programs that virtually guarantee students will need more than four years to earn a bachelor's degree. Parents and students should be advised to look closely at requirements for specific programs when exploring college options, so they can make fair comparisons of cost, time for completion and career preparation when looking at all of their options.

Two-Year Colleges

Slightly more than 1,600 two-year college options are offered in the United States (College Board, 2014). While the purpose of two-year colleges has changed since their introduction in the early 1900s (Geller, 2001), two-year colleges generally serve three specific purposes:

Career Preparation

Many of the certificates and associate degrees offered by two-year colleges prepare students for a specific career. While some of these degrees may include completion of general education classes, many require students to complete more than half of their coursework in a major or concentration tailored to meet the needs of a specific career in technology (auto technician, applied engineering), healthcare (x-ray technician, medical transcription specialist) or small business (accounting assistant, business administration).

Transfer Preparation

Both junior colleges and community colleges offer students the opportunity to complete general education classes that will meet degree requirements at many four-year colleges. The transfer option is often used by students who want to begin their college career close to home; save money on tuition by completing general education classes at a lower-priced college, or earn higher grades than they received in high school in order to transfer to a more selective four-year college.

Remediation

A growing number of two-year college students enroll in junior or community colleges in order to improve reading

and math skills, as well as the basic study skills needed to be a successful college student. These classes are sometimes taken so students can transfer to another college, and they are often taken so students can attain basic levels of literacy needed to apply for a job.

As is the case with a search for four-year colleges, students and parents often begin the two-year college search with assumptions that can prevent them from realizing all of the opportunities two-year colleges have to offer. For two-year colleges, these assumptions include:

Prestige

Because many two-year colleges are *open admission* colleges (they do not require a high school diploma or strong grades in high school for admission), many students assume all classes at two-year colleges are remedial, or reruns of what students learned in high school. This perception can make it difficult for a student to look forward to college if economics or personal circumstances require them to begin their college career at a two-year college, especially when they would rather be at a different institution, and are academically eligible to do so.

While many two-year colleges have an open admission policy, most require students to take placement tests before registering for classes. The results of these tests help students enroll in classes that will challenge them without overwhelming them; for students with strong academic skills, this means they will be able to take a wide array of demanding classes with other students who have similar abilities.

Students needing additional assurance about the quality of two-year college classes should be directed to online *transfer guides* that show how much credit these classes are given by more selective colleges. While policies vary from college to college, most four-year institutions will grant transfer credit of up to two years of full-time study at a two-year college, an indication that these transfer classes are just as demanding as similar classes offered at four-year colleges.

Transferability

The transfer guide is also an important tool to use when students and parents assume *all* classes from two-year colleges will transfer to all four-year colleges. Each four-year college has its own standards, but most will not give

credit to any two-year class that focuses on remedial academic skills; many will not give credit to classes with a curriculum that is more career-oriented than academically oriented, and some will not give credit to academic electives with a curriculum that is narrowly focused.

Students planning to transfer to a four-year college also need to know the difference between *elective* credit and *course* credit. A history major who takes five history classes at a two-year college may find out his/her four-year college will accept all of the classes for transfer credit, but will only accept one of them as course credit toward the college's degree requirements in history. The credits for the other four classes would count as elective credit, meaning the college will give the student credit for having taken the classes, but those classes won't count toward the number of history classes the student has to take to earn a history degree.

Since many transfer students start at a two-year college to save time and money, they'll want to work closely with the counselors at both the two-year college and the four-year college to make sure the classes they are transferring will help them reach their goal.

Location and Cost

Students considering two-year colleges often assume they have no choice but to go to the college closest to home, since most two-year colleges do not offer student housing. In addition, students looking to save money by attending a two-year college assume the cost of a two-year college goes up significantly if the student isn't a resident of the city or state where the college is located.

The College Board (2014) reports that about 70 two-year colleges give housing to all first-year students who ask for it—and this housing is guaranteed. In addition, many two-year colleges are located in cities and college towns where affordable student housing is available to all students, no matter what college they attend. Combined with the possibility of living with other relatives or family friends, going to a two-year college has the same array of geographic possibilities as choosing a four-year college.

In terms of cost, many *public* two-year colleges are supported by the taxes of residents, so attendance can be more expensive if a student is from a different city, county or state. On the other hand, *private* two-year colleges charge the same tuition for all students, and some pub-

lic two-year colleges offer in-district tuition for residents of neighboring towns. Some restrictions may apply, but students should be encouraged to explore these options if they want to look beyond local college options. Many two-year colleges also offer degrees that can be earned completely online.

Career Preparation

Students often select a two-year college because it offers a shorter path to a better-paying job than four-year colleges. This is also why two-year colleges are appealing to students returning to college after some time away from school; the two-year college offers the opportunity to try a career out, and see where it may take the students.

Community colleges were designed for students to explore career options, but students need to be aware of the limited connection between some two-year programs and their four-year counterparts. For example, a student considering engineering will come across many of the key career concepts by taking two-year college courses in applied engineering, but this coursework will have far less math and theoretical science than an engineering degree will require.

Students also need to consider if the requirements of a two-year degree are more than those required for a specific career. Many two-year colleges offer programs in culinary arts that thoroughly prepare a student for a career as a chef, but students may not have to complete a degree of any kind if their desire is to be a cook at the local restaurant. Having a credential or degree usually opens more career opportunities for students, but not always; if the primary goal of attending college is to find a better job, students should understand all of their training possibilities—and how they relate to one another—before choosing a specific path.

Certificate Programs at Community Colleges

Knowing that some careers require less than two years of training, many community colleges offer certificate programs that expose students to the key terminology and skills needed to be successful in a specific field. Since many of these certificates require only a year of study, students can quickly earn the certificate and gain an entry-level position in the field to see if they truly like the work they are doing. Students happy with their work can

often return to the community college to take the additional coursework needed to earn a two-year degree in the field. This can be especially helpful if the field requires some kind of degree for advancement.

Students looking at a certificate option should understand the limits of transferability of many of the courses. While many of these courses will apply toward the requirements of an associate degree, the vocational focus of many of these courses limits their transferability to four-year colleges, or even to other two-year institutions. Students will want to work closely with an academic advisor or counselor at the two-year institution to understand the possibilities of earning transfer credit for these classes.

VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

The Association for Career and Technical Education (2014) estimates that there are 9,400 postsecondary technical and career education programs in the United States. Because this number includes the career programs offered at two- and four-year colleges, it is difficult to determine how many independent vocational programs exist, but a quick online search reveals hundreds of vocational programs open to students in most major cities.

These vocational programs vary greatly from two- and four-year colleges, and two of these differences play a large role in comparing postsecondary options for students seeking an experience after high school that leads to job opportunities. As a whole, independent vocational programs tend to focus their entire curriculum on career-related skills, requiring few general education classes in order to complete a certificate or diploma. This focus means some of these programs can be completed in less than two years, and many in less than one year, far less time than is necessary to complete a degree from a two- or four-year college.

While these differences are significant, students should ask many of the same questions about the curriculum and services of a vocational school they ask when investigating two- or four-year colleges. Students should compare the courses offered by different programs that prepare students for the same career, and closely investigate the job placement services each program offers. These investigations should reveal the names of companies that hire graduates of these programs, giving students the op-

portunity to contact the employers to see if graduates of one program are better prepared in the field than those of other programs.

Students also need to look closely at financial aid offers presented by different programs, just as they would for any other postsecondary institution. This is particularly important because students may be completing a vocational program in a matter of months, and many educational loans require students to begin paying loans back six months after leaving school. This short timetable is something students should consider in careers where jobs may take time to find.

Just like students considering two-year colleges, students need to understand whether the diploma or certificate from a vocational program is necessary for a particular field, if it is part of a career ladder that creates other opportunities and if any of the coursework completed in the program is transferable to two- or four-year colleges, if the student wishes to pursue further study. It is best to work with counselors at both the vocational program and the school the student plans on transferring to in order to get a clear understanding of their options.

Finally, students should consider if they are prepared for the rigorous schedule many vocational training programs require of their students. A vocational program may not include traditional academic courses, but students will still need to study, read, review, and complete homework in vocational programs, tasks that require time and focus. Students considering a vocational school may want to talk with a career counselor in order to get a better understanding of the demands of vocational school and to determine if work or other family obligations may prevent them from getting the most out of their experience.

Military Training

One of the best examples of on-the-job training involves enlistment in a branch of the United States Armed Forces. By working closely with military recruiters, students can get a better understanding of the training options available through the United States Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines, and Navy that can guide students into a variety of career options, including some options that can transfer for college credit. As is the case with any postsecondary option, students are strongly encouraged to get a

clear understanding of the obligations that come with enlisting in the armed forces and if the training they seek in a specific career is guaranteed by the branch they select.

Additional military options await students in hundreds of two- and four-year colleges that house programs in the Reserved Officers Training Corps (ROTC), or other officer-training programs with similar benefits. Students committing to these programs receive financial assistance to attend college; in exchange, students make a commitment to serve in a branch of the armed forces for a period of active duty that usually lasts four years, followed by reserve duty that is usually an additional four years.

Finally, students with strong academic records and good physical abilities can apply to any of the United States Military Academies, where they can earn a four-year degree in a number of academic, vocational and military fields, with all expenses paid. Successful applicants typically have superior grades and extracurricular accomplishments, can pass a rigorous physical exam and must receive an appointment to an academy, typically offered by a member of Congress.

Post-Graduate Years

Some students get to the end of their high school careers and simply need another year to be ready for college. Perhaps their time management skills need some honing, or they're just beginning to get a feel for what it means to explore literature, do a real research paper or really get the most out of school. They're in the 12th grade, and they've passed all their classes, so they can't really stay at your school, but college isn't quite for them just yet.

Enter the idea of a post-graduate, or PG year. PG years are designed to give students the opportunities they need to make sure they'll get the most out of college, and they've been around for years. PG years are usually offered by private high schools, but students enrolled in PG programs aren't really in grade 13—the PG curriculum at most high schools has classes that aren't available to the other students in the high school, so it's really more like a school within a school. It's also important to note that most PG programs have a strong athletic component, since many PG students are athletes who need an additional year to bring up either their academic or athletic skills.

Gap Years

While some students may need another year of school to prepare for college, other students know they want to go to college, but not right away. For many of these students, a “gap” year between high school and college can give them the breather they need to make the most out of the college experience. Perhaps they want to teach English as a second language in another country, or join their family on a long visit to explore their heritage or do volunteer work they never had time for in high school. If that’s the case, these students are very likely to take the year off and return to college with a new perspective on themselves and on the world, a view colleges value in their students.

Most students who have successful gap years usually plan them out before they apply to colleges as high school seniors. That means that if a student comes to you in April of their junior year to explore gap options, there’s a good possibility it’s a good idea; however, if they come to you in April of their senior year, you’ll need to use your best counselor skills to determine if this request is based on a legitimate interest, or if there is a concern about being “ready” for college that needs to be addressed. The less specific their plan is, the less likely the student will get anything out of the year off, and the less likely they are to actually head on to college. If you ask for their plans, and they begin with, “Well, I’m not sure,” it’s time for a deeper discussion.

Many counselors are surprised to find that most colleges are more than happy to let admitted students have a gap year. The student usually gives the college an enrollment deposit and signs a commitment to attend the college the following fall; many colleges also require the student to pledge not to take other college classes during the gap year.

The gap year option is offered by many private colleges and some public colleges, but it is always better to ask than assume a college’s policy on gap years.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN EXPLORING THESE OPTIONS

As students and families review the wide array of programs and colleges that offer learning opportunities after high school, it’s important to keep the following factors in mind:

Cost

The wide range of tuition and fees makes cost an important consideration. New efforts are underway to help students determine if the cost of a particular program is “worth it,” but answering that question is harder than it may seem. Is the value of college only measured by the career options a degree offers? Are the life experiences of living on campus and away from home worth the extra expense? Are there programs other than the student’s “first choice” that would offer a similar experience that cost significantly less? This is where much of the counseling comes into the college counseling experience, where the counselor helps the student look past the data and logistics of applying to determine the best path for the student to pursue.

Early College

A number of school districts are offering the opportunity for students to take classes at a local college while also attending high school. These early college programs vary greatly, but many will allow 11th- and 12th-grade students to earn enough college credit to earn an associate degree either in high school or after an additional year of study at the local community college.

Students pursuing early college will want to make sure they understand the transferability of the college credits they are earning in high school. Many early college programs focus on career readiness and will include courses specific to a particular career. These courses may not be accepted for course credit at four-year institutions; in addition, students may have to take these courses in lieu of high school academic electives that can help students gain admission to four-year institutions right after high school.

For-Profit Institutions

For-profit colleges and postsecondary programs have the distinct goal of educating students while making money at the same time. In recent years, some for-profit colleges have been investigated for the large percentage of their revenues that come from students receiving federal assistance to go to college and the high dropout rates at some for-profit colleges.

Just as students need to get past the labels of “big” colleges and “liberal arts” schools, they will want to look

closely at the same key elements of a for-profit college. After considering cost, curriculum, campus atmosphere, reputation, and comparative strengths of other available programs, the student will want to work closely with the counselor to make sure they fully understand the financial obligations they are taking on when enrolling at a for-profit institution.

International Options

US students looking for an international experience will want to evaluate the study abroad options available at each college. Many colleges will offer a semester or year of coursework taught by their own instructors at international locations, while others will partner with colleges abroad where students can take courses taught by professors working at that school. Students taking classes where these agreements are in place are generally assured that these classes will transfer for credit.

Other students who want to look beyond the study abroad options at their own school may want to enroll as a guest student at another US college that offers the international experience the student is interested in. In this case, the student will need to get the consent of his/her home institution to apply as a guest student, and make sure the study abroad program at the other institution is available to him/her as a guest student. Students pursuing this option will also want to make sure the courses will transfer back to their home school.

Another option open to US students is studying at the international campus of a US college. More and more colleges are opening campuses abroad, both to meet the study abroad needs of US students and to serve the growing college needs of students overseas. Since many of these programs also allow overseas students to study at the college's campus in the US, many students are attracted to the strong international presence of these programs.

Some US students want to maximize their overseas learning experience by applying as an international student to a college based outside the country. Because the admission requirements and deadlines vary greatly from college to college and from country to country, students are strongly advised to speak with their college counselor about these plans as early as the start of the junior year. This discussion should include awareness of the value of an overseas degree in the US job market, the value of the degree when

applying to US graduate schools, and the transferability of credits to US colleges, should the student wish to return to the US to study before completing a degree overseas. Counselors will want to become familiar with cross-national partnerships or multi-institutional agreements. For example, familiarity with the Bologna Process of the European University Association (2014) that governs European universities, as well as the transfer agreements and articulation agreements governing the offerings of each overseas college that is of interest to the student, becomes imperative.

Online Options

A growing number of institutions are offering online classes, certificates and degrees, either as part of, or instead of, traditional face-to-face instruction. Depending on their design, online classes can allow students to complete the work at their own pace, or give them flexibility to learn in ways that meet the demands of their personal or professional lives. This is especially true with the advent of Massive Online Open Classes, or MOOCs, where colleges offer a course, certificate or degree online to the general public at little or no cost.

The flexible nature of online education is viewed to be its best attribute, but it can also be its greatest hindrance. Students excited by the idea of "class on my time" need to make sure they have the discipline to develop a personal schedule that will allow them to meet the demands of an online course, as well as the self-advocacy skills to reach out for help through the Internet—a skill that is very different from talking to an instructor after a face-to-face class. This is especially important if the student is studying a subject that is new to him/her or challenging for him/her. Many students will find the techniques needed to secure additional help online as an additional barrier to learning subject matter that is hard for them to begin with.

Students considering an online class as part of their college experience will want to work closely with their academic advisor to evaluate the student's schedule and readiness to meet the unique demands of this approach to learning. Students considering a completely online certificate or degree will want to work closely with their college counselor to evaluate these same attributes, as well as the value of the online degree in the workplace, graduate schools and when transferring to another institution.

TRANSFERRING AND REVERSE TRANSFERRING

Economic conditions are leading more students who are academically eligible to enter a four-year college right after graduation to consider transferring to a four-year college after a year or two of study at a local community college. This is requiring students and college counselors to be more aware of transfer policies at four-year institutions *before* starting college in order to get the most out of the community college experience. A similar trend is occurring with students who complete four-year degrees, then return to a community college to pick up a handful of classes to prepare them for graduate school. Known as *reverse transferring*, many college graduates will return to ask their college counselor for help in selecting a local college that would be the best choice to take required science courses for medical school, required history classes for law school or accounting classes for an MBA degree.

CASE STUDIES

All of these postsecondary options create multiple pathways for students to consider. While the following case studies present a cursory overview of some of each student's interests, they are intended to put the information presented in the chapter into practice.

Paul will be the first in his family to go to college, and is the only child in his family. A good student, Paul has already been contacted by several colleges out of state to let him know about merit scholarship opportunities, including some colleges with strong neuroscience programs Paul is interested in. Paul is excited at the idea of going away to college, but he is also concerned he will miss his family too much. This same sentiment has been expressed by Paul's father, who says he thinks it will be hard for him to "let him go."

Possibilities for Paul Include:

- Researching four-year colleges (both close to home and farther away) that offer neuroscience programs
- Researching four-year colleges (both close to home and farther away) that offer strong science programs that would prepare Paul for admission to a strong graduate school in neuroscience
- Investigating two-year colleges close to home that would allow Paul a gradual demonstration of auton-

my; this research would include investigation of two-year colleges that have articulation agreements or automatic acceptance policies with colleges with strong neuroscience programs, where all of Paul's credits would be accepted for transfer, or he would automatically be admitted to the neuroscience program

- Looking into gap year programs where Paul would defer college for a year, while engaging in neuroscience research to see if this is something he really wants to pursue
- Reviewing four-year colleges farther from home, where Paul could enroll as a full-time online student for a semester.

Pursuing these options (and others) maximizes Paul's options and gives the counselor time to help Paul and his family explore any separation anxiety that is natural during the senior year.

Julie is a natural-born computer programmer. At 16, she's already skipped one grade and sold three smartphone apps that are doing very well. Julie has never been a great student, but has drawn the attention of a few four-year colleges. Her current interest lies in learning more about current trends in computer programming; after that, her path is unclear.

Possibilities for Julie Include:

- Looking at vocational and technical training programs that offer computer programming
- Reviewing the certificate and two-year options available at community colleges
- Considering a gap year to work as an intern or independently writing code
- Developing a list of four-year colleges with strong computer science programs, and determining if it would be best for Julie to apply as a freshman or transfer student at those institutions
- Investigating the computer training and programming options in the military.

With Julie's advanced computer skills, it would be more challenging to find a technical training or military program that would meet her interests, but these could still be viable options.

Brandon is a very bright student whose family has limited means. His parents didn't complete high school and are certain they can't afford any college, which is why they are insisting Brandon start at a local community college.

Possibilities for Brandon Include:

- Completing a college search based on Brandon's interests
- Reviewing the results of this search with Brandon and his parents, making sure to discuss the financial aid opportunities at each school, as well as the honors college options available at larger colleges, especially research institutions
- Looking into the options available at the local community colleges, including scholarships for high-achieving students, transfer agreements and articulations with four-year colleges
- Reviewing the financial aid options available to Brandon at highly selective colleges, making sure Brandon's parents realize how affordable some of these options can be
- Discussing the option of enrolling in ROTC at a four-year college.

USE OF DATA

Because the college selection process is a blending of head and heart, counselors and students can use data sources to develop a postsecondary plan that includes student visits to colleges and programs, where additional data can be gathered. Intangible factors of the college selection process (the "feel" of the campus, the "fit" with other students on campus) can be ascertained via the following:

- Results of career interest inventories (Discover, ACT World of Work, state-developed tools)
- Results of career aptitude batteries (ASVAB, state-developed tests)
- Online college search engines that compare student interests to the qualities of two- and four-year colleges (College Board, Zinch, College Navigator)
- High school grades
- Where applicable, results of standardized test scores (SAT, ACT)

COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

Effective college counselors prepare students to make the most of postsecondary options by building a series of experiences familiarizing students and their families with these options long before students have to select which options to pursue and which programs to apply to. These activities include:

- Familiarizing students with different college options by taking class field trips to museums, cultural events and middle-school-focused admission activities held at nearby college campuses (grades 6–11)
- Bringing in speakers from different colleges to address the qualities of their institution (grades 6–11)
- Creating a robust career counseling program for students to explore possible job options, with an emphasis on the education and training tracks required for specific careers and the use of career interest and aptitude measures (grades 6–11)
- Holding grade-specific college night programs for students and their families that introduce the idea of college (grade 6), the academic requirements for all postsecondary options (grade 7), and exploration of various college and vocational training programs through individual tours and visits of these programs and their facilities (grades 8–11).

CONCLUSION

With tens of thousands of postsecondary options available, students can see the college selection process as an exciting opportunity to explore a host of possibilities, or look at the menu of choices and be overwhelmed by a sense of not knowing where to begin.

This is where a college counselor can make a world of difference. Using a multitude of strategies, including individual counseling sessions, small- and large- group discovery activities, evening programs for parents, and guided online searches in the school's computer lab, students can develop a strong sense of the opportunities that best meet their goals, abilities, needs, and interests, while developing a good sense of what doesn't work for them as well.

A well-developed relationship with the student that includes activities in self-awareness and career aware-