



Tips for talking about education & training



For school personnel, coaches, career counselors, and other “navigators” working with individuals to plan for post-high school education and training.

This document aims to provide those who support career and education seekers of any age with strategies, tactics, and language to more effectively advise those they serve. Resources to assist in these conversations with students can be found on page 8.

While this guide is a compilation of best practices, **there is no one-size-fits-all model for conversations around career and education planning.** It is important to know your audience and adapt this resource to best fit the needs of your students. Keep in mind that prospective **students should be in the driver’s seat** when making decisions about their future.

For many years, U.S. culture has emphasized two options for post-high school planning — college or work. In reality, there are **more than two** post-high school choices that can result in a successful and satisfying future.

It’s easy to default to using terms like “college,” “postsecondary” or “higher education” when talking broadly about education and training after high school. Despite an intent of speaking generally, **these phrases might not be relatable for everyone**, as they may hold negative connotations regarding time or financial investment.

Terms like “**credentials**” or “**education and training**” are more inclusive of all options and may help your audience approach the conversation with an open mind. It’s important to **know your audience** and use the term that works best for each individual.

Strategies at a glance

1. Empower with information

Empower students with information so they can choose a path that aligns with their values, goals, skills, and financial resources.

2. Consider the end goal

Focus on what opportunities participating in the education or training program will lead to. Don’t focus on education or training as the ultimate goal.

3. Reinforce the variety of education options

When promoting education and training after high school, college has historically been emphasized as the primary option. Instead, showcase the variety of credentials and program formats.

4. Highlight financial aid and support services

Students need to know that there are resources for navigating their options and paying for their education and training no matter what credential they pursue.

▶▶▶ Getting started: Common types of credentials

In alphabetical order

Apprenticeship

Apprenticeships combine paid, on-the-job training with classroom learning, allowing individuals to gain practical skills and knowledge in an occupation. They are offered by employers, often in partnership with an education provider, and can lead to professional licensure within an industry. Registered Apprenticeships are those that are verified to meet state and federal standards. Apprenticeships typically range from 1-6 years in length and are free to participants.



Certificate

Certificates show expertise in a subject or field and are offered at various education levels. They typically take between a few months and two years to complete, and are offered by different types of education and training providers.



Certification

Certifications are awarded by authoritative bodies and show ability to perform certain job skills. They typically involve passing an exam or meeting industry standards in a particular area. Certifications often must be renewed, can be revoked, and may offer paid learning.



Degree

Degrees are qualifications offered by colleges and universities. Common degree types include associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. Each represents progressively higher levels of academic depth and specialization.



- ▶ **Associate degree:** A “two-year” degree offered by community/undergraduate colleges, though completion time varies based on course load (~1-4 years). Students often commute or take online courses.
- ▶ **Bachelor’s degree:** A “four-year” degree offered by undergraduate colleges, though completion time varies based on course load (~4-6 years). Program delivery type (in-person, online, etc.) and residency requirements vary by college.
- ▶ **Masters’s degree:** Usually requires a bachelor’s degree. Program delivery type (in-person, online, etc.) and residency requirements vary by college. Typically takes 1-3 years.
- ▶ **Doctoral degree:** Highly specialized, may be research-based. Often in-person. May take around 4-9 years.

License

A license is a credential from a government agency or authorized group that gives legal permission to do a specific job. Licenses may require another credential in order to qualify, or completion of a training program and exam. They generally must be renewed and can be revoked.



Micro-Credential

A micro-credential typically represents ability in a specific skill or competency. They can usually be earned through short, targeted courses often completed in a few weeks or months. Digital badges are often considered a visual representation of a micro-credential. Micro-credentials are usually offered online.



When used in this document, “education and training” and “credentials” refer to all forms of post-high school education and training, and “students” refers to learners of any age or path — for consistency and brevity.

►►► Strategy 1: Empower with information

There is no correct formula for how someone should approach their education and training after high school. Someone will be most successful in an education and training program when they have access to information and guidance, they are interested in the outcome of the program, and they have encouragement from their support system/caregivers.

When speaking with students, it is helpful to acknowledge both the many credential options and the barriers that they may be facing. This will help set up a dialogue based on empathy and understanding.

Language to use and reconsider

Empower:

- ✓ “If you aren’t sure what to do after high school, or if the decision feels overwhelming to you, you’re not alone.”
- ✓ “Your path is your choice. What barriers to your goals can we address together?”
- ✓ “Let’s start with exploring what’s important to you, and what your goals might be.”

Impede:

- ✗ “It doesn’t matter what college you choose or what you major in, you just have to pick something and go.”
- ✗ “College isn’t worth the money or time.”
- ✗ “Your top priority should be figuring out how to make money.”

Tactics

- Provide data about actual program durations and post-completion pay specific to the program and region.
- Use testimonials from current and former students who have taken a similar path to what the student is considering, and/or have similar circumstances to the student. Avoid drawing direct comparisons.
- For those making a career change, acknowledge this difficult choice and affirm that there is financial and logistical support for making a change if they are ready.

Why this matters

- Students may feel pressure or judgment from family, friends, advisors, or society to pursue or not pursue a specific path. For example, they may be expected to take over the family business or be told that their grades are not suitable for a certain career.
- Working adults looking to upskill or change careers may believe it is too late to make a significant career change.
- Current students may have aspirations that require additional education and training, but they may be burned out on schooling. Empowering them with choice can help to get them reengaged and excited.

►►► Strategy 2: Consider the end goal

People continue their education and training for many reasons. While pay and availability of jobs are often a factor for prospective students, they should not be the only considerations. Try framing education and training after high school as the **means to their desired end**. Talk about **the value of credentials to “open doors”** to help them reach their goals. Shorter-term, more **tangible benefits of education and training often resonate well**. Here are some potential motivators:

- ▶ Get a well-paying job, which can help people afford to:
 - ▶ Pay off debt
 - ▶ Buy a house
 - ▶ Help support their family
 - ▶ Buy fun tech or recreation equipment
 - ▶ Go on vacation
- ▶ Start a business
- ▶ Have employer-covered health insurance
- ▶ Allow them to start a career or change a career
- ▶ Find fulfillment and meaning in their work
- ▶ Avoid unemployment, especially during hard times personally or nationally
- ▶ Increase the range of jobs they are eligible for

No matter their end goal, the message that “there is an education and training pathway that can fit within their life” is valuable and empowering.

Language to use and reconsider

Empower:

- ✔ “Gaining new skills through education and training will open doors, and keep them open.”
- ✔ “There is an education and training option that can fit into your life and will help you meet your goals.”

Impede:

- ✘ “You need a bachelor’s degree to get a good job with benefits.”
- ✘ “How much money you will make must be your main consideration.”

Tactics

- ▶ Frame education and training as a stepping stone or a means to an end rather than the goal itself.
- ▶ Be specific about what skills students will learn and how they will apply those skills in their desired career.
- ▶ Identify how an individual’s hobbies or interests can come together with their goals. For example, paths to climate change-related careers.
- ▶ Avoid overpromising about the results of a particular program or career path, but for context to inform their decision, provide information about post-program outcomes, such as completion rates, job placement, and salary levels.

Why this matters

- ▶ A student’s career or education and training plans may be informed by what they think they should be doing (i.e. attending college or working full time) rather than identifying the path that will support their goals.
- ▶ Students are motivated by different factors. Allowing them to explore their goals builds better buy-in to the path they choose.

►►► Strategy 3: Reinforce the variety of education options

Word choice matters when you talk to students about their post-high school options. **“Education and training”** can be used as a general term to describe the range of program options, including degree, certification, licensure, apprenticeships, and other education programs.

When people think about education and training after high school, a full-time 4-year on-campus college experience often comes to mind. Shifting the language used helps to communicate that there are many valuable programs available to someone, and that college is not the default. There are many paths that support the achievement of an individual’s definition of success in a career, and the language we use needs to reflect that reality.

Language to use and reconsider

Empower:

- ✓ “Are you considering education and training programs after high school?”
- ✓ “There are options that work for your learning style and match with your lifestyle.”
- ✓ “You can choose from options like certificates, certifications, apprenticeships, an associate degree, or a bachelor’s degree.”
- ✓ “You can stack short- and long-term credentials together to demonstrate the skill set you need to reach your goals.”

Impede:

- ✗ “Where are you applying to college?”
- ✗ “Education isn’t right for everyone. You should go to work after you graduate.”
- ✗ “A bachelor’s degree is the new high school diploma.”

Tactics

- Start the conversation with all education and training options on the table, don’t default to college.
- Showcase the variety of pathways and the potential benefits of each.
- Highlight how credentials can be stacked together to gain more value on the job market.

Why this matters

- Education and training options exist to fit a variety of schedules, budgets, interests, and abilities.
- Our word choice reinforces stereotypes and may communicate to individuals that they don’t fit in.
- With mixed public perception of the value of education and training, it is important for individuals to know that there are multiple pathways to success, and that choosing one today doesn’t close out an individual’s options for the future.
- Students are looking for an education and training program that fits their needs and meets their goals. Staying local might be important to one person, and helping people may rise to the top for another.

►►► Strategy 4: Highlight financial aid and support services

It is important to be empathetic with a student about the potential barriers of enrolling in education and training after high school, while informing them about the many financial aid and student support services available to help them.

Students need to know that **there are resources for paying for their education and training no matter what credential they pursue**. When students know that the cost of their credential is manageable, they gain the space to imagine and plan for their future.

Many individuals benefit from support from an experienced professional who can help break down financial and non-financial barriers. This could be a financial aid counselor, a career counselor, or someone with experience supporting students with disabilities. It is essential to make students and families aware of the myriad of support services and how to access them.

Language to use and reconsider

Empower:

- ✓ “There are professionals whose job it is to help you navigate your education and training. They can help uncover options for things like paying for credentials, or supporting your academics or wellbeing.”
- ✓ “No matter the program, there are options that can make the cost more manageable — through grants, scholarships, and other financial aid.”
- ✓ “There are support services available that are tailored to your unique circumstances.”

Impede:

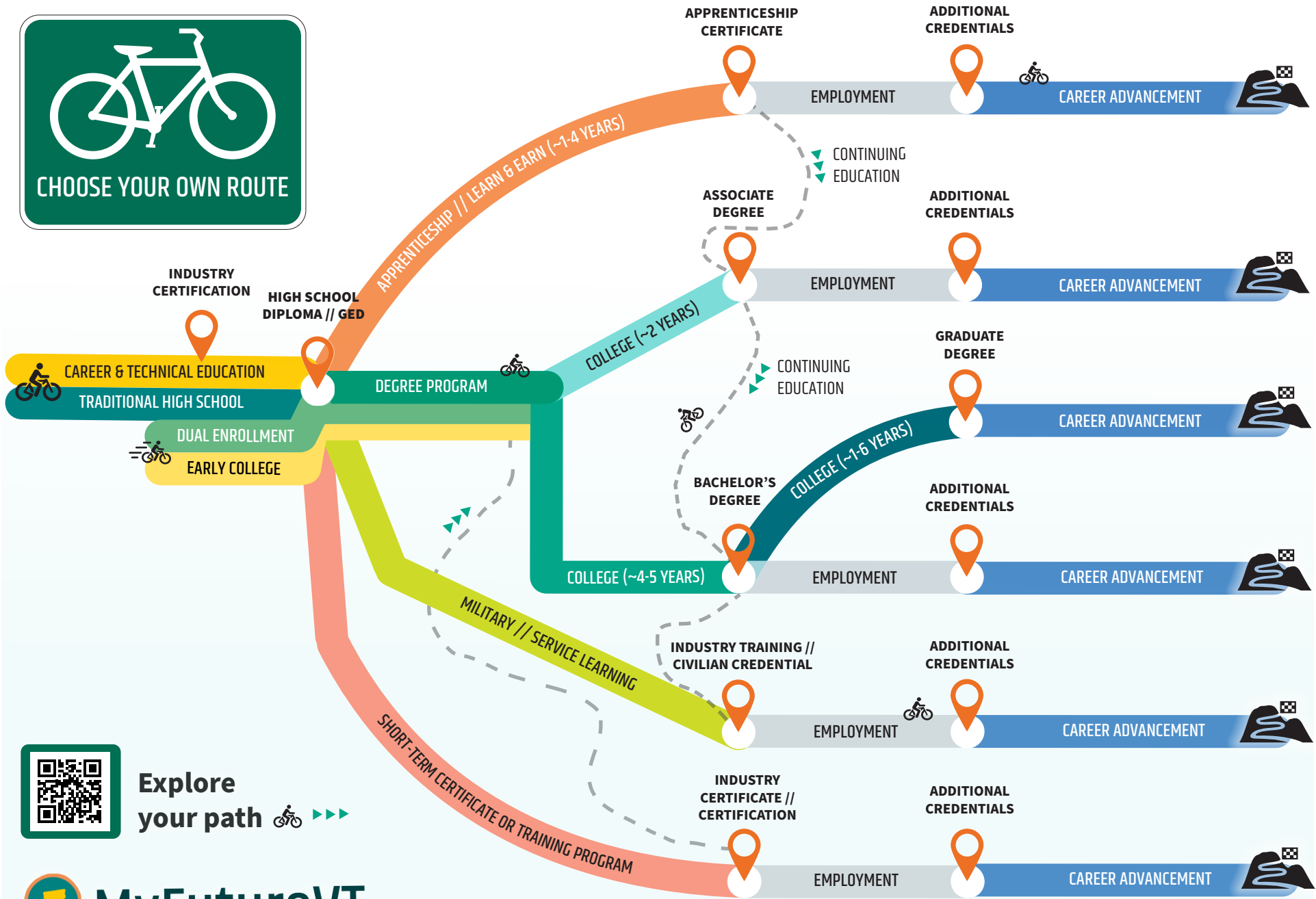
- ✗ “Others who are balancing busy lives are able to participate in this program with no problem.”
- ✗ “Don’t worry about the cost, it will be worth it in the end.”
- ✗ “If I can do it, then you should be able to as well.”

Tactics

- Reference student support. Financial aid (grants, scholarships, loans, military benefits, and employer paid tuition programs), career and education advising, transportation, childcare, and free tutoring all resonate with students because they address very specific barriers. See page 8 for student support resources.
- Frame financial aid support as making programs more manageable versus “affordable.”
- Avoid language that focuses on the financial cost being “worth it,” because it can make the program feel more expensive or out of reach than it really may

Why this matters

- It may be difficult for a student to receive advice or support from someone who also acts as an authority figure in their school — but students may not know that there are others they can look to for support.
- Resources to support students who are out of high school are dispersed across many different entities, making it difficult to know where to look for support.
- Individuals who are interested in education and training after high school but struggled with grades may not feel like they can succeed in additional education and training.



Explore your path  



▶▶▶ Resources to support students



[MyFutureVT](#) — Created by Advance Vermont, MyFutureVT is the state’s free online hub for career and education exploration.



[Vermont Student Assistance Corporation \(VSAC\)](#) — VSAC has helped students of all ages save, plan, and pay for college and career training since 1965.



[Navigator Toolkit](#) — A resource that compiles tools useful for individuals who support career and education seekers.



[Financial Aid Overview](#) — A comprehensive guide by VSAC that reviews different financial aid types, where to find them, and how to apply for them.



[Careers](#) — Tools for getting started on career exploration.



[Education Professional Resources](#) — VSAC’s resources for educational professionals working with middle and high school students.



[Education](#) — Tips for getting started with finding the right education or training program.



[Support Services](#) — An overview of support services available to adults and high school students.

This document is the result of a collaboration between VSAC and Advance Vermont.

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[Vermont’s Most Promising Jobs Brochure](#)
Produced by the McClure Foundation and the Vermont Department of Labor, this brochure showcases over 50 promising jobs projected for the state. Each pays above the state median wage and is expected to have at least 500 openings over the next 10 years.