



## Pathfinder Guide and Checklist

# Can a checklist really help you start your career journey? Yes—here's how

To help you pursue quality postsecondary training pathways, we created a guide below. This guide helps you move from thinking about job opportunities to planning for a thriving career by preparing you for success and empowering you to chart your own unique journey.

# Overview/notes:

The choice of an education-to-career pathway is a critical step in career navigation. This Pathfinder Guide and Checklist outlines criteria for evaluating and assessing a quality opportunity or pathway.

- The rubric provides you with topics to consider when researching and selecting education-to-career pathways (nondegree programs)
- Plus reflection questions to help guide you through your decisions

This Pathfinder Guide and Checklist is intended for students, but it can also be used by counselors, teachers, parents, and other decision influencers to help their learners with their career journeys.





# Welcome!

This Pathfinder Guide and Checklist will help you understand and select the best education-to-career pathway to begin a successful career journey—whether you’re in the process of completing or have already earned a high school diploma. Almost all careers require some education or training after high school. A degree is one post-secondary option, but there are many others, so it’s important to find the postsecondary or training program that’s the right fit for you.

## Before you start...

- Select a career interest(s)
- Match each career interest to a postsecondary training program
- Use the pathfinder guide to:
  - Review and consider—does it seem like a good fit?
  - Confirm—take time to reflect before deciding!

As you move through the Pathfinder Guide and Checklist you will be prompted to use the four key building blocks for evaluating education-to-career pathway programs:



What, how, and when will I learn?



How will I afford training?



When will I start working and earning in my field?



How might this program position me for career success?

# Ready to get started? Let's go!

## 1. Explore your interests

A career interest can be a specific occupation such as physical therapist or an industry area such as health care or health science. It's perfectly fine to not yet know or be sure of your career interests. Here are some tips:

- Reflect first: Think about what you enjoy, what gives you a sense of accomplishment, what makes you curious, and what others tell you you're good at. Career interest ideas can come from:
  - Your favorite classes, extracurriculars, or hobbies.
  - Direct experiences you've had with the world of work through a job, volunteer position, or community service.
  - Talking with trusted adults and professionals about their career paths. You can do this at a career fair, workplace tour, job shadow, or guest speaker event, or even ask a family member or neighbor.
- Then explore:
  - Use one of the many helpful and free online tools that can help you match with career interests. ASA's [Futurescape](#) and [EvolveMe](#) are two platforms to check out! Ask a trusted person who has found their career interest which one they recommend.
  - Start or continue to talk with trusted adults or your peers about how they chose their career path. How did they know it was right for them? Do they plan to stay in their current career or consider other options, and why?

For every career interest you identify, you'll record it under Step I.

## 2. Match career interest with postsecondary training programs

Remember, almost all careers require some education or training after high school. What's important is to identify a postsecondary training program that aligns with the career interest you've selected. It's OK to have more than one career interest, but for each, you are looking for a program or training opportunity that will give you a credential that tells employers you are qualified to become their employee.

Here are some tips for finding postsecondary training programs:

- **Connect to who you know.** Starting with a guidance counselor or another trusted adult is a great way to get firsthand information on programs that may match your interest. They are there to support you, and if they don't know the answers to your questions themselves, they can help you find them or recommend the best person to ask, such as a professional in that career or a young person like yourself

who has successfully begun to pursue the same or similar career interest.

- **Continue to explore online.** Try to find as many answers as you can by looking at the program information online or via its brochure. Keep using free online tools—some examples include:
  - [My Next Move](#), from the U.S. Department of Labor. Each career has an Education section where you can search by type of postsecondary option: Training, Certifications, Licenses, and Apprenticeships programs.
  - [Career Village](#), where you can get free personalized career advice and ask about postsecondary training programs from real-life professionals.
  - [One Degree](#), which provides free online tools to help you find low-cost or free resources (which we call *opportunities*) in a variety of locations across the United States (nine counties of the Bay Area; Los Angeles County; Southwest New Mexico (Grant, Hidalgo, and Catron Counties);
- **Keep connecting.** You will most likely need to continue getting advice and support from a guidance counselor or other professional. Keep them updated, ask them questions, and follow up with them on the next steps you plan to take. If you are interested in connecting with a mentor virtually, please go to EvolveMeTM and search for UStrive.

For every postsecondary training program you identify, record it under Step I.

### 3. Review and compare using the pathways guide checklist tool

Now, for each postsecondary training program you want to consider, complete the four-part checklist tool below. Note that:

- Words or terms that may not be familiar are in red and defined in the glossary.
- Reflection questions are included for your consideration.
- It's OK if you don't have all the information needed for the checklist. Complete as much as you can. If you need assistance, consider reaching out via email or schedule a virtual or in-person conversation with a representative of the program you're interested in or an employer that the program is designed to target (see Step III below).

### 4. Confirm fit

- After completing Steps I through III, reflect on Step IV: Based on all the information you have, do you feel it will lead you to the career you are interested in pursuing?
- If none of the programs you examined through the checklist are a fit, don't worry. Take time to find others—spending more time now can save you time and resources later!

## STEP 1: Identifying a Postsecondary Training/Program

Each time you use the pathway guide, record the career interest you're focused on, the specific postsecondary training program you're assessing, and when possible, an organization or company that has hired employees from the program.

Career Interest	<i>Ex: Information Technology</i>
	Your answer:
Postsecondary Training Program (list at least one)	<i>Ex. Cloud Credential Council</i>
	Your answer:
Company or organization that hires employees from the program (ask the program to share this information—you may need to wait to complete this during Step III)	<i>Ex. Prudential</i>
	Your answer:

Now, indicate if you agree with the following statements about the career interest and postsecondary training program, you'll be considering using the checklist. If you aren't sure of an answer, select maybe.

1. Understanding				
Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
				I have considered different career interests and am confident I have selected at least one that I can envision myself pursuing.
				I understand that this checklist will help me assess at least one program that will provide me with the skills and training I need to be successful in my chosen career.
				I know what post-secondary training program fits best with how I would like to complete my education and training.
				I am fully aware of postsecondary training program expectations and am prepared to succeed.

## STEP 2: POSTSECONDARY TRAINING PROGRAM INFORMATION

Indicate if you agree with the following statements. If you aren't sure of an answer, select maybe.

Self				
Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
				The program is connected to a career interest I have or want to investigate.
				The knowledge and skills the program teaches are interesting to me.
				I am in Career and Technical Education (CTE) or a Career Pathways program or Academy that relates to the program.
				If yes: The experience has created or enhanced my interest in this field. If no: Not to worry! That doesn't mean the program is not a good fit. Keep going through the checklist.
				I have done/am doing <a href="#">Work-based Learning (WBL)</a> that relates to the program (e.g., job shadow, worksite tour, internship, informational interview).
				If yes: The experience has created or enhanced my interest in this field. If no: Not to worry! That doesn't mean the program is not a good fit. Keep going through the checklist.

### Entrance Requirements

Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
				By the time I graduate high school, I will meet all of the program's <b>entry requirements</b> (e.g., age, background check, prerequisites, immunizations).



### What, How, and When Will I Learn?

#### Structure and Logistics

Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
				The length of the program works for me (i.e., the number of weeks, months, or years)—not too short, not too long.
				The program schedule works for me (i.e., the days and times it meets, and the length of classes don't conflict with other commitments such as a job).
				The program's type of learning works for me (i.e., lecture, hands on, a mixture, online [asynchronous and synchronous], self-directed learning)
				The program location works for me, including the location of any placements for internships and clinicals (i.e., it's not too far, or I can get to it by public transportation or car).



## How Will I Afford It?

### COST: Financial Requirements/Financial Assistance

				I am knowledgeable about my financial aid options and have the guidance and direction to learn how to pay for or cover the cost of my postsecondary training.
				The total cost of the program (tuition, fees, books, supplies, etc.) is manageable for me and my family.
				There is financial aid that I'm eligible for (e.g., loans, grants, scholarships).
				If applicable: The average loan debt (the amount of money you'd have to borrow through a loan to afford the program) seems manageable to me. I could pay it back in reasonable amounts per month and in a reasonable amount of time.

### Rigor/Work Ethic

				I have the drive to learn and the work ethic needed to stay motivated and complete the program.
				I have some of the skills needed to succeed in the program (i.e., technical skills and durable skills such as communication and problem-solving)—and if I don't yet, I will put in the hard work to learn them.
				If you will work while in school or in a training program: I will have the time and energy to work while I'm in the program without hurting my grades/ performance or chances of completing.

### Support Services

				The program provides strong support services, either directly or through referrals, to help students like me complete the program (e.g., technology support, tutoring, transportation, child care assistance, counseling).
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## When will I start working and earning in my field?

### Time to Hire

				The program places learners with employers from the moment they start training (as with apprenticeships).
				The program offers job placement immediately upon training program completion (as with programs designed as training for specific employers).
				The program offers assistance with job placement, but I am ultimately responsible for finding a job at some point after program completion.





## How Might This Program Position Me for Career Success?

### Success indicators: Return on Investment/Outcomes

*Note: Answers for this section may require a phone or email inquiry directly to the program.*

				<p>The program's completion or graduation rate is solid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 65% for a certificate or job training program</li> <li>• At least 55% for an associate's degree program</li> </ul>
				At least 75% of program graduates get jobs in a related field.
				The program representative (coordinator, director, etc.) can name more than one employer (company or organization) in the region or city that has hired program graduates in the past one to two years.
				The program contact can provide the average starting wage for program graduates.
				<p>The program results in in one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Industry-Recognized Credentials:</b> Employers rely on credentials (often included in job postings) to validate that a jobseeker brings certain in-demand skills well-aligned with the job they want to enter into.</li> <li>• <b>College Credit:</b> Earning college credit outside the boundaries of a traditional four-year degree program can both signal advanced skills to employers and give learners a valuable leg up should they one day pursue a degree.</li> <li>• <b>Stackability:</b> Some programs and credentials prepare learners for shorter term credentials that provide clear labor market value and on which they can then "stack" additional training to open doors into more advanced careers with significant potential for economic mobility. Nursing is an example of a program with stackability.</li> </ul>
<b>Employer Engagement</b>				
				Perspective employers that hire directly from the program offer a clear path to advancement.
				Employers inform the program's design and implementation.

## STEP 3: CAREER READINESS/PLACEMENT

Indicate if you agree with the following statements. If you aren't sure of an answer, select maybe. Copy the name of the company or organization that you identified under Step I.

*Note: To get answers to these questions, you may want to schedule an informational interview with a current employee, if that is an option.*

Name of Company / Organization				Example: Prudential
Position or Occupation Title				Example: Data Analytics and Management
<b>SOCIETY LENS: What the world needs that connects to your career interests</b>				
Yes	No	Maybe	N/A	
				<p>I think this work will benefit or add to society.</p> <p>Reflect on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In what ways?</li> <li>Why or how is that meaningful to you?</li> </ul>
<b>SELF LENS: What you're good at, what you love, what you want to learn</b>				
				<p>I think I would enjoy working in the occupation.</p> <p>Reflect on:</p> <p>Why? Why not?</p>
				The occupation's typical work schedule, lifestyle, and environment (e.g., virtual, outdoors, physical work/desk work) would probably work for me.
<b>SECURITY LENS: What you can get paid to afford the lifestyle you want</b>				
<b>i. Wages</b>				
				Employer(s) describes a typical entry wage that is enough for me to live comfortably (to pay all my bills on time, including any loans I may have, and have some money left over).
<b>ii. Advancement Opportunities: Career Ladder</b>				
				The occupation I researched has a well-defined career ladder (opportunities to move up to higher paying jobs), or it helps me to build skills that can transfer to different occupations.
<b>iii. Hiring Practices / Requirements</b>				
				Employer(s) will hire recent program graduates with little or no work experience in this industry.
				The typical requirements for applying to the job (e.g., background check, drug testing, skills testing, etc.) will not be a problem for me.
				Employer(s) will hire people with the credential (e.g., certificate, certification, associate's degree) offered by the postsecondary program I researched.

iv. Projected Openings			
			Employers I researched or interviewed are currently hiring for this work or expect to do so in the next year.
			Other employers in the region are currently hiring for this work, or they will likely hire the same number of or more people for this work in the next few years.



## STEP 4: SUMMARY

Is the program you explored a good fit?

Please check off and fill in the one box below that best describes your decision on the postsecondary, job training, or apprenticeship program you explored.

Reflect on the following questions as you make your decision:

1. Is this program designed to meet the needs of employers? For example, do employers know about/ mention/like the program? Does the program teach the professional and technical skills employers seek?
2. Does the program have a track record of placing graduates/completers in jobs in the industry (or a related industry)?
3. Is this training program accessible to you in terms of cost, distance, and skill level? Are students likely to succeed in this program? Does it have a track record of supporting and graduating students like you?
4. Are students likely to succeed in this program? Does it have a track record of supporting and graduating students like you?
5. Is the occupation the program prepares you to work in a good fit for you?
6. Do employers think there will be jobs available to you when you graduate from the program?

This program <b>is</b> a good fit for the following reasons:	This program <b>may be</b> a good fit if I do the following (for example, work on improving my math or writing skills, get help with child care, move to a place closer to the program, take advantage of tutoring services, or take part in study groups, making sure to ask for help when I need it):	This program is <b>not</b> a good fit for the following reasons:

## YOU DID IT!

There's a lot to consider, but you created a checklist in the Pathway Guide and are well-informed about whether the postsecondary training option you considered is a good fit for your great interest. Remember, if you have another program to compare, start the checklist again.

# Glossary

## CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING

### Postsecondary training program

A postsecondary program is an educational program for students who have earned their high school diploma or equivalent and are looking for education/training beyond that level, often to prepare them for a career. These programs are offered by a range of schools/institutions/organizations, including two-year colleges (community colleges), four-year colleges and universities, as well as trade schools, apprenticeships, vocational schools, institutes of technology, the military, and nonprofit organizations.

### Career and Technical Education (CTE)

CTE is a broad term for education that combines academic and technical skills with the knowledge and training needed to succeed in today's labor market. CTE prepares students for the world of work by introducing them to workplace competencies in a real-world, applied context. CTE programs cover health sciences, engineering, entrepreneurship, computer science, sustainable agriculture, theater arts production, media, culinary arts, and many other fields. ([Ed Northwest](#))

### Career pathway program or academy

Career pathway programs help high school students gain secondary and postsecondary education, training, and support services while they acquire marketable skills, industry-recognized credentials, and eventually good jobs. Career pathway systems combine rigorous academics with workplace experience using the latest technologies.

Career academies are organized around such themes as health sciences, law, business and finance, and engineering. Typically, academy students take classes together, remain with the same group of teachers over time, follow a curriculum that includes rigorous academic courses as well as career-oriented courses, and participate in WBL activities. ([MDRC](#))

### Work-based learning (WBL)

WBL, or a career-connected or work related experience like an internship or pre-apprenticeship allow students to explore their career goals, abilities, and interests while applying their academic and technical knowledge and skills in a real-world context. These experiences are planned and supervised by instructional staff in collaboration with business, industry, or community partners.

- Early WBL typically happens in a school or educational setting and includes guest speakers, career fairs, career days, and real-world project-based learning.
- Intermediate WBL typically happens at a worksite and includes worksite tours or field trips, job shadows, and informational interviews.

- More advanced WBL, which also takes place at a worksite, includes service learning, internships, and pre-apprenticeships and typically is for credit or payment.

Also see: JFF's [WBL Framework](#)

## **Credential**

A credential is a documented award by a responsible and authorized body that attests that an individual has achieved specific learning outcomes or attained a defined level of knowledge or skill relative to a given standard. Credential is often viewed as an umbrella term that includes degrees, diplomas, licenses, certificates, badges, and professional and industry certifications. (Some do not include degrees within the term credentials, creating confusion as to whether degrees are credentials.)

### **Entry requirements**

The qualifications that are required for acceptance into a postsecondary training program, (e.g., age, background check, high school course prerequisites, immunizations).

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## **FINANCE TERMS**

### **Financial aid**

Financial aid includes grants, scholarships, loans, and part-time employment from federal, state, institutional, and private sources. These types of aid are combined to create an award package. The types and amounts of aid you receive are determined by financial need, available funds, student classification, academic performance, and sometimes the timeliness of your application.

### **Loan debt**

Student loan debt is money borrowed to pay for education expenses including tuition, fees, books, supplies, room and board, etc.

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## **TYPES OF LEARNING**

### **Self-directed learning**

Self-directed learning is a learning method whereby the student takes initiative for learning. This includes activities such as selecting, managing, and assessing their own learning activities. Teachers provide advice, direction, and resources to support the student while peers provide collaboration.

### **Asynchronous learning**

Asynchronous learning occurs when classes run on a more relaxed schedule, with some students accessing class materials during hours that work best for them and from different locations.

### **Synchronous learning**

Synchronous learning occurs when classes are held in real time, with students and instructors attending together from different locations.



Building a Future  
That Works  
**For Everyone**