

ALTERNATIVES TO COLLEGE:

College may not be the right investment for every high school graduate. According to a January 2021 report from StudentLoanHero.com, there is an estimated \$1.71 trillion of outstanding student loan debt. The site also reported, in 2019, 69 percent of college students took out student loans, with the average student loan debt for Class of 2019 graduates at \$29,900. With more and more students tacking on the equivalent of an expensive car payment each month, parents and students alike should give serious consideration to college expenses before assuming it's the best life path for their kid. 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 System

There are many jobs that may only require vocational or skills training. The Oklahoma Career Tech System 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 www.okcareertech.org for information, locations and the Oklahoma Career Guide (<https://okcareerguide.kuder.com/landing-page>), an online tool offering assessments, occupation information, education plans and more.

Military

The U.S. military 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 he or she chooses, 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 www.schoolguides.com/the_military_helps_pay_for_college.html.

Other alternatives

The United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics provides an Occupation Outlook Handbook located online at www.bls.gov/ooh that provides information about many types of jobs and careers. A user 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 he or she wants to pursue and knows a college education is needed, parents can work out 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.