



Career planning for high schoolers

Elka Torpey | January 2015

“I’ve always had a pretty clear idea of what I want to do,” says Megan Lovely, a high school senior who hopes to become a [director](#) someday. She’s already taking steps toward her career goal by interning with her school [drama teacher](#), acting, and applying to colleges.

If you’re still in high school, you may not be as sure of your vocation as Lovely is of hers. But, like Lovely, you can start thinking about—and planning for—your future before graduation.

“Start exploring what you want to do when you’re a freshman,” says Mark Danaher, a career counselor at Newington High School in Newington, Connecticut. “The high school years go very quickly.”

Most people need some preparation before they’re ready for the workforce, and planning should begin long before it’s time to start a career. This could include taking technical courses during high school or, after graduating,

attending a college or university to earn a certificate or a degree. Knowing what type of career preparation you need begins with thinking about what type of career you want.

This article helps high school students plan for careers. The first section talks about exploring your interests. The second section highlights the importance of internships, jobs, and other opportunities for getting experience. The third section describes some education or training options, both in high school and afterward. The fourth section offers some thoughts on pursuing your dream career. And the final section lists sources for more information.

Explore your interests

High school is a great time to start thinking about careers. “All your life you’ve been asked what you want to do when you grow up,” says Steve Schneider, a school counselor at Sheboygan South High School in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. “In high school, you start to work towards making that happen.”

Many high schoolers don’t yet know what they want to do. And school counselors say that’s perfectly fine. In fact, students are likely to change their minds multiple times, perhaps even after they enter the workforce. And some of tomorrow’s careers might not exist today.

Settling on just one occupation in high school isn’t necessary. But looking into the types of careers you might like can help set you up for success. “My feeling is that high school students don’t have to know the exact career they want,” says Danaher, “but they should know how to explore careers and put time into investigating them and learning about their skills and interests.”

Learn about yourself

Understanding what you enjoy—and what you’re good at—is the first step in exploring careers, say school counselors. “If you don’t know what you want to do, the question is, ‘What do you like to learn about?’” Schneider says. “If you really like science, what do you enjoy about it—the lab work, the research?”

Use the answers to those questions to identify careers that may have similar tasks. High school junior Kate Sours, for example, loves spending time with kids as a babysitter and enjoys helping people. So she focused on those two interests when she began considering potential careers.

It’s important to think about what you like to do, say school counselors, because work will eventually be a big part of your life. “The whole purpose of thinking about careers is so that when you go to the workforce, you wake up in the morning and look forward to going to work,” says Julie Hartline, a school counseling consultant at Cobb County public schools in Smyrna, Georgia.



Identify possible careers

Once you've thought about the subjects and activities you like best, the next step is to look for careers that put those interests to use. If you love sports, for example, you might consider a career as a [gym teacher](#), [recreational therapist](#), or [coach](#). If you like math, a career as a [cost estimator](#), [accountant](#), or [budget analyst](#) might be a good fit.

But those aren't the only options for people interested in sports or math. There are hundreds of occupations, and most of them involve more than one skill area. School counselors, teachers, and parents can help point you in the direction of occupations that match your interests and skills. School counselors, for example, often have tools that they use to link interests and skills with careers. Free online resources, such as [My Next Move](#), also help with career exploration.

Another approach to identifying potential career interests is to consider local employers and the types of jobs they have. There are many jobs in [manufacturing](#) and [healthcare](#) near the high school where Schneider works, for example, so he often talks to students about the range of career options in those fields—from occupations that require a 6-week course after high school to those that require a bachelor's or higher degree.

Exploring careers that combine working with children and helping people led Sours to [nursing](#). She's now considering working in a hospital's neonatal intensive care unit or pediatrics department.

Sours notes the importance of broadening, rather than narrowing, possibilities when studying careers. "Keep an open mind," she says, "because with some work, you might think, 'Oh, that's a nasty job.' But when you start exploring it, you might discover, 'This is cool. I might want to do this.'"

Do your research

After identifying possible occupations, you'll want to learn more about them. Resources such as [Career Outlook](#) and the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) can help you get started. Other sources of information include career-day programs, mentoring, and opportunities offered through your school to learn more about the world of work.



Talking directly to workers can help you get information about what they do. If you don't know workers in occupations that interest you, ask people such as parents, friends, or teachers for their contacts. Some schools have business liaisons or coordinators who help put students in touch with employers—and school counselors can assist, too. These networking efforts might pay off later, even if opportunities aren't available now.

After you've found workers who are willing to help, talk to them on the phone, by email, or through online forums. Meet with them in person for [informational interviews](#) to learn more about what they do. Or ask if you can shadow them on the job to see what their daily work is like.

To find out if you'll really like an occupation, school counselors say firsthand experience is indispensable. Sours, for example, shadowed her aunt, who works in a hospital as a [physical therapist](#). Sours liked the hospital environment so much that she attended a week-long nursing camp, where she got to see the many tasks that [nurses](#) do. "I had so much fun, and I learned so much," she says about both experiences.

Get experience

If job shadowing gives you a taste of what an occupation is like, imagine how helpful getting experience could be. Students can begin getting career-related experiences in high school through [internships](#), employment, and other activities.

Taking part in different experiences is another step toward helping you to figure out what you like—and what you don't. These experiences may teach valuable job skills, such as the importance of arriving on time. (See box: [Put forth your best you.](#))

But, say school counselors, students need to remember that school takes priority over other pursuits. “It’s a good idea to get experience while you’re a student,” says Hartline, “but not at the expense of academic success.” Danaher agrees. “School should be your full-time job,” he says.

Internships

Completing an [internship](#) is an excellent way to get experience. Internships are temporary, supervised assignments designed to give students or recent graduates practical job training. Sometimes, internships or other experiential learning positions are built into educational programs, and students receive academic credit for completing them.

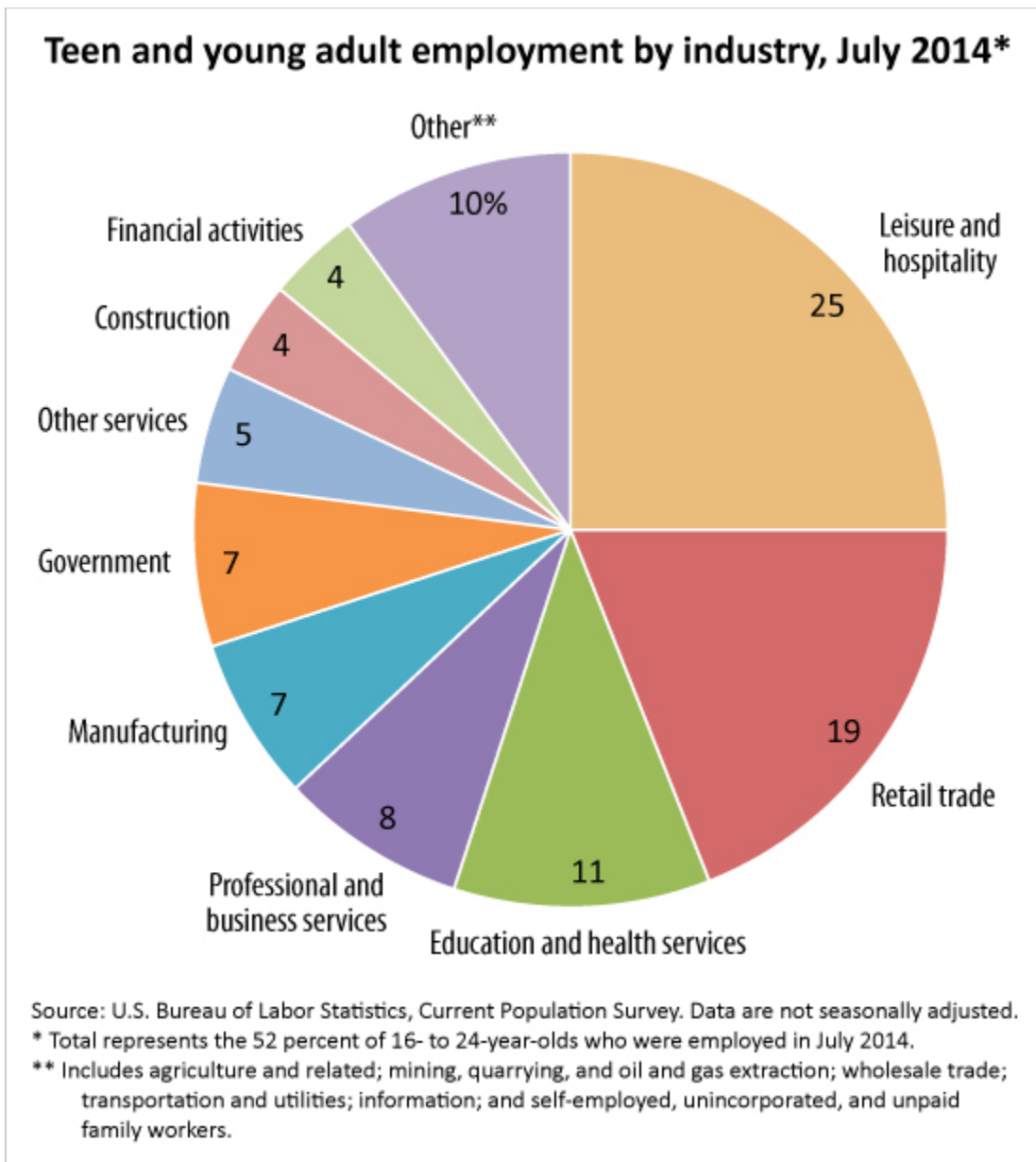
At Lovely’s school, for example, students have the option to fulfill an internship for credit during their junior or senior year. Lovely interned during her junior year for her high school theater director. “She gave us opportunities to do everything from contacting local newspapers for ads to writing program notes to directing the middle school production,” says Lovely. The experience gave Lovely a feel for a director’s work—and helped to cement her career goals.

At other schools, students seek out internships on their own. Academic credit may not be awarded, but gaining hands-on experience can still be worthwhile. Check with your school counselor to see if opportunities exist at your school.

Jobs

Summer or part-time employment is another way to get experience. Paid jobs allow you to earn money, which can help you learn how to budget and save for future goals or expenses.

For some students, summer is a great time to explore careers through employment. As the chart shows, [young people worked in a variety of industries](#) in July 2014, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS).



The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) has [rules about youth employment](#). These rules differ depending on your age, but they often limit the types of jobs and number of hours you can work. States may have additional restrictions.

Hartline advises that students who work during the school year start with a few hours and build from there, once they find it won't interfere with their studies. "For some students, work is a motivator. For others, it's a distractor," she says.

Regardless of when or where they work, school counselors say, students who pursue employment can learn from it. "I think there's no substitute for any type of work experience," says Michael Carter, director of college counseling at St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Virginia. "Without experience, it's hard for students to appreciate what type of career they'd like to have because it's all hypothetical."

Other activities

You can participate in [other activities](#) in high school that may spark a career interest. Examples include yearbook committee, science club, and debate team.

By joining groups that involve community service and leadership opportunities, such as student government or honor societies, you can hone work-related skills or interests. Attending a camp in a subject area that interests you, such as engineering or writing, can help you focus on academic skills that may lead to a career.

Some student organizations aim to promote career readiness. [SkillsUSA](#), [DECA](#), and the [Future Business Leaders of America](#) are just a few of the national-level groups that might have student chapters at your high school.

Volunteering allows you to serve your community and bolster your experience. Religious institutions, local nonprofits, and government agencies are among the many organizations that use volunteers to fill a variety of roles.

In addition to encouraging you to meet like-minded people and develop your interests, these activities also show future employers and postsecondary schools that you are motivated and engaged. And the more you shape your thoughts about a career, the better you'll know how to prepare for it.



Train for a career

Career preparation should start in high school, but it shouldn't end with graduation: Most occupations require some type of training or education after high school. On-the-job training, [apprenticeships](#), [certificates](#), non-degree awards, and various levels of college degrees are typically required for entry-level jobs.

Which type of training you need depends on the career you want to pursue. Your high school may offer opportunities for getting career training or college credits before you graduate. And after graduation, your training options expand even more. The closer you get to entering the workforce, the more you'll want to narrow your choices.

In high school

Getting a solid education is an important foundation for any career. Workers in many occupations use problem-solving, communication, research, and other skills that they first learned in high school. By doing well in classes and taking part in career-training or college-preparation programs, you demonstrate that you're ready to put these skills into action.

Plan and achieve. Make sure your high school course plan prepares you for entering the next phase of training or education in your desired career. To enter an [electrician](#) apprenticeship, for example, you may need a year of high school algebra. Your school counselor can help you plan your schedule to ensure that you take the required classes.

Employers and postsecondary schools often look to your high school record to gauge how you might perform on the job or in an educational program. And finishing high school shows that you can set goals and follow through. “Starting freshman year, do the absolute best you can in your classes,” says Laura Inscoe, dean of counseling and student services at Wakefield High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. “Start strong and stay strong.”

But school counselors also say not to worry too much if your grades aren’t as good as you’d like. “School studies open doors if you do well, but they don’t shut doors if you don’t,” says Danaher. “You might just take a different path.”

Career programs. Your high school may offer options for exploring careers while earning credit toward graduation. Some of these options also allow you to earn industry certifications, licensure, or college credit.

In her high school, for example, Sours attends a career academy for health and medical sciences. She is learning about [healthcare careers](#) and will have a chance to apply some of her skills and knowledge as she continues in the program. By graduation, she’ll have earned both certifications and credits toward an applied nursing degree program at the local community college.

Career academies and other types of technical education are available in many schools to provide hands-on career training. Classes in fields such as [business and finance](#), [culinary arts](#), and [information technology](#) are designed to prepare you for work or postsecondary school.



College prep. If you know your goal is college, school counselors usually recommend taking the most rigorous academic classes your school offers—and those that you can successfully handle. Doing so helps bolster both your college application credentials and your readiness for college-level study.

Some college-prep programs, such as Advanced Placement and dual enrollment, may help you get a head start on earning a postsecondary degree. Taking classes in these programs may allow you to waive some college course requirements, either by achieving a high score on exams or by completing a course for both high school and college credit.

Admission to college is not based on coursework alone, however. Not all high schools offer advanced academics programs, and not all students take them. You may still have more options than you think, depending on your career goals.

After high school

About [two-thirds of high school graduates from the class of 2013 enrolled in college](#) that fall, according to BLS: 42 percent in baccalaureate (4-year) colleges and 24 percent in 2-year schools. Of the remaining one-third of 2013 graduates, who opted not to go to college, 74 percent entered the labor force.

College-bound high school graduates may not know it, but BLS data show that [wages are usually higher, and unemployment rates lower](#), for people who continue their education after high school.

Associate's and bachelor's degree programs range from accounting to zoology. But job training and vocational school programs may offer the type of career preparation you need for the occupation that interests you.

Job training. If you get a job or enter the [military](#) directly out of high school, you'll receive training specific to the job. Some employers may even pay for you to get related credentials, such as industry certification.

The type and length of on-the-job training you get depends on the occupation. For example, [community health workers](#) typically need 1 month or less of experience on the job and informal training, in addition to a high school diploma, to become competent in the occupation.

[Apprenticeships](#) are a form of job training in which a sponsor, such as an employer, pays a trainee to learn and work in a particular occupation. Some jobs in the military include apprenticeship training, but others involve different types of hands-on learning.

Vocational school. Also known as trade or technical schools, vocational schools have programs designed to give you hands-on training in a specific field. Many of these programs lead to non-degree credentials, such as a [certificate](#) or diploma. Occupations that you can prepare for at these types of schools include [automotive mechanic](#) and [emergency medical technician](#) (EMT).

Some vocational schools specialize in a certain occupation or career field, such as [truck driving](#), [culinary arts](#), or [cosmetology](#). Others provide a diverse range of programs, such as [medical assisting](#) and [precision production](#).

Earning a certificate allows you to prepare for a career in a relatively short amount of time: Nearly all certificate programs take fewer than 2 years to complete. For example, you may earn a [nursing assistant](#) certificate in less than 1 year.

Associate’s degree. [Associate’s degrees](#), which may qualify you for occupations such as [dental hygienist](#) and [funeral services manager](#), are available through public community colleges and other 2-year schools.

But some 4-year schools also offer associate degrees that complement or lead into their bachelor’s degree programs.

Associate’s degrees are available in a variety of subject areas, but most degrees awarded in the past decade have been broadly focused. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), the [most popular fields of study for associate’s degree recipients](#) between 2001–02 and 2011–12 were liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities.

Earning an associate’s degree and then transferring to a bachelor’s degree program might make sense if you’re unsure of what you want to study. It also allows you to save money on tuition, because community colleges are usually less expensive than baccalaureate colleges and universities.

Bachelor’s degree. If you plan to get a bachelor’s degree, your school counselor can help you with the application processes for colleges and financial aid. But you should also have a plan for why you’re pursuing a degree.

A good initial step is to think about what you might like to major in. If you’ve been considering your career interests throughout high school, declaring a major won’t be difficult. “Your initial undergraduate program should be an outgrowth of your academic strengths in high school,” says Carter.

Still not sure what you want to study? Look at some studies. For example, [job opportunities](#) and [starting salaries](#) vary by college major. (See table.) Data may be helpful in narrowing your choices, but they shouldn’t be the sole determinant of your future. “Don’t let your decision be based on money alone,” says Hartline. “Find something you’re going to love to do.”



Average starting salaries for Class of 2014 college graduates, by major field of study

Major category	2014 average starting salary
See footnotes at end of table.	
Overall	\$48,707
Engineering	62,891
Computer science	62,103
Business	57,229
Communications	48,253
Math and sciences	44,299
Education	40,267
Humanities and social sciences	38,049

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers, September 2014 Salary survey

To keep your options open as you choose a major, school counselors suggest entering a liberal arts program. Take classes in a broad range of subjects to help you figure out what you like best—and where that might lead in your future.

Be flexible—and follow your dream

Everyone’s career path is different, and there is no “right” way to start a career. For example, if you want to postpone your studies to discover your passion, you might decide to take a “[gap year](#)” after high school. A gap year gives you a chance to pursue meaningful volunteer, work, or travel experiences. But school counselors recommend that you have a plan to ensure that your time off is productive.

Whatever career path you choose, says Schneider, remember that you can change your mind at any time. “There’s always the flexibility to shift course,” he says. “A career is not a life sentence. If at some point you realize, ‘I don’t want to do this,’ back up and ask yourself the same questions again: ‘What am I good at? What do I like to do?’”

And have the confidence to work toward your ideal career, school counselors say, even if it seems out of reach. “Put a plan together and go for it,” says Danaher, “even if everyone else says you’re crazy, or you’ll never make it. You may not make the NBA, but you might find a way to work within it doing work you really enjoy.”

For more information

Visit your public or school library for books and other resources about careers. The [BLS K–12 site](#) has a career exploration page that can help you match your interests with selected occupations. For detailed occupational profiles, see the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#).

Your state's [labor market information office](#) may have additional career tools and data specific to your area.

Other government career resources include

[My Next Move](#), which helps you identify careers by keyword, industry, or interests and training.

[YouthRules!](#), which provides information about federal and state employment rules to young workers and their parents, employers, and educators.

[Career One Stop](#), which has resources related to jobseeking and career exploration.

[StudentAid.gov](#), which can help you to prepare for—and fund—a college education.

Put forth your best you

It may seem early, but even in high school you can start to develop habits that are sure to be appreciated by future employers. “As a student, there are things you can do to get yourself college and work ready,” says career counselor Mark Danaher. For example, he says, students can develop good habits by getting to class on time, taking responsibility for their school work, and emailing a teacher if they’re going to be absent or late.

Also, students need to remember to dress and behave appropriately whenever they might be in contact with a potential employer. “You act one way with your friends and another on the jobsite,” says school counseling consultant Julie Hartline. “Mind your demeanor.”

This awareness extends to online forums, too. “There are a tremendous amount of positives to social media in terms of networking,” says director of college counseling Michael Carter. “But you have to be really careful.”

Employers and college admissions officers often check out applicants online and on social media sites. “They’re looking into your background and want to see who you’re going to be because you may represent a business or institution someday,” says Carter. “Make sure that what you put out there for the world to see is how you want to be seen. Social media is a great tool, but you have to use it responsibly.”

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