



## **CHADD and the National Resource Center on ADHD**

### ***Ask the Expert* Chat Series**

#### **May 25th – When Traditional College is Not the Answer: Other Avenues for Young Adults**

**Moderators – NRC Staff**

**Expert – Arlyn Roffman, PhD**

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**Moderator 1:** Thank you for joining us today. We will begin shortly. Just to remind everybody, this is a moderated chat. All questions go to the moderator and we will do our best to post as many of your questions as possible . . .

It's likely that many of you may have similar questions dealing with the same issue. Even though your particular question may not be posted, please try to see how Dr. Roffman's responses to other questions may apply to your situation.

Arlyn Roffman, PhD, is responding to your questions about *When Traditional College is Not the Answer: Other Avenues for Young Adults*.

Thank you for joining us Dr. Roffman, are you ready to begin?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Yes, thanks for inviting me!

**GoGreen350:** Thanks for offering this online chat. I would like to learn what options may exist in a few years for my son, now a sixth-grader, who has attention deficit disorder (inattentive type) and a couple of specific learning disabilities. He's exceptionally bright in many ways (vocabulary of an 18-yr-old, etc.).

**Arlyn Roffman:** You're wise to be thinking of this already. There will be lots of postsecondary options for your son, depending on his interests and capabilities.

It's important to realize that the path of continued learning after high school is unique to each student. It may consist of study at four-year colleges, two-year junior or community colleges, vocational-technological schools, non-degree transition-focused programs, or adult education centers. The trick will be to find the best post-secondary option for his unique constellation of strengths and interests.

Your son sounds very capable of postsecondary learning, so it's important to keep your eye on the prize and make sure he finishes high school with a standard diploma, having taken college preparation courses. In fact, we need to make sure ALL our students with ADHD graduate from high school- the dropout rate for this population is far too high!

There are increasing numbers of colleges and universities with services and programs to support diverse learning needs. You can learn about them in some of the college guides targeted to students with disabilities, such as the *K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities*, published by Princeton Review.

For many students with ADHD/LD, starting their postsecondary experience at a community college is a good option to consider. One reason is that community colleges have an open admissions policy, meaning a high school diploma or a GED is all that is necessary for admission, and admissions criteria are more "forgiving" of high school records that may reflect learning problems. In addition, class size tends to be smaller at community colleges than at large universities, tuition is usually lower, and they offer a wide range of vocational, remedial and developmental courses. Students may choose the intensity of study that fits their needs and interests: they may start slow and take just a few courses in areas of interest, enroll in a certificate training program toward particular employment goals (e.g. dental assistant), or choose to matriculate in an associate's degree program with the intention of later transferring to a four-year institution.

Beyond the financial and academic advantages, community college is a popular option for psychological reasons too—since all students are commuters, students can "try out" the college experience close to home, near family and friends.

For highly motivated students with more severe learning disabilities and/or ADHD who might be too challenged by traditional degree programs, there is the option to enroll in a campus-based life skills-oriented transition program. Courses are very practical and often community-based, focusing on vocational training, development of daily living skills (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning, money management), and social skills training. Many offer continued transition support as graduates move from the campus into apartments and jobs.

In addition, there are transition programs that primarily center on independent living and are not based on college campuses. Participants in these programs usually live in apartments with supervision and work locally as they develop the daily living skills to assume more independence. Some of these programs work collaboratively with nearby community colleges, and residents can take courses if they choose to do so.

As you can see there are many options ahead for your son. In the meantime, make sure he gets the help he requires over the next 6 years to manage the symptoms of his ADHD, to develop effective study skills, and to learn about any accommodations he might need to perform to his potential in whichever postsecondary setting he selects.

**Kurly:** We all know that each case is different, but are there any TYPES of jobs in particular that are more suitable (or more accommodating) to someone with ADHD if college is not an option? My son has ADHD, the impulsive type, and I can't see him being, say, an accountant. I just don't know how to guide him.

**Arlyn Roffman:** What you're talking about is finding the right vocational match, or what Gerber et al. call "goodness of fit." While one person with ADHD may make a terrible accountant, another person with the same disability may be well suited to that field; career matching really depends on each individual's unique set of interests, strengths, and challenges. There are professionals who are able to help students identify their assets and interests and find jobs and settings that capitalize on their stronger areas and allow them to work around their weaknesses. Vocational counselors and/or Vocational Rehabilitation personnel can be a big help in determining what the right employment avenue might be for your son. Career One-Stop Centers, sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of Labor, Employment, and Training Administration (<http://www.careeronestop.org>) are a good place to start the job search process.

**Moderator 1:** To learn more about workplace success please see our [What We Know Sheet #16: Succeeding in the Workplace](#).

**Esedor:** My child has been in community college for three years and has yet to finish 1 year of classes. She will not ask for help, and will not consider tech school. I have pulled my financial support. How can I convince her to try something else?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Postsecondary learning is a monumental challenge for MOST students; for those with ADHD college is guaranteed to be overwhelming if they don't get support for establishing structure, finding ways to maintain focus, and organizing themselves and their approach to their studies. They need to develop systems, such as breaking down large assignments into achievable subgoals, maintaining calendars of due dates and "to do" lists, finding ways to take frequent breaks, establishing set places for important belongings, etc. just to manage the day-to-day obligations of college life.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of college is balancing personal life with academic demands. The novelty of being away from home makes it particularly difficult for students with ADHD to stay focused. College environments require a new level of time management and self-discipline. Students are faced with the freedom to make their own decisions about scheduling, choosing their own classes and majors, and conducting their social lives. They are often ill-prepared and overwhelmed as they try to strike a balance between their coursework and busy social lives.

For most, in order to succeed, they need to be able to ask for help. One of the keys to success for students with ADHD is to be aware of and be able to articulate what their disability is all about, how it affects their day-to-day functioning, how they have learned to compensate for it in the past, and what they need to be able to "level the playing field" for themselves, so they can function at their best. Sounds as if your daughter isn't there quite yet. Disclosure is a very personal and individual matter- and she sounds unwilling to take that step.

College isn't a panacea. Does she really want to be there? If so, it may be helpful to work with her to help her learn the specifics of her disability and its impact on her learning. She's certainly old enough to read her own assessment reports, to start processing what they say about her, and to consider any recommendations made about accommodations she needs to work at her best level. There are a number of books about college students with ADHD- perhaps reading one would help normalize the problems she's having and would make her more willing to reach out for the help she needs. Perhaps a student who DOES get services could reach out to her and talk about how helpful it has been to have assistance. Another student can be a powerful role model and may well motivate her to step forward for the support that will allow her to succeed in school. 1

**Marbutlady:** What other options are out there when your child tried Community College and that didn't work? He tried Job Corp and finished but he's now working part-time as a bagger in the grocery store.

**Arlyn Roffman:** There are a number of other learning options beyond community college. As technology advances and distance learning becomes more commonplace, online courses and programs are becoming more popular. Online learning is a particularly appealing option for students who have strong computer skills and need or prefer a flexible class schedule to fit around home or work responsibilities. Online learning is also an attractive alternative for students who have trouble sitting still for long lectures. A word of caution, though - attention can wander even online, and this learning format isn't for everyone.

Students with ADHD seeking careers in technical areas that are more hands-on may want to look into tech-prep programs. These often involve a partnership between secondary vocational technical schools and community colleges. If a student is clearly directed toward a career in mathematics, science, or engineering, a technical college curriculum is worth considering.

Technical schools provide students an education that concentrates on their particular career choice in trades such as carpentry, cosmetology or secretarial skills. Technical schools allow students to focus directly on areas of strength and interest and often enable them to skirt around academic areas that have been their nemesis in high school.

Some youth choose to hire on with a skilled tradesman as an apprentice, where they are paid an hourly wage and are taught the skills of that trade on the job. Yet another option that warrants mentioning is career colleges, which prepare students for such jobs as massage therapist, computer technology, acupuncture, and the like.

**om-mama:** Do you have any recommendations for Career or Interest Inventories that students have found relevant or especially helpful in beginning to chart a course for themselves and their future plans?

**Arlyn Roffman:** I don't have specific recommendations, but high school guidance counselors have loads of resources at their disposal that can help students start to chart their vocational course. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, which is in every state, has counselors who can test your child. [Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service](#) is the site that can help you find the office nearest to you.

One important step you can take is talk with your child about work and encourage him or her to learn about the different kinds of jobs that are out there. Young kids can start learning about what their parents and neighbors do; older students can write research papers on careers of interest to them. As they become more informed, they can see if they find an appealing option to consider investigating in more depth. They may even shadow someone in fields of interest to see how the jobs that interest them actually look and feel and then look into the educational requirements for those positions.

Schools are mandated to work with transition-aged students to identify their vision for their own future and to help them begin working toward their vocational goals. A vocational assessment should be part of the evaluation process for all students on IEPs once they reach age 16. Actually working in the community, in real jobs, is an important way to expose youth to what it means to work and what each position entails. Research tells us that working during high school highly correlates with employment beyond high school, so it's critical to get our youth out there in paid or volunteer jobs during their secondary school years.

**Moderator 1:** [CHADD's Annual Conference](#) is a great way to learn more about ADHD and registration is now open! . . . Our next annual conference will be held in Disney's Contemporary Resort, Orlando, Fla., from Nov. 10-12. World-renowned experts will be on hand to provide the latest science-based information about ADHD in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

**Debrab:** As the mom of a bright kid with ADHD I feel pretty strongly that we parents need to remember that not every child -- ADHD or not -- SHOULD be headed to college. I'm raising my son in a part of the country (suburban Washington, DC) where folks tend to way overvalue pure academics. Sure, we need good doctors and lawyers and MBA's. We will also always need good carpenters and mechanics. So far, my boy (he's 13) is consistently showing signs of being happier when he's producing something, whether it be building a canoe or creating an animation on the computer. Do you think I'm wrong to not push, push, push academics?

**Arlyn Roffman:** I'm with you that not all students should be pushed toward college. For many positions college degrees aren't essential. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the 30 jobs projected to grow at the fastest rate over the next decade in the United States, only seven typically require a bachelor's degree.

In many communities, the only socially acceptable path beyond high school is college. This places tremendous pressure on students who really don't wish to pursue that route in life. Students who aren't college-bound often feel awkward and stressed during the period of high school when peers are taking PSATs and SATs, going on college tours, filling out applications, asking teachers for letters of recommendation, hearing whether they've been admitted, and deciding which colleges they will attend. If your son chooses not to continue learning immediately after high school, he will need some prepared responses to the questions about where he's planning to apply. I recommend directly responding, "I'm going to take a little time off" or "I've decided to take a job for now" to fend off further questioning.

That said, without knowing your child, I can't say whether or not you and he should be considering college. It's great that you've noticed his sense of fulfillment in using his hands. There are certainly many careers that could call upon his pleasure and skill in hands-on work. Some of those careers may require postsecondary training or a college degree. There are many studies that suggest that earning power increases with the amount of education an individual achieves. For that reason I'd suggest sitting with your son's counselor to discuss potential vocational avenues as well as the feasibility of his taking college prep courses. If there no barriers to his doing so, I suggest enrolling him in college prep courses for freshman year and then reevaluating this direction based upon his comfort level and achievement. Taking this path will keep his options open for applying to college if that seems desirable after all by the end of high school or later in life.

**Sus:** My son will be a young high school grad. I am interested in exploring the possibility of a "Gap-Year," but I'm afraid if he takes a year "off" from school he may not want to go back. What is your experience with kids with ADHD and Gap Years?

**Arlyn Roffman:** I don't have statistics on this, but I think a lot of kids who struggle with school are exhausted and dispirited by the end of 12th grade. They've too often met with frustration and many can benefit from an organized gap year.

The key here is that it must be organized! A year "off" holds little advantage for someone who needs structure in his or her life. But a year doing something purposeful, where he or she can build confidence and learn lessons about the ways of the world can be highly beneficial.

There are organizations that set up gap-year experiences, though families can also do the planning themselves. However, just as it's essential to choose the right postsecondary program or work experience, finding a good match is key to making this a positive experience. Try conducting an Internet search for "Alternatives to College" to access a variety of sites that will help you consider options such as community service programs, leadership training programs, and apprenticeships.

Regardless of the direction of the gap year, your planning should include a discussion of what happens after it's over. Applying to college before the gap year and then deferring admission can be an effective way to keep your child from becoming detached from an educational path.

**Slpmom:** I have heard wonderful things about the Threshold Program at Lesley Univ. Are there any resources to learn of other schools that may offer similar programs?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Well, as the founder of Threshold, I'm certainly happy to hear these complimentary words! For those unfamiliar with the program, it was the first comprehensive campus-based transition program in the country for students with significant disabilities. It's 30 years old now (I was 12 when I started it!), and it's still thriving, with excellent outcomes for its students. I won't stay on Threshold per se, but I will refer you to the website at [www.lesley.edu/threshold](http://www.lesley.edu/threshold). This is a non-degree program that helps students learn vocational skills, social skills, independent living skills, and leisure time skills, all to prepare for independent adulthood. And it's true- it's a wonderful program!

There is a handful of like-minded campus-based life skills-oriented transition programs, which all tend to be designed to serve highly motivated students who might be too challenged by traditional degree programs but are very interested in continuing to learn, experience college life, and become independent adults. Courses are very practical and often community-based, focusing on vocational training, development of daily living skills, and social skills training. Many, like Threshold, offer continued transition support as graduates move from the campus into apartments and jobs.

In addition, there are transition programs NOT based on college campuses that primarily center on independent living. Participants in these programs usually live in apartments with supervision and work locally as they develop the daily living skills to assume more independence. Some of these programs work collaboratively with nearby community colleges, and residents can take courses if they choose to.

The Heath Resource Center (<http://www.heath.gwu.edu>) is a rich resource for information about the range of postsecondary options, including alternative programs such as Threshold. Thinkcollege.com is a resource for students with cognitive impairments who are interested in postsecondary learning.

**Moderator 1:** Being a [CHADD member](#) not only provides valuable products and services, such as Attention magazine, to you and your family, it also supports CHADD's work on behalf of individuals with ADHD at the local, state and national level. [Join CHADD today!](#)

**Rez:** My son is interested in the military. Will he be restricted from certain services if he is on medication?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Not necessarily. He needs to work with his recruiter and pursue a waiver, which might be available if he's a good candidate. Medications don't necessarily close the door to military service. But it's essential that he disclose when applying. CHADD has a more in-depth answer to this question, available at <http://www.help4adhd.org/en/living/workplace/military>.

**KathyMow:** I have a rising high school junior. This is the year we'd be visiting colleges, preparing for SATs, and figuring out which schools to apply to. I agree CC is a better approach for him - do we go through the motions to make him feel like he's had the opportunity? How do we go about transition planning?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Ah, the all-important question about transition planning! Your IEP Team should work together to come up with a plan based upon your son's interests and strengths and vision for his future. His voice MUST be heard in the process. My book, *Guiding Teens with Learning Disabilities: Navigating the Transition to From High School Adulthood*, describes the transition process in general, with specifics about getting ready for work and community life as well as college. I think you'll find it very applicable to ADHD as well.

Engaging your son in exploring educational options is important - looking at what's out there will help him feel part of the process and will help him see that he has choices. Many high schools have SPED

college fairs where postsecondary representatives come to share their offerings. It'll be important to talk with the disability service providers to find out how disability-friendly each place is.

I'd taking him scouting to a few schools that are within his academic range. His guidance counselor should be able to advise you regarding appropriate options. Allowing him to make the final choice from among these schools will build self-determination, which is essential for all our youth with disabilities.

One tool that I think is essential for every high school student on an IEP is a Transition Planning Portfolio, a personal file of all transition-related documents, for eventual use in application to college or employment.

The Transition Planning Portfolio can be developed and maintained in a variety of formats - as a hard copy in a binder, file box or accordion file; as an "e-portfolio," a series of electronic file folders; or as a URL on a personal website. The key is for the student to have sections that organize materials needed in the transition process:

One section should contain school records: copies of past and present IEPs, high school transcripts, and a one-page summary of extracurricular activities.

One section should contain disability documentation, including the most recent psycho-educational evaluation with specific diagnostic information; a listing of all approved accommodations from high school; and a copy of her ACT and/or SAT scores.

One section could contain college-specific information, questions to ask during the admissions interview, an extra copy of a completed Common Application form, an updated resume, a personal essay describing the learning disability, and non-confidential letters of recommendation.

Other sections should be dedicated to employment, including a resume, sample cover letter, and names of references .

Development of a Transition Planning Portfolios can be built into an IEP goal, can be completed as an independent study project, or can be the focus of a summer transition program between junior and senior years of high school. The portfolio itself will be invaluable as the student transitions into either work or postsecondary learning settings.

**Moderator 1:** Missed part of the chat? Past chat transcripts are available to CHADD members as a benefit. [Learn more about joining CHADD!](#)

**Jelly:** Do you know if the Vocational/technical Schools are supportive and good choices for kids with learning disabilities?

**Arlyn Roffman:** Vocational/technical schools can be a great option for students with ADHD, but each is different, so it's important to check with the special education team to discern the culture of the particular school you're interested in and the level of services provided for students with disabilities. Talk with current students on IEPs and their parents to get their perspective.



Sadly, in these days of NCLB, when academic achievement is the ultimate goal of too many schools, practical training in the trades has been less funded than in the past. I certainly believe we need good trades people and hope this avenue will remain an option for our students.

We have to eliminate stigma associated with technical, vocational, and hands-on training programs. They are a valid educational option and provide excellent practical training in vocational areas that are essential to our society.

Beyond vocational schools, trades may also be learned through apprenticeships. Still considered by many as an old-fashioned notion, apprenticeships can be invaluable for our students who learn best by watching and doing.

**Moderator 1:** The National Resource Center on ADHD hosts “Ask the Expert” chats every month! Our next chat on “Parenting when the Parent has ADHD” with Dr. Patricia Quinn is scheduled for June 22 from 2 to 3:30 p.m.

This will be our final question.

**workingmom3:** Thinking ahead for my two elementary school kids with ADHD, I've heard that many colleges and universities include ADHD in their Student Disability Support programs. Do you have any feedback on the success of their programs? How do you prepare young people to advocate for themselves?

**Arlyn Roffman:** It's great that you're thinking ahead for your children. To respond to the first part of your question, campus supports in postsecondary settings vary widely, ranging from very basic services to comprehensive programming. For this reason it is very important to be diligent when investigating any particular college. Ask such questions as how many students with ADHD are receiving services, what types of accommodations are typically provided, what records or types of documentation are required in order to receive services, and how many students who matriculate with ADHD actually graduate.

Your child may need nothing more than extra time on tests but another may require 1:1 help in the form of more intensive academic support and organizational assistance. Thus, there is no way to report globally on the “success” of the programs offered for college students with ADHD. The key is to help your child become aware of his or her needs, be willing to disclose his disability and self-advocate for any accommodations he requires, and to find a college that has the level of services that will serve him well.

I'm so glad you also asked about self-advocacy. Empowering our youth to speak up and ask for what they need is essential, and it's never too early to start teaching them to do so. Youth with disabilities must be helped to understand that there is no special education in postsecondary settings. Entitlement to services ends when they exit high school. They will be protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act as adults only if they disclose their disability and ask for any needed accommodations. Thus, self-advocacy is essential to getting what they need to succeed. In order to be able to self-advocate, youth

need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and which accommodations help them perform to their potential. They must come to a place of self-acceptance and be willing to self-disclose. It is only when they can explain their needs to others and ask for accommodations that they will be able to perform their best and maximize their chances for a successful post-secondary academic experience.

Before I close, I'd like to come back to the fact that traditional college is not the path for all students.

Many youth don't feel ready to continue learning immediately after high school. Some just do not feel motivated to move on to higher education; some are unprepared to face the academic demands or the social pressures of post-secondary settings; some are reluctant to return to the vulnerable position of being in the student role again in a new learning environment.

It's important to weigh the pros and cons to determine whether college is a suitable goal after a student finishes high school. It may be that taking time to work or travel is a better option than college, at least in the short run, because it allows time for the individual to mature and develop a better sense of the interests he or she may wish to pursue at the post-secondary level.

Taking individual classes or attending community college part-time may be a better fit, allowing the individual to test the academic waters with little pressure.

Every child has potential to continue learning at some level after high school-- parents and teachers alike must convey the message that lifelong learning is a realistic and desirable goal. The critical goal is to find the right match of learning opportunities to fit the student's interests, aptitudes, personal objectives, and budget.

**Moderator 1:** Thank you Dr. Roffman for taking the time to chat today. Your advice will help young adults decide on a path after they graduate high school.

Thank you for all your questions. If your question was not answered, please contact one of our Health Information Specialists on ADHD by calling 1-800-233-4050 between 9 AM- 5PM EST or by clicking on the "Ask a Question" link on the top of every page on our website: <http://www.help4adhd.org>.

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*The views expressed in this chat are those of the guest expert and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), the National Resource Center on ADHD, or the CDC.*

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