

# Is College Ri

by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA



**College can be a great experience,  
but it's not for everyone.  
If you're a young adult,  
you need to figure out for yourself  
whether college is the  
right thing for you at this time.**

## **I SEE A LOT OF KIDS AND TEENS WITH ADHD.**

This means that I also see a lot of parents who are really concerned about these kids' grades and their ability to get into a good college. This is certainly understandable, but I don't automatically assume that every teen I see is destined for college or even that college is what would be best for all of them. College can be a great experience for many people, but it isn't necessarily the best place for *everyone*.

Therefore, the first question to ask is what you expect the college experience and a degree to do for you. If you can achieve your occupational and financial goals without one, then perhaps it isn't worth the investment of time and money. For example, going to a technical school or getting on-the-job training in a trade may be a better way for you to learn and prepare yourself for a satisfying career. Or perhaps the military is a better fit. Or you could try just getting a job and seeing what appeals to you.

Having said all that, there are other teens I see who hate school or just aren't strong students but want and would be good at the kinds of jobs that require a college degree. These students should get that degree so that they're not limited to jobs they don't really want. These folks will struggle more with staying on top of their academic demands and getting grades that at least somewhat resemble their abilities. They may be more than smart enough to handle the work, but will struggle with juggling multiple classes and longer assignments when parents and teachers don't hound them about it. These students will have to find a way to suffer through school and get grades that are good enough to get them to the next level and eventually get them a diploma. Better things await once school is done, so they need to keep their eye on that prize.

Whether you decide to go to college or not, I would hope that you make your choice based on the right reasons. By contrast, there are lots of bad reasons to go to college, including:

- › **Someone is making you.** If the main reason that you're going to college is that someone else wants you to be there, then perhaps they should go instead. It's unlikely that you're really going to give it your best effort or get much out of it if you're just going to pacify someone else.

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**Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA**, is a clinical psychologist based in West Chester, Pennsylvania, who specializes in diagnosing and treating children, teens, and adults with ADHD. He is the author of *Integrative Treatment for Adult ADHD: A Practical, Easy-to-Use Guide for Clinicians* (New Harbinger, 2007) and the vice president of the Attention Deficit Disorder Association. Adapted from *More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD* by Ari Tuckman. (Copyright c 2009: Specialty Press, Inc.)

# ght for You?

- › **You don't know what else to do.** Many graduating high school seniors go to college immediately because they don't feel they have any other options. Considering what college costs these days, you should be there only if that's where you want to be, not just because you don't know what else to do.
- › **Everyone else is going to college.** Perhaps that's a good choice for them. But does that mean that it's good for you?
- › **It's your ticket out of Dodge.** It's true that going to college out of the area is a great way to flee your hometown at least partly on your parents' dime, but you can probably find another way to get out if you really want to.

If you decide to go to college, I would hope that you go with a clear conscience and are able to make the most of the experience. This means more than just grades and a degree—it means meeting lots of interesting people, getting involved in extracurricular activities, and finding your place in the world. It's hard to pull this off if college isn't the right place for you. Instead, you get an expensive uphill climb. So spend some time and really think about it.

Talk to others—some who went to college and some who didn't. Would they do the same thing again? Does their experience apply to your life at all? What are they doing for work? What kind of a lifestyle does that give them (not just financially, but also matters like job stability, work hours, type of work, and flexibility). Ask what a typical workday looks like. This is a big decision, so you want to gather as much information as you can.

It may be that college will eventually be right for you, but not now.

## Some do better after taking time off

There can be a lot of pressure for a graduating high school senior to go straight into a four-year college. While this path works for many, some students are not yet ready to handle the academic and social demands of college—even if they're more than smart enough to handle the classwork. This is especially true for students with ADHD who relied heavily upon parents, teachers, tutors, and other support staff to get their good grades. For these young adults, a delayed entry can make a world of difference in their performance when they do start college and, ultimately, in their success and happiness in later life. College success requires two maturities:

- › **Intellectual maturity** to be able to handle the academic challenges on one's own without parental guidance. This also involves knowing who, when, and how to ask for help, if necessary.
- › **Emotional maturity** to be able to strike an appropriate balance between studying and enjoying the social and recreational aspects of college. This may also involve overcoming the resistance to utilize available support services on campus, if necessary.

While most parents will have some doubts about how their children rate on these two dimensions, some graduating seniors are truly



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not yet able to function in a college environment. Packing them off prematurely, simply because that is what many of their classmates are doing, may prove ultimately disastrous. Placing these students into a college environment before they are ready risks a failure experience that will only make them feel bad about both themselves and school. Passing but scraping by doesn't gain a student much as a stepping stone—after all, is the goal to simply get a diploma, or is it to set oneself up to lead a successful and satisfying life? By twenty-five, it won't matter that the student started a year, or even two, later. Students with ADHD or other learning disabilities are especially prone to

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struggling if they start college before they're ready. Given their increased difficulties with classwork, they are more likely to overdo the recreational aspects of college.

Of course, the decision to delay starting college is not an easy one. It requires that the family make an honest, if perhaps painful, assessment of the student's abilities and likelihood of success. Information from teachers, guidance counselors, and mental health professionals may be helpful. Keep in mind, though, that there usually are no absolute answers—ultimately it's a judgment call.

Related to the two maturities, there are two factors to consider in determining if a student is ready for college:

- › **Prior academic performance.** To what extent is the student a self-starter? Was she able to consistently produce work that is at least good enough? College success requires a much greater ability to manage the details of more complicated assignments on one's own, so scraping by in high school is kind of a bad sign.
- › **Ability to balance work and play.** The move from home to dorm room presents almost all college students with much more freedom and a whole lot more temptation. At any given moment, there are at least a dozen activities that are more fun than slogging through a fat textbook, but the textbook still needs to be read. How has this student done in the past when it comes to getting down to work?

Whether you're the student or the parent, you need to be totally honest with yourself about how the student rates on these two factors. If someone is claiming that college will be different than

high school, I would want to know specifically why that is—what is going to be different so that it's reasonable to expect different results? The ultimate goal of this discussion isn't to convince anyone of anything, but rather to make the best decision possible—if a student isn't ready, that will eventually become obvious. Those hard facts will be far more convincing than anything anyone could say. By contrast, if you decide that the student isn't yet ready, then something that would be different is that he or she is a year or two older (and hopefully wiser) from having done something else before going away to college.

If the decision is made to hold off on starting college, the family needs to find a way to tell friends and extended family and deal with the social pressure of people's reactions. This can be an uncomfortable moment, but often the best approach is to simply state, "We thought about it and decided that he will get more out of college later." The issue here is not what most classmates are doing, but rather what is best for this specific student.

### **Put the break to best use**

Just as college is an investment in one's future, so too can taking time off first be if it enables the student to get more from the college experience. The best way to spend that time will depend on the individual, as well as on circumstances and what's available. There are several options.

- **Attend a local college while living at home.** This gives the student experience with college-level work, while still providing the structure of living at home. Parents are available to help with assignments, as well as to provide guidance on time-management choices, such as the balance between socializing and studying. The goal is to provide a smoother transition to living independently at school. Community colleges offer the most flexibility in terms of how many classes are taken, as well as usually being the least expensive.

- **Get a job.** This could be something personally meaningful, such as working for a nonprofit, or simply something to make a buck. If the parents are willing to foot the bill for living expenses, volunteer work may be more rewarding, as well as look better on a resume.

For bright students with poor motivation or little direction, the time spent in the types of clock-punching jobs available to high school graduates with little work experience may provide a concrete example of why a college degree is worthwhile. The new graduate should probably be ex-



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pected to pay more of his own way than he had to before, such as his cell phone bill or car insurance. This teaches responsibility and signifies that this is a new time of life. Additional chores around the house may also be imposed to give a taste of living independently, especially because some of these chores would have to be done anyway if he lived somewhere else. Of course, additional freedoms may also be appropriate, such as later curfews.

- **Live abroad or in a different part of the country.**

Whether through a formal program or with relatives or friends, this can be a fantastic opportunity to gain exposure to other ways of life. During the time away, the young adult may take classes or work, or both. Depending on what type of structure is provided in the living arrangement, this may actually be easier to manage than a busy college campus.

- **Join the military.** The armed forces can be just the thing for some graduating seniors who need a great deal of structure and don't know what they want to do for a career. The military tends to offer perks such as job training and college classes. Nonetheless, this is a decision that should be considered thoroughly in that it is much more difficult to undo.



### Going off to college

Some parents may worry that if their children take a break before going to college, they will never get there. While this is true for some young adults, if the break is well conceived, it will serve its purpose as a solid stepping stone that enables them to make much better use of the college experience. Of course, some people simply do not fit the traditional college mold and would be happier and more successful seeking their fortunes elsewhere—and a break won't change this. Attempting to jam these square pegs into round holes will only lead to failure, resentment, and fruitless struggle.

The college experience involves far more than the academic knowledge gained. It is a time of self-exploration. Exposure to diverse ideas, people, and opportunities provides the raw material for crucial decisions about what each student is looking for in life, both in terms of work as well as in more personal areas. Although the ultimate product of a college degree is often emphasized most, college is really a process by which teens become young adults. 📍