

Transition Truths: Postsecondary Education

The postsecondary education system provides an additional, final level of education to those who are seeking an advanced degree, training, or certification.

How this System Works

This system consists of the people, places, policies, and programs that support quality instruction and access at postsecondary institutions like universities, colleges, and training or vocational schools. This system also provides support to disadvantaged student groups, including low-income and first generation students those with disabilities.

People and Places

The people in this system include students, instructors, administrators, researchers, disability services coordinators, admissions counselors, financial aid officers, student health specialists, and policymakers who determine ways to support students. The work of this system takes place at community colleges, technical schools, four-year colleges or universities, graduate programs, and online education programs. At the federal level, the [Office of Postsecondary Education](#) in the U.S. Department of Education leads efforts to improve and promote access to and completion of postsecondary education.

Policies and Programs

Different postsecondary education programs serve different purposes:

- General higher education consists of community college, two-year (Associate's degree), or four-year (Bachelor's degree) programs in which students focus on a particular field of study related to their desired career path.
- Some careers require advanced degrees that allow students to further specialize in a field of study. For example, they may earn a Master's degree or a doctoral degree (PhD). To pursue a career in law or medicine, students must earn a juris doctor (JD), or Doctor of Medicine (MD) respectively. A Doctor of Education (EdD) is another common advanced degree.
- Career, technical, or vocational education offer sequences of courses directly related to preparing individuals for employment in current or emerging occupations that do not require a Bachelor's or advanced degree.
- Occupational education or apprenticeship programs also help prepare students for specific careers.
- Tech-prep programs are a sequenced program of study that combines at least two years of secondary and two years of postsecondary education.

The policies in this system help make sure everyone has equal access to postsecondary education programs that take place in the schools described above. The [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 \(ADA\)](#) has different parts that make sure public and private schools do not discriminate against students with disabilities. [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) similarly prevents discrimination across all entities that receive federal funding.

The [Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008](#) creates opportunities for eligible students to receive financial aid for postsecondary education in the form of Pell Grants, Federal Student Loans, and work study opportunities. A student's eligibility for this type of aid is determined by their or their family's income, their citizenship status, their enrollment in a postsecondary institution, their continuing progress toward graduation, and their completion of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

Another major aspect of access to education concerns [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#). This strategy focuses on designing classes and lessons in a way that uses multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to give all students the opportunity to access content and succeed. UDL aims to support all students, including but not limited to students with disabilities, in meeting their educational goals.

The [Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006](#) solidifies the connection between education and work by increasing access to career and technical education programs. These programs often emphasize skills needed for success in specific trades or jobs, and many exist as part of a career pathway—a continuous and seamless string of preparatory activities leading from education to a career.

Eligibility

There are no age requirements for entering postsecondary education. Usually, a candidate must have a high school diploma or a General Education Development (GED) certification, have completed an application for a school they want to attend, and have a way of paying for school (scholarships, grants, loans, or otherwise) before entering the program. An advanced degree requires completion of a Bachelor's and specific coursework related to that degree.

Youth with disabilities are eligible to receive accommodations in postsecondary education if they disclose their disability and provide current documentation of their disability from a medical professional. Educational institutions, however, are not required to make any adjustment that would alter or waive essential academic requirements or that would fundamentally alter the nature of a service, program, or activity, or result in undue financial or administrative burdens on the institution.