

Unit 2:

Guiding Youth Through College and Career Decisions



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1) MIDDLE SCHOOL



The process of making decisions about whether or not to attend college, which college to attend, and your future career can be overwhelming, intimidating, and daunting. **We ask youth to make these huge decisions when they are still very young** and, likely, have had very limited exposure to potential jobs and the wide variety of options available. Now, as a result of School Choice and the popular development of high school pathways, we are asking youth as young as 11 and 12 years old to begin making decisions about their futures. **OST programs can play a pivotal role in providing the necessary support and exposure** youth need as they explore their options and navigate the decision-making process.

Research has shown that middle school is the time when youth can benefit the most from career exploration through “a process of building self-awareness, learning about potential careers, and developing a plan for reaching future goals” (McAvoy 1). By the end of middle school, many youth are given the opportunity to select their high school with the advent of School Choice programs, Magnet schools, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathway programs. This is often seen as the first step toward college and career decisions, however, it is important to remember that when making this decision, youth are not locked into any particular choice. Throughout high school their tastes and preferences

may change, they may learn of new opportunities and possibilities, or simply change their mind. Any number of factors can influence a change during this time of adolescent development.

During the middle school years, it is important to provide a wide variety of college- and career-focused experiences for youth and expose them to many different possible career paths. Youth should be able to envision themselves in a variety of career fields. A foundation can be laid during elementary school by integrating information about the variety of careers throughout the curriculum, but during middle school this should become an active focus.

MIDDLE SCHOOL CAREER EXPLORATION IDEAS

- 1) Career Exploration Activities:** Using sites like the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Student Desk](#), invite students to learn about careers that seem interesting to them. Then learn about the education and experience requirements needed to enter various fields.
- 2) Career-Related Projects:** Incorporate projects and activities that center around learning about aspects of different careers.
- 3) College Tours:** Middle school is a great time to tour a variety of local colleges and universities to give youth an idea of what nearby schools could be options for them. Include community colleges!
- 4) Family Career Interviews:** Have youth conduct interviews of their family members to learn more about their careers and the path they took to get there.
- 5) Career Day:** Invite local adults from a wide variety of careers to your program to share information about their career paths.
- 6) Job Shadowing:** Arrange opportunities for youth to visit someone on the job and learn more about what a typical day looks like for that particular job or career.

MIDDLE SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

The following activities have been developed as a building sequence aimed at helping middle school youth identify their interests and conducting research to find high school programs and activities that align with their interests.

The focus here is not so much on career and college selection, but more on using interest-driven research to explore their immediate ideas to take a first step (choosing a high school) in this long and winding path.

#1 - This is Me Web

This activity leads middle school youth through the exercise of taking an inventory of their interests and what they know about high school and themselves already. Their interests may align with career aspirations, or not. Either is okay! Click [here](#) for a link to the worksheet.

1. Explain to youth that they are going to create a web of things they are interested in and what kinds of things they may want to consider about choosing a high school or high school activities.
2. Once you've introduced the activity, have youth complete the [This is Me Web Worksheet](#) by writing their responses to each question on the web.
3. Circulate during the activity to help youth think through their responses if they get stuck or just check-in with them.
4. To wrap up, you can have youth share their responses with one another or invite them to share with the group. Have youth hold on to their This is Me Web for use in the next activity.

MIDDLE SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

#2 - School Alignment Research

The second activity in this sequence uses information from the **This is Me Web** to guide research on the high school options available to them. Click [here](#) for a link to the worksheet.

1. Explain to youth that they will be conducting research on the local area high schools and determining which schools they might be interested in attending based on the responses in their This is Me Web.
2. Then, share the [School Alignment Research Worksheet](#) with them as well as a list of websites for each of the schools in your area that would be possible for them to attend.
3. Set them up on computers to conduct their research and complete the School Alignment Research Worksheet by writing in responses to each question based on the information they are able to find.
4. Circulate during the activity to help conduct searches or direct youth toward information on the school's sites and check-in on their progress.
5. To wrap up, have youth share their findings as well as which schools are most interesting to them and why.
6. As a follow-up to this activity, it may be helpful to have representatives from as many of the high schools as possible to come visit and talk with the youth about their programs and activities and answer any questions youth may have.
7. This could also be a great opportunity for a family night where parents and guardians could also attend.

NOTE: You may want to conduct this sequence of activities each year from 6th grade through 8th grade as youths' choices and interests may change.

2) HIGH SCHOOL



The goal in middle school is to have youth work toward identifying which high school is a good fit for them, that may or may not be connected to their college and career pathway. However, in high school youth should really shift toward planning their future and embark on their college and career decision-making process.

During high school, it is recommended to continue with the career exploration activities mentioned above in the middle school section, such as college tours, career days, and more. As an OST program, these are all activities that you can organize for your participants as an enhancement to what they may be offered through their schools.

HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

The following activities have been developed as a building sequence aimed at helping high school youth research careers that align with their interests, strengths, and ideas about their future and create profiles on the pathways to those careers.

#1 - HS Interest Inventory

Similar to the Middle School This is Me Web, this activity leads high school youth through the exercise of taking an inventory of their interests, strengths, weaknesses, and desires for the future. Click [here](#) for a link to the worksheet.

1. Introduce the activity by explaining to youth that they will be identifying their interests and strengths and weaknesses, as well as thinking about some aspects of their future life.
2. After introducing the activity, have youth complete the [Interest Inventory Worksheet](#) by writing their responses to each question or prompt.
3. Circulate during the activity to help youth think through their responses if they get stuck or just check-in with them.
4. To wrap up, you can have youth share their responses with one another or invite them to share with the group. Have youth hold on to their Interest Inventory for use in the next activity.



HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

#2 - Career Alignment Research

In this activity, youth will use the information from their Interest Inventory to research careers that align with their interests, strengths, and desired lifestyle. Click [here](#) for a link to the worksheet.

1. Explain to youth that they are to use the information from their Interest Inventory to begin finding and researching careers that align with their interests and strengths. Explain that this information will help them begin to understand which careers might be of interest to them and will provide valuable information for the next activity.
2. Share the [Career Alignment Research Worksheet](#) with youth and set them up with a computer to work on to begin researching careers that incorporate their interests and skills. Make yourself (and maybe others) available to youth who may need some help thinking of careers that align with their interests and skills. Others may need help with specific search terms or finding the information to complete their research. Youth should complete this worksheet by writing in the information they find through their research.
3. To wrap up, have youth share their findings as well as which careers are most interesting to them and why.
4. As a follow-up to this activity, it may be helpful to have professionals in each of the youth's careers of interest visit to speak with youth about their experiences, pathways, and advice. This could also be a great opportunity for a family event.

It is worth mentioning to youth in high school that it is okay to change careers! This is an important point that should be emphasized to students early on. If students feel locked into one particular choice for the rest of their lives, it may have debilitating effects on their ability to make decisions regarding their future.

HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

#3 - Pathway Profiles

The final activity in this sequence invites youth to use what they have learned so far about careers of interest and begin researching the educational pathways into those careers. The goal of this activity is to give youth a starting point for researching post-secondary opportunities that are of interest to them and aligned with their interests and skill sets.

From here, youth will be able to begin researching each of the schools, training programs, or other experiences they've identified more deeply to identify which might be a good fit for them. Click [here](#) for a link to the worksheet.

1. Explain to youth that in this final activity, they are going to research the possible pathways into their careers of interest and create a profile for each one. This will include schools that offer degrees or training programs and details about those schools and programs.
2. Share the [Pathway Profiles Worksheet](#) with participants and set them up with a computer. Explain that they should use the template to complete one profile for each possible pathway into their careers of choice by responding to each question or prompt in the template. Youth should plan to complete many profiles.
3. Throughout the activity, make yourself available to youth to help with their searches and answer questions as needed.
4. At the end of this activity, you may want to meet one-on-one with youth to discuss their findings and help them identify the next steps for learning more about the opportunities they've identified.

Note: These activities may take more than one session. They can take as long as you'd like, given that youth are engaged in the process and find it valuable.

3) ECONOMIC CONTEXT

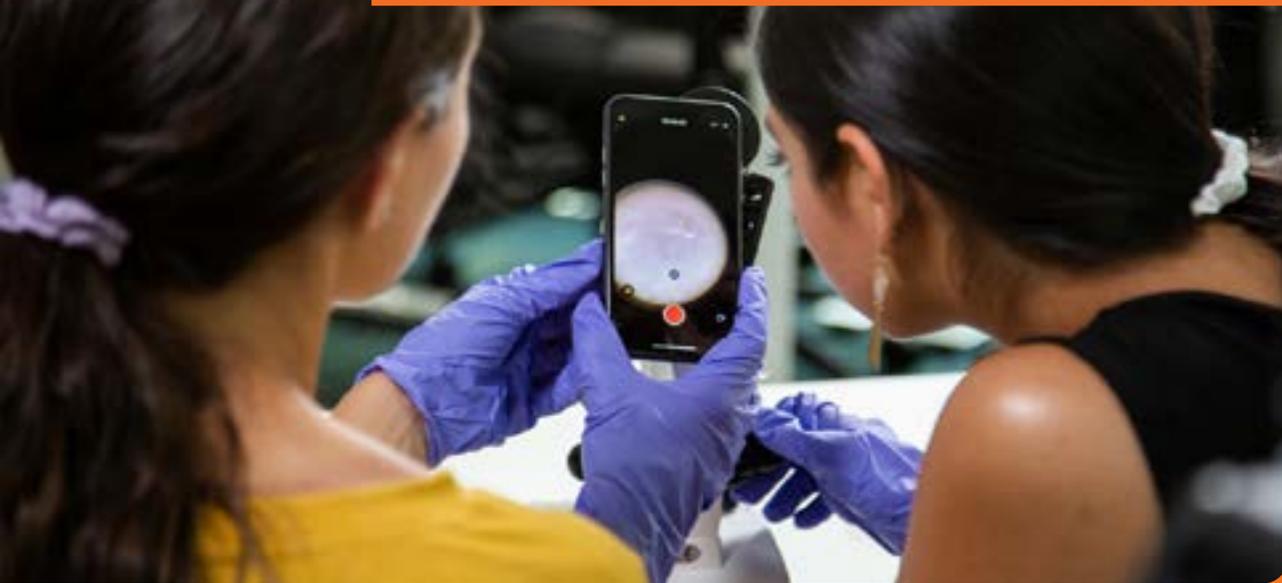


It is important to make sure youth have some understanding of the economic context surrounding the decisions that lie ahead of them related to post-secondary education and careers. Understanding salaries and wages and the associated economic implications can help inform their decision-making process related to higher education and their future careers.

The following resources can help you provide some necessary economic context to your students:

- [Lesson Plan: Understanding Salaries and Wages](#), Wells Fargo
- [Lesson Plan: Calculating Wages and Income](#), Consumer Math Course
- [ALICE Report](#), United Way
 - ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. This is a new way of defining and understanding the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but not enough to afford a bare-bones household budget.
- [ALICE: Who is Struggling in Maryland?](#), United Way of the Lower Eastern Shore
- [Planet Money Podcast](#), NPR

4) ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Here are some additional resources for guiding youth through the college and career research and decision process:

- [Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success](#), ACTE Online
- [College and Career Planning Worksheet](#), EverFi
- [K-12 Student Resources](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Understanding Employment Projections](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [How to Choose a Career](#), College Factual
- [College and Career Awareness Activities for Elementary and Middle School Students](#), American Council on Education (Please Note: this link initiates an automatic download of the document)
- [Teen Career Exploration: Resources for High School Students](#), Career Vision
- [10 Things for High School Students to Remember](#), Live Career

WORKS CITED

McAvoy, Dawn, et al. Career Exploration in Middle School: Setting Students on the Path to Success. Alexandria: Association for Career and Technical Education, www.acteonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ACTE_CC_Paper_FINAL.pdf . Accessed Sep. 17, 2020.



The Career and College Readiness Toolkit is an initiative of the Maryland Out of School Time Network. To learn more and find more resources, visit www.mostnetwork.org/initiatives/CCR.