



National Association for
College Admission Counseling

Career and Technical Colleges: Careers in Focus

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If you have a clear-cut career goal and would like to get into the job market quickly, you may want to consider a technical or other specialty program. Technical colleges vary widely in majors, length of programs, cost, and other characteristics, but they have one thing in common: an emphasis on training for a specific career.

"Unlike liberal arts colleges, [technical colleges] generally place students directly in the major, and they take major-related courses in their first term," says Clayton Smith, director of admissions and marketing for SUNY (State University of New York) Cobleskill.

What careers can technical colleges prepare you for? Common fields of study include health care (practical nursing, home health aide), computers, other technology (electronics, auto mechanics, plumbing, heating and air conditioning), culinary arts, business, and more. The specific degree or certificate may vary depending on your field, but two-year associate's degrees are common. Some technical colleges do offer four-year degrees or help students who wish to transfer to a four-year college after earning their associate's. If this interests you, make sure you ask about which credits might transfer to a four-year college.

Technical colleges stress a hands-on approach to learning. At SUNY Cobleskill, for example, culinary arts students run a restaurant, and landscape development students maintain much of the college's grounds.

You should take the same care in choosing a technical college as you would in choosing a liberal arts college. Visit the campus, talk to professors and students, and check out the courses and facilities for your intended major. If you're interested in a field that changes quickly (like electronics, machine technology, or computers), make sure the equipment and facilities are up-to-date.

Attending a technical college can have some disadvantages. Because of the specialized nature of the majors, changing majors can be difficult or impossible without starting over. So do as much research as possible before you start classes: read about the career fields that interest you, "shadow" someone who works in your chosen field, and ask plenty of questions about what a typical day on the job looks like.

Financial aid is sometimes limited at technical colleges. If you choose a public or nonprofit college, you can apply for federally-funded financial aid. Students at for-profit schools cannot receive federal aid, but the schools themselves may have some financial aid available.

Keep in mind that not all technical colleges are created equal. In the past, some students have had bad experiences with a few for-profit (also called "proprietary") schools that were substandard or went out of business before classes were completed. There are many excellent proprietary schools, but it's worth the effort to research the reputation and financial stability of any technical college you're considering. Try calling a few companies in your chosen field and asking which schools are considered the best. Look for colleges that are accredited by the Council on Occupational Education (COE) or by a regional accrediting organization.

Despite these considerations, career and technical colleges can be a very good fit for students with specific career goals who are looking for hands-on training, job placement, and a quick start to a great career.