

# Exploring Future Career Paths During the High School Years

How Students in Grades 7-12 Can Begin to Define Their Future Direction Today

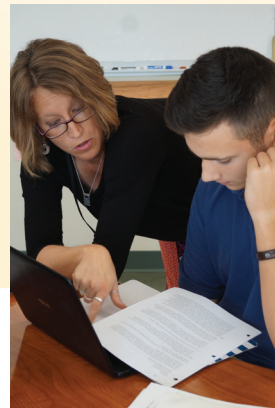
When parents and other adults ask younger people, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, a cute or unrealistically ambitious response is typically expected in terms of what the young child believes they will pursue as a career in the future. However, this question begins to take on more weight as students enter their middle and high school years. This is when it becomes helpful for students and their parents and caregivers to begin giving future career direction sincere thought and taking steps toward formulating solid plans.

Career exploration is an essential step in determining the right path for your student’s future, and it’s a great way to figure out whether a traditional college experience is next or if your student might be more inclined to pursue a trade, technical training experience, or military service.

## Students Should Get Started with Career Exploration by Getting to Know Themselves

Self-awareness serves as a compass guiding students toward fulfilling and meaningful career paths. Having established a clear understanding of their preferences, skills, and values, students can explore various industries and professions with greater confidence and purpose. Of course, parents, teachers, and school counselors will guide and support students along the way, but each student needs to undertake the self-reflection process with the goal of getting to know who they truly are—and who they want to be in the future.

The following steps can be used as a basic roadmap to begin the self-reflection journey before pursuing more targeted career exploration activities.



### STEP 1

#### Identify Skills and Interests with Reflection Questions

By the time students reach middle and high school, they tend to have a good sense of what they like to do, even if they cannot easily express their personal strengths or fully understand how their “likes” can translate into career satisfaction later. For instance, some individuals may thrive in hands-on, technical roles, while others may prefer more academic or managerial positions. Answering thoughtful and intentional reflection questions is a straightforward way to help students uncover valuable insights about themselves and identify where their most marketable skills may lie.

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These are just a few examples of questions to help students dig deeper into what they are passionate about and how to connect their passions to goals they might have for the future:

- **What subjects or concepts spark your curiosity or excitement?**
- **What do you most enjoy doing in your time away from school and extracurriculars?**
- **What extracurricular activities, sports, or clubs do you enjoy, and why do you like them?**

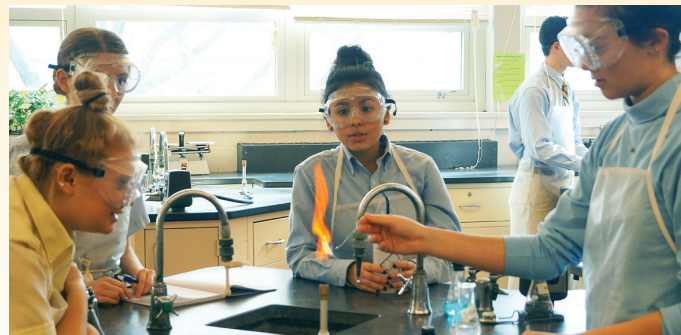
**Don't forget**—it's a good idea to jot down notes or even write out complete answers to the questions instead of just thinking about them. This way, students can refer back to answers as career exploration continues. Answers may also change over time, which is perfectly normal.

## STEP 2

### Think About Personal Core Values and Goals for Life

An extension of the self-reflection work described in Step 1 above, uncovering individual core values, is incredibly significant—even if it shifts or changes as the student grows and matures. Core values are related to how one approaches life and what are often “non-negotiables” as we make lifestyle choices and discover what kind of work environment—such as an office setting or outdoor job sites—best suits our preferences.

To start, it often helps to read through a comprehensive listing of core values and note which particular words resonate with your student. These lists will include principles like generosity, individuality, quality, and wealth, just to name a few. You can find resources online that will provide comprehensive listings of core values to explore, as well as valuable tips regarding narrowing down choices if you are unsure. Simply search for personal core values to get started.



## STEP 3

### Take Aptitude Tests

To complement the more open-ended self-reflection work outlined in the previous steps, professionally designed career aptitude tests can be extremely useful for helping students find their unique strengths. While tests like these can sometimes be intimidating, the results are often quite accurate. Students should keep an open mind and try a test or two. Many high-quality tests can now be taken online for free or at minimal cost, and high school guidance departments may also administer these as part of their regular curriculum. Parents and students should connect with a guidance counselor to learn more about testing options.

**Explore career aptitude tests and interest profiling resources online:**

- [bigfuture.collegeboard.org](http://bigfuture.collegeboard.org)
- [mynextmove.org](http://mynextmove.org)
- [collegeraptor.com](http://collegeraptor.com)

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## Career Exploration Next Steps: Get to Know the Jobs & Try Them Out

Once students have a sense of their personal values and possible future career pathways, it's time to delve into research on specific jobs that align with their goals. Begin by exploring broad categories of jobs—sometimes called career clusters—that call for related skillsets. STEM careers, business management careers, and professional trades are just a few examples of career clusters. There are lots of high-quality online resources that provide excellent overviews of these categories, as well as the individual jobs themselves.

Students and families should also take note of the requirements to obtain these roles and the future outlook regarding whether they are susceptible to negative impacts from automation, outsourcing, or other job security threats.

### **Explore career research resources online:**

*The following sites offer high-quality, data-backed information about many different career options.*

- [onetonline.org](http://onetonline.org)
- [collegescorecard.ed.gov](http://collegescorecard.ed.gov)
- [scoir.com](http://scoir.com)

While vital to the career exploration process, simply researching jobs cannot show students everything they need to know. Families can look into immersive ways for students to try jobs that interest them now. Job shadowing is a wonderful way to discover what the day-to-day looks like in many careers, and many professionals are willing to invite students into their workplaces for a few hours or a day to observe. Other ways to begin actively trying out career paths may include taking college courses in high school or “earning while you learn” in a summer job or internship opportunity.

## How Do I Ensure That My Student Finds the Best Career?

The path to identifying the right career is very personal, and each student will have a unique journey based on their individual preferences, goals, and circumstances. Taking an intentional approach that starts early with conversations, reflection, and deliberate exploration and continues through facilitated opportunities to get early experiences with careers of interest can build a strong foundation for future planning.



## YC Provides a Personalized Approach to Career Exploration for Every Student

Preparing students of all faiths and backgrounds for future success in college and their careers is at the core of our approach at York Catholic. The heart of YC's academic program is a dedication to helping students cultivate their passions, develop their strengths, and ready them for a rapidly changing world.

Have questions about our educational programs? **We invite you to get in touch.**

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