

ALTERNATIVES TO COLLEGE

College may not be the right investment for every high school graduate. According to a report from StudentLoanHero.com in January 2021, there is an estimated \$1.71 trillion of outstanding student loan debt. The site also reported that 69 percent of college students took out student loans in 2019, with the average student loan debt for class of 2019 graduates at \$29,900. With more students taking on this amount of debt, parents and students alike should give serious consideration to college expenses before assuming it's the best path for their future. Does it make sense for a student to incur the enormous expense of going to college only to find out it's not the right fit? There are other options for finding a satisfying career.

Oklahoma CareerTech

There are many jobs that may only require vocational or skills training. Oklahoma CareerTech is a network of 29 technology centers on 58 campuses in more than 90 instructional areas. It's a good way to get needed education for preparation to enter directly into specialized careers. For example, automotive maintenance, aviation maintenance, business technology, precision machining, and welding are just a few of the programs offered. Some programs offer on-the-job training and job placement assistance. Some centers offer free tuition for high school students and regular tuition costs for adult learners, but the tuition is usually lower than traditional college tuition. To get started, visit okcareertech.org for information and locations. Additionally, check out the [Oklahoma Career Guide](#), an online tool offering assessments, occupation information, education plans, and more.

U.S. Armed Forces

The U.S. Armed Forces offers multiple opportunities for college tuition assistance, and military service is often a good way to learn discipline and skills prior to enrolling in college. Depending on how long someone enlists and the job they choose, the Montgomery G.I. Bill can offer more than \$50,000 to help pay for college. There's also a College Fund Program (also known as the Montgomery G.I. Bill "kicker") that can provide financial assistance. Additionally, the American Council on Education works with the Department of Defense to review military training and experiences and recommend appropriate transferable college credits. For additional information, visit militaryguide.acenet.edu.

Other Options

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics provides an Occupational Outlook Handbook located online at bls.gov/ooh that provides information about many types of jobs and

careers. You can research numerous jobs by pay level, education, and needed training. It also reports the projected number of new jobs. Unless your student knows exactly what career they want to pursue and knows a college education is needed, parents can work out the pros and cons of directly entering college. Even for students who ultimately earn college degrees, spending time learning a skill or trade while they identify ideal career paths is a smart move.

Professional Certification

Other certification pathways that serve as alternatives to traditional college degrees include:

- **Trade Schools**
Fields: plumbing, electrician, HVAC, automotive repair
Duration: Typically 6 months to 2 years
- **Coding Bootcamps (usually offered online)**
Fields: web development, data science, and software engineering.
Duration: 8-24 weeks
- **Healthcare**
Fields: Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), medical assistant, or dental hygienist
Duration: Ranges from a few months to a year
- **Creative and Design**
Fields: Graphic design, digital marketing, video production
Tools: Adobe Certified Professional, Google Ads Certification
- **Skilled Trades**
Fields: welding, carpentry, or machine operation through industry-specific credentials
- **Technology**
Fields: Amazon Web Services (AWS) Certified Cloud Practitioner, Cisco Certified Technician (CCT)
- **Entrepreneurship**
Fields: Small Business Administration (SBA) training or certifications in entrepreneurship