



About to Graduate from High School? **CONSIDER CAREER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES**

GETTING A SOUND EDUCATION IS

important to your ability to make a good living in a field that you will enjoy. For many students graduating from high school that includes high quality career technical (or vocational) education tailored to a specific job. In California, such programs are available in a wide range of fields, from healthcare to the building trades, from firefighting to computer technology.

Both public and private institutions offer career tech programs. Many high schools allow students in their junior and senior years to take courses at institutions outside of the high school—such as regional occupational centers and community colleges—where they can continue their training after they graduate. This Q&A largely focuses on career tech opportunities available after high school and how to evaluate them.

Who can help me decide which career technical program to choose?

Go to the career center at your high school or community college and talk to a guidance counselor. Or talk to the principal or a teacher to find out who can help you. Ask your counselor how to access a career interest survey and online career research systems. Ask for career guides that explain what different jobs involve.

An online resource sponsored by the financial aid industry, Mapping Your Future (www.mapping-your-future.org), can guide you through thinking about what kinds of jobs would appeal to you based on your skills, talents, interests, and values. If you don't have access to the Internet, use a computer at your local library.

When considering a future career, make sure you understand what the job is really like so you do not waste both your time and your money. Often the best way is to ask people who are working in that field. Carefully research expected wages and benefits and compare these to other occupations you may be considering. Make sure you understand all the training and certifications required to be successful in any career you choose. (For example, increasingly automotive training certification is a condition of employment, especially in auto dealerships.) Find out if you must pass a state exam.

In addition, try to determine if there are chances to advance with more training, such as from a beginning tradesperson to a

journeyman. Often a career tech program can be a steppingstone to a higher-skilled job. For example, someone could first become a licensed vocational nurse, then a registered nurse, and then a nurse practitioner. If you might be interested in running your own business at some point, see if your chosen field provides such opportunities.

How do I find out which skills employers are likely to need in the future?

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes an Occupational Outlook Handbook that discusses which type of jobs are likely to be most in demand. You can download this handbook for free at www.bls.gov/oco. The 2004–05 handbook says that computer and health-care occupations are expected to grow the fastest from 2002 to 2012.

Another resource is the Occupational Information Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. This online resource contains a wealth of information on jobs. You can find it at: www.onetcenter.org

What kinds of background skills or knowledge do I need?

Many career tech programs require a high school diploma or equivalent and the ability to read well. To be successful in some of these programs, you may also need to be able to write clearly and use problem-solving math skills, including those taught in algebra. Doing well in high school makes





the transition to a career tech program much easier. However, if you are lacking in particular skills or knowledge, you can take advantage of adult education courses offered through your local school district, community college, or nonprofit agency.

If you are still a junior or senior in high school, find out if your school or local community college offers a “2+2” or “Tech Prep” program. These increasingly popular programs combine two years of high school where your studies are focused on a particular career with two years after high school at a community college or other tech program.

Who offers career and technical courses and programs?

Many courses and programs are publicly funded. These include offerings at community colleges throughout California (go to www.cccco.edu for a list of colleges) and the 74 state-funded regional occupational centers and programs (ROCPs). (Go to www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/rp/quickref.asp for a listing.) Most ROCPs offer some courses to adults. In addition, there are federally funded programs; programs run by nonprofits; numerous privately run, for-profit schools or vocational “colleges,” and apprenticeship programs through the building trades and other occupations. For information on apprenticeships, go to: www.dir.ca.gov/das

The California Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education’s website (www.bppve.ca.gov) has a search engine that allows you to search for private schools based on location, the type of program, or the school name (or partial name). You can combine the type of program with the city to find out, for example, the names of schools offering computer technician programs in

Modesto. Go to the website and click on “Directory of Institutions” in the sidebar.

How do I know if a program is right for me?

Before enrolling in a program, do some homework.

To begin with, know your options:

- Compare programs. If you are thinking of a private technical school, consider if a similar program for no cost or less money is available at a regional occupational center or public community college or if local labor unions or businesses offer apprenticeship programs or on-the-job training. Also ask the community college or ROCP counselor how easy it is to get the classes. Sometimes more popular programs fill up fast, and it might take you longer to get your certificate or degree than if you paid more for a private program.
- Consider your life situation. Do you need to support yourself or a family while you are going to school? If so, ask the admissions officer what help the school offers working families. For example, does the school provide on-site childcare? Does it offer flexibility in class times? Can you attend part-time? Does the school offer paid internships?

Know what you are getting:

- Ask the school admissions officer what you will get when you graduate—an industry-based certificate or eligibility for on-the-job experience? Will the school help you find a job or a hands-on training opportunity?
- Are course credits you earn at the school transferable to two- or four-year colleges

and universities? Always check with a guidance counselor in advance to determine if the credit is transferable to other schools.

- Find out from the admissions officer as much as you can about the school's facilities—whether the technology is up to date and what supplies and tools you as a student must purchase on your own.
- The admissions officer can also tell you how much the program is going to cost and if books, equipment, and uniforms are included in the overall fee. See if the school provides financial assistance. If the school makes loans, talk to the student financial aid officer to find out the terms for paying back the loans, including the time period and interest rate.
- Ask the admissions officer about the instructors' educational and technical qualifications and the size of classes.
- The admissions officer can also tell you about the program's success rate. Ask what percent of students complete the program. (A high dropout rate means many students found the program unsatisfactory.) How many graduates find jobs in their chosen field? What was their average starting salary?

Talk to people:

- Visit the school. Look at the classrooms, labs, and workshops. Sit in on a class. Are the students engaged? Is the teacher interesting? Talk to the teacher after class. Does he or she appear to be knowledgeable and have recent real-world experience?
- Ask the admissions officer for a list of employers of recent graduates. Ask the employers if they think the graduates they have hired were well prepared for the job.

Ask if the connections between the school and the industry or business are good.

Check the school's standing in the community:

- Ask the school's director or admissions officer for the names and phone numbers of the school's licensing and accrediting organizations. Check with these organizations to see if the school is up to date on its license and accreditation and is in good standing.
- Check the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org), the California Department of Consumer Affairs (www.dca.ca.gov), and the Bureau for Private Postsecondary & Vocational Education (www.bppve.ca.gov) to see if any complaints have been filed against the school. To check on community colleges, go to: www.accjc.org

How do I know if a public program is a quality one?

A legitimate school is usually "accredited," which means that an independent organization has determined that the school has met or exceeded stated criteria of educational quality.

Community colleges are accredited by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). WASC determines if the school has met its quality standards and whether it has sufficient funds now and in the future.

About 40% of the state-funded regional occupational centers and programs are also accredited through WASC. In addition, all ROCP courses are state-certified, and ROCP instructors are required to have five years of recent verified industry experience in the occupational area they teach. Students who

Which community college should I choose?

Many people live close to more than one community college so they have a choice of where they can go to school. First and foremost, it is important to see which school offers the most complete program in the career of your choice. But if the programs seem similar, it might help to see what the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges thinks of each institution.

If you go to the commission's website, www.accjc.org, you will see blue buttons on the left of the home page. Click on "Directory of Colleges Accredited by ACCJC." If the college is in bold, that indicates the institution is in serious trouble. However, some colleges still have some problems noted by the ACCJC that are not serious enough to warrant putting them in bold. If you click the blue buttons "Most Recent Commission Actions" and "Our Newsletter," you will find out if the community college you are considering has any less serious accreditation problems. If the institution does not act on settling these less serious issues, it could face loss of accreditation in the future. Fortunately, any credits you earn while attending an accredited public community college in California will be transferable to other state colleges and universities if the school loses its accreditation.

In addition, if you are considering transferring to a four-year university, each community college has transfer agreements with specific universities. Find out which community colleges have these agreements with the university you are considering.

finish their training receive certificates of completion typically indicating the competencies each student has mastered. Depending on the course, students may also receive industry certification that is recognized regionally, statewide, or nationally. In many cases, an ROCP course fulfills prerequisite requirements for a community college course or can count as college credit. ROCPs provide reports on their programs to their local governing boards, which oversee them. Check with your local ROCP to find out if it is WASC-accredited, offers industry certification, and has courses that are recognized by the local community college.

How do I know if private schools are legitimate?

Private schools can obtain accreditation from organizations that monitor educational quality. The California Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (www.bppve.ca.gov or **1-916-445-3427**) regulates approximately 1,800 privately operated vocational schools in the state. It establishes minimum standards for instructional quality and the stability of the school. The U.S. Department of Education at www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation also has a database of accredited academic institutions.

Another way to determine if a school is legitimate is to call the registrar of a local college or university and ask if it would accept transfer credits from the school you are considering. Your high school guidance counselor, principal, or teachers may also be able

to tell you which accrediting bodies have worthy standards and which schools that are not accredited are still considered legitimate.

Sometimes institutions—labeled “diploma mills” by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)—will claim to be accredited; but their accreditation is from a bogus though official-sounding agency that they have created. Often they will choose a name that is similar to a legitimate school and may even have a web address that ends with “edu.”

The FTC lists the following telltale signs of a diploma mill:

- It offers a degree based on experience with no studies and no exams.
- Attendance is not required (though legitimate courses are offered by accredited institutions over the Internet).
- There is a flat fee for a degree. Legitimate colleges charge by the credit, course, or semester.
- There is no waiting. If an ad promises that you can earn a degree very quickly, it's probably a diploma mill, the FTC says.
- Aggressive sales tactics, such as “click here to order now,” or advertising through spam or pop-ups often indicate a diploma mill.

How much do these programs cost? Is there any scholarship or other funding available?

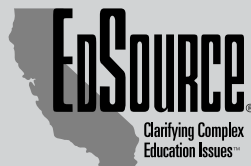
The costs vary significantly, but thousands of scholarships are available for post-

secondary training and education. Some services offer information about such scholarships for a fee. Check with your school guidance counselor or local librarian for free information about current scholarships before you pay someone for similar scholarship lists. For information on federal loans, go to the website of the U.S. Department of Education at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/> or call **1-800-4-FEDAID**.

The state offers Cal Grants to assist with tuition and training costs at vocational programs. To qualify, graduating high school seniors need to have at least a 2.0 grade-point average (GPA) and meet financial and other requirements, including filing an application on time. You also must enroll in a vocational program that is at least four months long at a California community or independent college or vocational school. Funding is available for up to two years. For more information, go to the Student Aid Commission's website, www.calgrants.org, or call **1-888-224-7268**.

However, there is “grant money” that you don't want to pursue. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), scam artists often run advertisements for “guaranteed free grant money” if you pay a “processing fee.” Legitimate grant applications are available for free, and no genuine grant is guaranteed before it is processed. ☐☐

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