

Time to Change How Students Choose Their College



As a society, the traditional way students and their parents have gone about choosing a college has been backwards for far too long.

It's time to [flip the college decision-making process](#) and promote that students become career-focused at an earlier age. This one basic shift in attitude, followed by action, will pay dividends for students, their families, and our country.

Choosing which college to attend can be one of the most consequential decisions a student can make. Yet when counselors and advisors speak about "right fit," that usually refers to whether it is in an urban area or a small town, or if it's a large versus small campus. Students may pick a college because it's a parent's alma mater or where their best friend is going.

Too many families still believe that their son or daughter will determine which career to pursue during their time in college. Perhaps that delayed decision making was an option in another era, but beginning with the recession of 2008, the playing field for entry-level employees has changed. Getting a foothold on the career ladder is now more challenging.

Every semester in college and every class taken is precious. To maximize their return on investment, students need to focus their time on the acquisition of the knowledge and the skills required to be competitive in their chosen career path. To wait until one's junior or senior year in college to figure out which career path to jump on is naïve and costly—in tuition paid while taking unfocused courses and in earnings lost to delayed workforce entry.

As a result of delayed career decision making, too many students graduate from college lacking the practical skills and experience to find jobs in their degree field. This underemployment has economic consequences for young people. For example, 2014 data showed that [44 percent of recent college graduates were working in jobs requiring no post-secondary education](#), and that trend has continued.

A Paradigm Shift is Needed

We need to change the way we think about college, and the paradigm shift needs to start before students step onto a college campus. Instead of focusing students on which college to attend with little discussion of major and career choice, high schools should make career exploration and planning paramount in the post-secondary decision-making process. Any discussion of “right fit” should center on considerations related to major and certification opportunities for a carefully chosen career path before settling on a college choice.

High schools devote a lot of time to the college application process and standardized test preparation. Conversely, very little time is spent determining what students want to do after college, which contributes to [low post-secondary completion rates](#). How? Well, most students graduating from high school have no clue what type of work they want to pursue as an adult. Yet [research from the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy](#) shows that students who enter a program of study in their first year of college are twice as likely to complete as students who enter a program after their first year.

Students are able to avoid being overwhelmed by the maze of choices when they enter college with a clear educational path built on carefully chosen career goals. If more time is spent in high school learning about what they want to do after they finish their education and what is needed to qualify for a job in that field, students will enter college with an informed, declared major. Having an informed major in their sights means they will be twice as likely to take the right classes and graduate from college, according to a report by the [California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office](#).

How can that goal become a reality?

- ◆ Give high school students the time to thoroughly study career paths that match their aptitudes, personalities, and lifestyle goals with a classroom-based comprehensive guidance course.
- ◆ Once students identify a career goal to focus on, they are better able to choose which major would be best for them to pursue.
- ◆ With that information, the college choice is narrowed to those schools with the best programs for their major.

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A Program to Support the Paradigm Shift

A career-focused, educational planning model that supports this paradigm shift is already being employed in over 450 high schools around the nation by the nonprofit Get Focused Stay Focused National Resource Center. [The Get Focused...Stay Focused!](#)[®] program prioritizes teaching all students how to start planning for a career and a desired lifestyle early in secondary school. This [whole-school program](#) guides students through a crucial self-discovery process that spans their high school years and transforms them into self-motivated learners with a plan to be economically self-sufficient.

This career-focused program starts with students in the eighth or ninth grade who enroll in a semester or yearlong freshman transition course based on the [Freshman Transition Standards](#) from The George Washington University's Freshman Transition Initiative. During that class, students begin the process of answering these fundamental questions: Who am I? What do I want? and How do I get it? These three questions drive [the curriculum](#), making it relevant, rigorous, and effective at increasing engagement and motivation.

The freshman course teaches a systematic process for quantifying and analyzing life-defining choices while offering opportunities to integrate English, math, and online skills. As they complete the coursework, students gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to successfully examine their own lives, evaluate a wide range of education and training options, explore the consequences of not completing their education, foster a growth mindset, and establish researched career and life goals.

As the culminating project of the freshman course, students develop an individualized, [online 10-year plan](#) that charts the journey through high school and post-secondary education or training and into the workforce. When students have a plan of their own design—rather than a canned plan resulting from an online survey—their motivation to succeed increases.

Because this rigorous course is taught on many college campuses, a number of the high schools are able to offer dual credit for this Get Focused...Stay Focused![®] coursework. Participation in dual credit opportunities not only allows students to make strides toward a degree while still in high school but also increases their self-efficacy as a student capable of college-level work.

Students [revisit their 10-year plans in their academic classes during the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades](#) using follow-up modules to:

- ◆ Expand their career and education options
- ◆ Learn the process for selecting and applying to post-secondary education or training
- ◆ Create a skills-based education plan

Students' evolving online 10-year plans can then be used as a tool to inform instructors' advisory and [academic coaching](#) functions, continually motivating students to graduate and reach the goals that will lead to an economically self-sufficient adulthood. When counseling sessions start with a review of each student's 10-year plan, the advice provided can be more substantial, direct, and focused on long-term success.

Helping Students Prepare for College and Careers

Educators teaching and administering this career-focused program say [this approach to learning has allowed students to discover the importance of planning for a career](#) before choosing a major or even going down a different path.

"It's not a straight path from high school to career," said Gina Sanders, a Get Focused...Stay Focused!® educator at McDade High School in McDade, Texas. *"Some kids aren't meant for college and they might want to explore something else, but they won't know unless they start learning how to do research, which is something that we afford them with this program."*

Haylee Cochran, who experienced the Get Focused...Stay Focused!® program at Indio High School in Indio, California, before graduating in 2014, said she continues to use the information she learned in the career-focused freshman course today:

"I have always been terrible at planning my life out, but after having that class and then finally being out in the open world seeing things hands-on has really opened my eyes to how important planning is. Now, before I even make a decision, I always ask myself, 'Would this be smart?' or 'How effective would this be in my life for the future?'"

Diego Ochoa, former superintendent at Esparto Unified School District in California, said a career-focused course, like the one provided with Get Focused...Stay Focused!®, has helped students prepare for college and their careers much better than placing a priority on testing. According to Ochoa:

"The purpose of the program is to facilitate a future for students in a way that places them at a higher priority than any number the school is going to achieve by giving tests to students, and that subtle change is very meaningful for parents and for students."

For the sake of our students and their future, we can't afford to get it backwards any longer. [Flipping the college decision-making paradigm](#) to highlight career-focused post-secondary education will allow students to understand and plan for the most direct route to a self-sufficient future.

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About the Author

Dawn O'Bar is board president of the Get Focused Stay Focused National Resource Center, a nonprofit organization promoting high school graduation, post-secondary completion, and successful, skilled entry into the workforce. She is also an adjunct professor at Westmont College. Prior to her work with Get Focused Stay Focused, Dawn was president of Unite to Light, an international nonprofit organization.