Adult Education: School Selection & Admissions
In the current landscape of American higher education, the definition of a “traditional” college student is changing rapidly. For many years, a traditional student was considered a young adult, ages 18 to 22, but with adult learners (ages 25 and up) making up more than 40 percent of the nation’s college student body, it is clear that the traditional path to a college education is not as traditional as 20 years ago. Regardless of age, a college education opens up a world of opportunities for professional achievement and personal fulfillment. Choosing to continue your education is a major decision and it is crucial to find a school and degree program that best fits into your lifestyle and budget. While the process may seem overwhelming, the purpose of this guide is to introduce you to the college selection and admissions process alongside its deadlines and expectations, so you are prepared to make an informed decision as you begin your college career.
What are my degree options and can I transfer from one program to another?

For undergraduate study, students have three options: a certificate program (roughly one year, focused on a career objective), an associate’s degree (roughly two years of career or bachelor’s degree preparation), or a bachelor’s degree (roughly four years that provides advanced study in a particular major). Your career and educational goals will inform which level you choose to pursue, but you are not locked into one program upon enrollment; you always have the option to transfer. Transferring is especially common for students enrolled in a two-year associate program at a community college who then wish to attend a four-year program to earn a bachelor’s degree. If your ultimate goal is a bachelor’s degree but you are still considering career options or cost is a concern, beginning your college journey at a community college and finishing at a four-year institution is a popular choice. If you have earned college credit already and are looking to finish your degree, consider searching for schools that are “transfer-friendly,” meaning the institution will accept credits earned from other institutions.

Frequently Asked Questions

I’ve been considering going back to school, but where do I start?

The process of choosing a school and an academic program begins with some self-reflection. Before beginning the application process, you’ll want to identify the types of schools and programs that best fit your interests and lifestyle. Consider these questions: What do you hope to achieve once you’ve earned a degree? When will you be able to take classes? How flexible is your schedule and how will you manage a busier schedule? How can you apply your interests to find a fulfilling educational path? By answering these questions and reflecting on your reasons to go back to school, you’ll be closer to identifying a program that will help you realize your goals.

If you are still considering your degree options or are conflicted between degrees, use career inventory or personality assessments to help you determine how to best translate your interests, skills, and talents into a potential career; we’ve listed a few of our favorites in the “to-do list” portion of this handout. Tools like the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook will provide more information on the results of career or personality inventory assessments. When used together, career assessments and the Occupational Outlook Handbook will help you to decide on a degree program that prepares you for a fulfilling career.
There are so many colleges and universities. How do I choose the best one for me?

There are five key components to choosing a college or university: academic program or major, schedule, location, support services, and cost. Thinking about your needs in these five categories will inform your college decision. When you sit down to create your college list, the first piece is to identify schools offering your intended academic program. Although it is not an admissions requirement to have chosen a major, it is helpful to have an idea; with this knowledge in mind, you can choose institutions that will help you achieve your personal and professional goals.

The schedule, location, and support services are also key pieces of the college admissions puzzle because they can determine your academic success. Choosing a school that offers online education or flexible class times within driving distance will enable you to attend classes regularly and meet requirements and deadlines for classwork. Finally, the cost of your education is a key factor that should be considered when creating a list of colleges and universities. Remember that you can apply for financial aid and scholarships, but only choose colleges that are financially feasible for you and your family so you are not buried in debt. To learn more about financial aid and paying for college, see our handouts on these topics for adult learners.

When should I begin applying?

There is no one clear answer to this question because each school is different. Colleges and universities have distinct timelines and deadlines, so it is important to visit admission websites. Many colleges use the Common App, which will allow you to complete one application for several colleges. If the schools you apply to use the Common App, you can begin the application when the portal opens on August 1 of each year. For many online colleges and community colleges, you will not complete the Common App, but rather the school’s application. If you have schools that are rolling admissions – meaning they read applications as they arrive rather than by a specific date – talk to an admissions representative about their timeline and when you can begin classes, because their terms might look different than a September or January start date.

What do I submit in my college application?

Although each college and university will have slightly different requirements, you can expect to submit the following: either the Common App or the school’s application, a high school transcript or HiSET score, at least one letter of recommendation, and an essay or short-answer response. If you have been out of high school for a while, you can contact the school’s counseling office for your transcript or the adult education program where you earned your HiSET score. If a letter of recommendation is required, you can ask your most recent educator, a current or former supervisor at work, or the organizer of a community organization in which you are involved.

It is not free to submit applications to most colleges, but many admissions offices will have fee waivers for qualifying students. Before sitting down to complete your application, be sure that you have reviewed the required application materials. Preparing the required materials will avoid frequent stops to find answers or materials, meaning you will be able to apply more quickly.
To-Do List

If you are ready to begin your college journey, use this to-do list to guide you through creating a list of colleges and universities:

1. **Complete a career inventory or personality assessment.** Here are two to get you started: Career Coach from Great Bay Community College and My Next Move from O*Net.

2. **Research careers that interest you from your career inventory.** Websites like CareerOneStop, O*Net Online, or the Occupational Outlook Handbook provide details on required education, potential salaries, and the career outlook for hundreds of jobs.

3. Now that you have identified and researched potential careers, **match your career goals to an academic program.** Use websites like the College Navigator and Big Future from the College Board to help you narrow down your college list.

4. **Explore the admissions websites of colleges and universities that interest you.** Does their location, class schedule, major offerings, and cost work for you? To stay organized and track college and universities, create a college binder or a folder on your computer that includes the key information you need to know about the school before applying.

5. **Have a conversation with an admissions counselor** to answer any questions you have about the application process or your life as a potential student.

6. Once you have finalized your list of one or more institutions, **gather the required materials and begin the application!**