

How Career Exploration Can Change A Student's Path In Life

Aligning Students' Interests & Skills For Future Success



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Children often have dreams about what they want to do in the future, but when do they get an opportunity to explore what those dreams or interests could really translate to in the way of a career? Will they like what they find out? The earlier that students are able to discover possible careers, the more time they will have to explore if those careers might be a good fit for their interests, talents, and abilities before entering the workforce.

Without love or passion for their professions, they may develop burnout during the course of their careers and can become unhappy. Since the **average person spends over 8 hours a day working**,¹ let's examine how career exploration early on can help set students up for fulfilling futures ahead.

Early Career Exploration Provides Numerous Benefits



Oftentimes college is when students figure out how they want to spend their time in the working world after graduation. Is college really the ideal time for a career exploration experience though? **Tuition costs of colleges and universities have been steadily increasing**,² plus a growing number of **careers no longer require a four year degree**,³ so it can be extremely efficient for students to gain an understanding about what they want to do for the next 5+ years of their life before making the decision to enroll in college. Afterall, how many people would say that what they thought they wanted to study in college did not turn out to be what they expected and had to change their major, costing them more time and money?

In a 2022 survey of 5,300 14-18 year olds by ECMC Group, **"81% said learning the skills they need to be successful is an important factor in their decision about education after high school."**⁴ Learning about available opportunities for various career and technical education (CTE) academies and career pathways prior to being presented with the decision on which direction students would like to go, allows them the opportunity to be aware of more options. Perhaps they would like to enroll in the local CTE academy to focus on a specific career cluster, or, through learning the career pathway trajectory of a certain profession during career exploration, they can see if the education and certifications that are required will line up with their **lifestyle goals**.⁵

Perkins V - Bringing Funding to Middle School



When students initially learn about career fields, some may find that it seems difficult and challenging to envision themselves in those roles especially if they struggle with disabilities, lack of access, or language barriers. They may think there's little to no chance that they could have a job that they like. However, there are amazing tools and supports available today that help students learn and overcome those challenges so they can work towards having the job they've always dreamed of. Perkins V, **"The Strengthening Career and Technical Education (CTE) for the 21st Century Act"**⁶ was put in place to provide funding to schools' CTE programs and **increase equity**.⁷ These tools can be within reach for many more school districts than before through the growth of **Perkins V funding to include middle schools**.⁸ Advance CTE explains that "States are now able to use Perkins V funds to support the expansion of CTE and career exposure opportunities as early as the fifth grade."

The sooner students can find out where their interests lie, the more focused they'll be on subjects where knowledge is required in those career fields and they'll focus on getting better grades. They'll be more determined to pay attention to what is being taught and retain the information, rather than just learning it to pass the test. Plus, **research has identified middle school as a time when students can benefit the most from career exploration**,⁹ a process of building self-awareness, learning about potential careers, and developing a plan for reaching future goals. Career exploration should come early, before grades and transcripts may become limiting factors of future options.

Connection From School to Career Leads to Higher Engagement



Another barrier in place for some students may be related to extenuating life circumstances. **Evidence suggests that children from low-income contexts**¹⁰ are more likely to drop out of school and show lower educational aspirations. Understanding why some students drop out of school may provide insight into what measures can be taken to help prevent it. In a **study by the Gates Foundation**,¹¹ students who dropped out suggested that schools make curriculum more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work. In fact, four out of five (81%) said there should have been more opportunities for real-world learning and more experiential learning experiences. Essentially, by helping students bring together the idea that the concepts they learn in school will directly translate into future success at work in their chosen profession, educators can deepen engagement in coursework for students. Also shared was a lack of interesting courses, and low motivation as well as not being inspired to work hard were all reported by 47% and 68% of respondents respectively. Through career exploration, students are able to better understand the options available to them and which fields align best with their interests and passions. Once they have a better view of the variety of courses available and the career pathway ahead of them with an end goal in mind, students can feel a stronger sense of motivation to work hard.

Success in Core Subjects & Higher Graduation Rates



Students who pursue CTE courses during their high school education may even be at an advantage for future success. According to **this data story from the US Department of Education**,¹² "Eight years after their expected graduation date, students who focused on CTE courses while in high school had higher median annual earnings than students who did not focus on CTE." **High School graduation rates for students who concentrated on CTE are also nearly 10% higher than for their peers who did not take CTE courses, or "non-concentrators"**.¹³ CTE offers a wide range of career options outside of the trades like electricians, welders, and, automotive service technicians and mechanics. **"In 2017, the most popular career cluster out of all 16 career clusters in the nation's high schools was Arts, Audio-Visual Technology, and Communication, followed by Business Management and Administration, and Health Science."**¹² In this study¹⁴ that focused on students who earned certifications in Information Technology (IT), it is documented that "...each individual in cohort 1 articulated that they used the skills obtained in their IT certification class to enhance the quality of work in core classes." **Success in core subjects along with CTE education**¹⁵ has shown "test scores that equal or exceed "college prep" students; are more likely to pursue postsecondary education; have a higher grade point average (GPA) in college; and are less likely to drop out the first year of college."

Labor Statistics - High Demand Areas & Income to Lifestyle



With so many career options available to students and different factors like income, lifestyle, education or certification requirements to take into account, narrowing the focus may seem like a weighty task at times. One helpful resource can be the **US Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook**¹⁶, which includes a section dedicated to highlighting the fastest growing occupations. This enables students to see which fields are in high demand, including income information,

for those options as they are evaluating possibilities for their futures. For example, data scientists earned a median salary of \$100,910 per year in 2021 and nurse practitioners and wind turbine service technicians are the occupations with the highest projected growth rate between 2021-2031.

Some kinesthetic learners may be drawn to career fields where they will be able to work with their hands on a daily basis, while other students may discover they might be best suited for a career that focuses on interacting with people and building relationships. With so many possibilities ahead, it is truly an exciting time to be a student today.

Apprenticeships & Internships



Once students have a better idea of which path to pursue, there are even ways for them to “learn by doing” and get a taste of a career path while still in school. Many students gain an even deeper understanding of a career field by actually working within it. Through an **apprenticeship**¹⁷ or **internship**,¹⁸ students can see firsthand the realities of what it would be like to be actively working in certain fields. This type of experiential learning is a win/win situation for students and employers alike with many benefits. **Students gain valuable employability skills**,¹⁹ including **soft skills**,²⁰ and often can earn an income while still in school, and employers expand their workforce and can train workers early. According to **Perkins V**,⁶ opportunities for students may include work-based learning such as internships, mentorships, simulated work environments, and other hands-on or inquiry-based learning activities. An added benefit of these types of opportunities is that students get a practical view of what their lifestyle could look like after graduation, including income potential.

Career Exploration can enable and inspire students to start figuring out what they want to become early on and motivate them to work hard towards a career path. In helping support students early in this process, not only will we have happier people in our society but we'll also have more people in the careers that they were designed to do.

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* The sources are hyperlinked in the digital version of this document.