

## Other Avenues: When Traditional College Is Not the Answer

A chat with Arlyn Roffman, PhD



**"TRADITIONAL COLLEGE IS NOT THE PATH** for all students," says Arlyn Roffman, PhD. "Many youth don't feel ready to continue learning immediately after high school. Some just do not feel motivated to move on to higher education; some are unprepared to face the academic demands or the social pressures of postsecondary settings; some are reluctant to return to the vulnerable position of being in the student role again in a new learning environment."

A professor of education at Lesley University, Roffman is also the founder and former director of Threshold, a groundbreaking transition program for young adults with learning disabilities. She is the author of *Guiding Teens with Learning Disabilities: Navigating the Transition from High School to Adulthood* (Random House, 2007) and *Meeting the Challenge of Learning Disabilities in Adulthood* (Brookes, 2000).

"Every child has the potential to continue learning at some level after high school," Roffman stresses. "Parents and teachers alike must convey the message that lifelong learning is a realistic and desirable goal. The critical goal is to find the right match of learning opportunities to fit the student's interests, aptitudes, personal objectives, and budget."

Roffman recently participated in an online chat sponsored by the National Resource Center on ADHD, taking questions from parents eager to discuss alternatives to college. CHADD members may access the full chat transcript on the CHADD website; an edited version follows.

**I would like to learn what options may exist in a few years for my sixth-grader, who has ADHD inattentive type and a couple of specific learning disabilities. He's exceptionally bright in many ways, with the vocabulary of an eighteen-year-old.**

You're wise to be thinking of this already. There will be lots of postsecondary options for your son, depending on his interests and capabilities.

It's important to realize that the path of continued learning after high school is unique to each student. It may consist of study at four-year colleges, two-year junior or community colleges, vocational-technological schools, non-degree transition-focused programs, or adult education centers. The trick will be to find the best postsecondary option for his unique constellation of strengths and interests.

There are increasing numbers of colleges and universities with services and programs to support diverse learning needs. You can

learn about them in some of the college guides targeted to students with disabilities, such as the *K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities*, published by Princeton Review.

For many students with ADHD or LD, starting their postsecondary experience at a community college is a good option to consider. One reason is that community colleges have an open admissions policy, meaning a high school diploma or a GED is all that is necessary for admission, and admissions criteria are more "forgiving" of high school records that may reflect learning problems. In addition, class size tends to be smaller at community colleges than at large universities, tuition is usually lower, and they offer a wide range of vocational, remedial and developmental courses. Students may choose the intensity of study that fits their needs and interests: they may start slow and take just a few courses in areas of interest, enroll in a certificate training program toward particular employment goals (e.g. dental assis-

tant), or choose to matriculate in an associate's degree program with the intention of later transferring to a four-year institution.

Beyond the financial and academic advantages, community college is a popular option for psychological reasons too—since all students are commuters, students can "try out" the college experience close to home, near family and friends.

For highly motivated students with more severe learning disabilities and/or ADHD who might be too challenged by traditional degree programs, there is the option to enroll in a campus-based life skills-oriented transition program. Courses are very practical and often community-based, focusing on vocational training, development of daily living skills, and social skills training. Many offer continued transition support as graduates move from the campus into apartments and jobs.

In addition, there are transition programs that primarily center on independent living and are not based on college campuses. Participants in these programs usually live in apartments with supervision and work locally as they develop the daily living skills to assume more independence. Some of these programs work collaboratively with nearby community colleges, and residents can take courses if they choose to do so.

There are many options ahead for your son. In the meantime, make sure he gets the help he requires over the next six years to manage the symptoms of his ADHD, to develop effective study skills, and to learn about any accommodations he might need to perform to his potential in whichever postsecondary setting he selects.

**What other options are out there when your child tried community college and that didn't work? He tried Job Corps and finished, but he's now working part-time as a bagger in a grocery store.**



There are a number of other learning options beyond community college. As technology advances and distance learning becomes more commonplace, online courses and programs are becoming more popular. Online learning is a particularly appealing option for students who have strong computer skills and need or prefer a flexible class schedule to fit around home or work responsibilities. Online learning is also an attractive alternative for students who have trouble sitting still for long lectures. A word of caution, though—attention can wander even online, and this learning format isn't for everyone.

Students with ADHD seeking careers in technical areas that are more hands-on may want to look into tech-prep programs. These often involve a partnership between secondary vocational technical schools and community colleges. If a student is clearly directed toward a career in mathematics, science, or engineering, a technical college curriculum is worth considering.

Technical schools provide students an education that concentrates on their particular career choice in trades such as carpentry, cosmetology, or secretarial skills. Technical schools allow students to focus directly on areas of strength and interest and often enable them to skirt around academic areas that have been their nemesis in high school.

Some youth choose to hire on with a skilled tradesman as an apprentice, where they are paid an hourly wage and are taught the skills of that trade on the job. Yet another option that warrants mentioning is career colleges, which prepare students for such jobs as massage therapist, computer technician, acupuncturist, and the like.

**Do you have any recommendations for career or interest inventories that students have found relevant or especially helpful in beginning to chart a course for themselves and their future plans?**

I don't have specific recommendations, but high school guidance counselors have loads of resources at their disposal that can help students start to chart their vocational course. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, which is in every state, has counselors who can test your child.

One important step you can take is talk with your child about work and encourage him or her to learn about the different kinds of jobs that are out there. Young kids can start

learning about what their parents and neighbors do; older students can write research papers on careers of interest to them. As they become more informed, they can see if they find an appealing option to consider investigating in more depth. They may even shadow someone in fields of interest to see how the jobs that interest them actually look and feel and then look into the educational requirements for those positions.

Schools are mandated to work with transition-aged students to identify their vision for their own future and to help them begin working toward their vocational goals. A vocational assessment should be part of the evaluation process for all students on IEPs once they reach age sixteen. Actually working in the community, in real jobs, is an important way to expose youth to what it means to work and what each position entails. Research tells us that working during high school highly correlates with employment beyond high school, so it's critical to get our youth out there in paid or volunteer jobs during their secondary school years.

**Are vocational or technical schools supportive? Are they good choices for students with learning disabilities?**

Vocational or technical schools can be a great option for students with ADHD, but each is different, so it's important to check with the special education team to discern the culture of the particular school you're interested in and the level of services provided for students with disabilities. Talk with current students on IEPs and their parents to get their perspective.

Sadly, in these days of No Child Left Behind, when academic achievement is the ultimate goal of too many schools, practical training in the trades has been less funded than in the past. I certainly believe we need good tradespeople and hope this avenue will remain an option for our students.

We have to eliminate stigma associated with technical, vocational, and hands-on training programs. They are a valid educational option and provide excellent practical training in vocational areas that are essential to our society.

Beyond vocational schools, trades may also be learned through apprenticeships. Still considered by many as an old-fashioned notion, apprenticeships can be invaluable for our students who learn best by watching and doing.

**As the mom of a bright kid with ADHD I feel pretty strongly that we parents need to remember that not every child—ADHD or not—should be headed to college. I'm raising my son in a part of the country where folks tend to way overvalue pure academics. Sure, we need good doctors and lawyers and MBAs. We will also always need good carpenters and mechanics.**

I'm with you that not all students should be pushed toward college. For many positions college degrees aren't essential. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the thirty jobs projected to grow at the fastest rate over the next decade in the United States, only seven typically require a bachelor's degree.

In many communities, the only socially acceptable path beyond high school is college. This places tremendous pressure on students who really don't wish to pursue that route in life. Students who aren't college-bound often feel awkward and stressed during the period of high school when peers are taking PSATs and SATs, going on college tours, filling out applications, asking teachers for letters of recommendation, hearing whether they've been admitted, and deciding which colleges they will attend. If your son chooses not to continue learning immediately after high school, he will need some prepared responses to the questions about where he's planning to apply. I recommend directly responding, "I'm going to take a little time off" or "I've decided to take a job for now" to fend off further questioning.

**My son will be a young high school grad. I am interested in exploring the possibility of a gap year for him, but I'm afraid that if he takes a year "off" from school he may not want to go back. What is your experience with kids with ADHD and gap years?**

I don't have statistics on this, but I think a lot of kids who struggle with school are exhausted and dispirited by the end of twelfth grade. They've too often met with frustration, and many can benefit from an organized gap year.

The key here is that it must be organized! A year "off" holds little advantage for someone who needs structure in his or her life. But a year doing something purposeful, where he or she

can build confidence and learn lessons about the ways of the world can be highly beneficial.

There are organizations that set up gap-year experiences, though families can also do the planning themselves. However, just as it's essential to choose the right postsecondary program or work experience, finding a good match is key to making this a positive experience. Try conducting an Internet search for "Alternatives to College" to access a variety of websites that will help you consider options such as community service programs, leadership training programs, and apprenticeships.

Regardless of the direction of the gap year, your planning should include a discussion of what happens after it's over. Applying to college before the gap year and then deferring admission can be an effective way to keep your child from becoming detached from an educational path.

**I have heard wonderful things about the Threshold Program at Lesley University. Are there any resources to learn of other schools that may offer similar programs?**

Well, as the founder of Threshold, I'm certainly happy to hear these complimentary words! For those unfamiliar with the program, it was the first comprehensive campus-based transition program in the country for students with significant disabilities. It's thirty years old now, and it's still thriving, with excellent outcomes for its students. I will refer you to the website at [lesley.edu/threshold](http://lesley.edu/threshold). This is a non-degree program that helps students learn vocational skills, social skills, independent living skills,

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and leisure time skills, all to prepare for independent adulthood. And it's true—it's a wonderful program!

There is a handful of like-minded campus-based life skills-oriented transition programs, which all tend to be designed to serve highly motivated students who might be too challenged by traditional degree programs but are very interested in continuing to learn, experience college life, and become independent adults. Courses are very practical and often community-based, focusing on vocational training, development of daily living skills, and social skills training. Many, like Threshold, offer continued transition support as graduates move from the campus into apartments and jobs.

In addition, there are transition programs *not* based on college campuses that primarily center on independent living. Participants in these programs usually live in apartments with supervision and work locally as they develop the daily living skills to assume more independence. Some of these programs work collaboratively with nearby community colleges, and residents can take courses if they choose to.

The Heath Resource Center, [heath.gwu.edu](http://heath.gwu.edu), is a rich resource for information about

the range of postsecondary options, including alternative programs such as Threshold. [Thinkcollege.com](http://Thinkcollege.com) is a resource for students with cognitive impairments who are interested in postsecondary learning.

**I have a rising high school junior. This is the year we'd be visiting colleges, preparing for SATs, and figuring out which schools to apply to. I think that community college is a better approach for him, but do we go through the motions to make him feel like he's had the opportunity? How do we go about transition planning?**

Ah, the all-important question about transition planning! Your IEP team should work together to come up with a plan based upon your son's interests and strengths and vision for his future. His voice **MUST** be heard in the process. My book, *Guiding Teens with Learning Disabilities: Navigating the Transition to From High School to Adulthood*, describes the transition process in general, with specifics about getting ready for work and community life as well as college. I think you'll find it very applicable to ADHD as well.

Engaging your son in exploring educational options is important—looking at what's out there will help him feel part of the process and will help him see that he has choices. Many high schools have special education (SPED) college fairs where postsecondary representatives come to share their offerings. It'll be important to talk with the disability service providers to find out how disability-friendly each place is.

I'd take him scouting to a few schools that are within his academic range. His guidance counselor should be able to advise you regarding appropriate options. Allowing him to make the final choice from among these schools will build self-determination, which is essential for all our youth with disabilities.

One tool that I think is essential for every high school student on an IEP is a Transition Planning Portfolio, a personal file of all transition-related documents, for eventual use in application to college or employment.

Development of a Transition Planning Portfolio can be built into an IEP goal, can be completed as an independent study project, or can be the focus of a summer transition program between junior and senior years of high school. The portfolio itself will be invaluable as the student transitions into either work or postsecondary learning settings. **A**

## The Transition Planning Portfolio

The Transition Planning Portfolio can be developed and maintained in a variety of formats—as a hard copy in a binder, file box or accordion file; as an "e-portfolio," a series of electronic file folders; or as a URL on a personal website. The key is for the student to have sections that organize materials needed in the transition process:

- One section should contain school records: copies of past and present IEPs, high school transcripts, and a one-page summary of extracurricular activities.
- One section should contain disability documentation, including the most recent psycho-educational evaluation with specific diagnostic information; a listing of all approved accommodations from high school; and a copy of ACT and/or SAT scores.
- One section could contain college-specific information, questions to ask during the admissions interview, an extra copy of a completed Common Application form, an updated resume, a personal essay describing the learning disability, and nonconfidential letters of recommendation.
- Other sections should be dedicated to employment, including a resumé, sample cover letter, and names of references.