

# Beyond Four-Year Degrees: Insights from High School Counselors



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Recently, there has been a noticeable surge in interest among high school students exploring career and vocational postsecondary education options. Articles like The Wall Street Journal's "How Gen Z Is Becoming the Toolbelt Generation" have highlighted this shift in perspectives towards higher education. Additionally, enrollment numbers from the National Student Clearing House reported that trade programs have seen high growth, especially in programs such as Mechanic and Repair Technologies, Construction Trades, and Personal Culinary Services.

To gain insights into what is unfolding on the ground, I spoke with three high school counselors and an assistant principal, who shared their firsthand experiences. High school counselors have a lot on their plate these days, shouldering an ever-growing array of responsibilities, from grappling with the FAFSA delays and mental health struggles to dealing with chronic absenteeism coming out of the pandemic. Many counselors are managing large caseloads, with some juggling as many as 400 students. In addition to those demands, counselors are tasked with the important role of guiding students in their post-high school endeavors.

Traditionally, we think of guidance counselors recommending higher education choices based on a student's grades and interests. With so many career pathway options, high schools have moved away from just looking at grades into a more comprehensive approach and they are starting as early as freshman year. Shannon Gormley, a school counselor at Tinley Park High School in Tinley Park, IL, explains that they administer career assessments to freshmen, allowing students to discover their interests and aptitudes. These

assessments are often conducted in the classroom and serve as an exploratory introduction to the array of possibilities.

Wendy Falk, a school counselor at Appleton West High School in Appleton, WI, discussed additional options like job shadowing and field trips as opportunities for students to understand their options after they graduate. Additionally, parent nights, such as their "Diploma by Design" series, are held to educate parents about aligning coursework with career pathways. Falk said they also work with outside organizations to hold specialized presentations like FAFSA nights.

David Lynch, a school counselor at Hartford Union High School in Hartford, WI, said his high school organizes an annual college and career fair where local employers, including manufacturing and trade organizations, participate alongside colleges. These are great partnership opportunities for career and trade institutions to work with high schools to sponsor special events.

As students enter their junior year, the guidance becomes more personalized and focused. It is a chance to discuss the student's next stage of planning, whether that is a four-year college, technical school, military, apprentice, or entering the workforce, explained Sara Hall, assistant principal at White Plains High School in White Plains, NY. At this point, counselors are meeting with juniors individually to craft a customized academic plan for the remaining two years of high school, aligning their coursework with career aspirations. This includes the opportunity to enroll in experiential programs that blend classroom instruction with real-world, hands-on training through a split daily schedule between school and



workplace environments.

Appleton West High School and Hartford Union High School participate in GPS Education Partners, a program that offers a unique blend of classroom learning and workplace experience for high school juniors and seniors. Students work with partner companies, receive mentorship, and earn a competitive wage while still enjoying traditional high school experiences like prom and graduation.

Given the diverse array of postsecondary pathways available, an increasing number of students are opting to pursue vocational or technical education at career and trade institutions. Concerns about accruing debt and a desire for meaningful work experiences are influencing career decisions and challenging traditional views on higher education, explained Falk. Gormley agrees, saying that there is a perception among students that they may not be getting enough value from a traditional four-year degree.

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Messaging to parents about these options is still a work in progress, said Falk, but storytelling and showcasing success stories of students who pursued alternative pathways could be effective strategies. Falk believes educators play a crucial

role in providing parents with accurate information about the potential pathways to success beyond traditional college routes. She recommends shifting the conversation from "college plans" to "postsecondary plans" because it helps broaden the discussion to include alternative pathways like vocational training and apprenticeships.

Gormley mentioned the importance of educational workshops for parents and families to provide information about various career paths and educational options beyond traditional colleges. Many parents still hold onto the expectation of a four-year college, but this mindset is evolving.

Lynch has observed the trend of more students opting for technical college or direct work instead of traditional four-year colleges. In fact, at his school, on average, only about 50% of their students go to a four-year college, 28% or so go to technical college, and the rest go to work or the military. He also noted that in his community, there is an increasing openness among families to alternative paths such as technical colleges, trade schools, or apprenticeships. More students are looking for hands-on experiences and not just in the trades, said Lynch.

Hall believes many students default to wanting to go to college due to a lack of awareness of alternative options. It is up to the counselors to work to educate students about different pathways based on their interests and goals. Before the pandemic, Hall explained they were beginning efforts to educate themselves about trade and vocational opportunities to expose students to a variety of options. They organized a trade fair and have expanded it since then, which has been well received by their local community.

One obstacle that counselors encounter when



suggesting career paths is the lack of available and affordable resources. Many students may not be aware of the various specializations within fields like nursing or engineering, limiting their career exploration and decision-making process.

To help students explore career options, Gormley mentions using various resources, including Google searches and leaning on specialized teachers and committees within the school to gather information about different career paths and opportunities available to students. Gormley underscored the need for more resources and information regarding career schools, apprenticeships, and other non-traditional postsecondary paths to help students and parents make informed decisions.

Lynch said he uses online resources like Xello and college/trade websites for personalized career guidance but acknowledged that finding a curriculum that can be individualized for students without high costs is challenging and may not adequately cover the breadth of career options available.

Affordable tools and comprehensive materials specifically tailored to support students interested in pursuing career-focused education remain scarce, leaving counselors to piece together information from various sources. Career and trade institutions can play a pivotal role in enhancing career awareness by furnishing high schools with tailored resources centered around specific career clusters. Often, students lack comprehensive knowledge about the diverse array of job opportunities within broad industries like healthcare, underscoring the importance of such targeted resources in broadening their horizons.

As the former Executive Director of the Association for the Advancement of the College Admissions Profession (AACAP), Gormley has experience working with for-profit schools. While she is not opposed to recommending for-profit institutions to her students, her colleagues are more likely to recommend a community college over a for-profit institution due to concerns about cost and the value of the education provided. Hall expressed reluctance to recommend a for-profit institution, although she acknowledged that it is more about the programs offered by an institution that would fit the student's needs.

As the landscape of postsecondary education continues to evolve, the role of high school counselors in guiding students toward diverse career pathways has become increasingly pivotal. By forging collaborative partnerships with career and trade institutions, counselors can access tailored resources, facilitate hands-on experiences, and provide comprehensive exposure to the myriad of opportunities available beyond traditional four-year colleges. This not only empowers students to make well-informed decisions about their futures but also equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in an ever-changing job market. By embracing a holistic approach that celebrates multiple pathways to success, high schools and career institutions can collectively nurture a generation of students who are prepared to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce with confidence and purpose.

