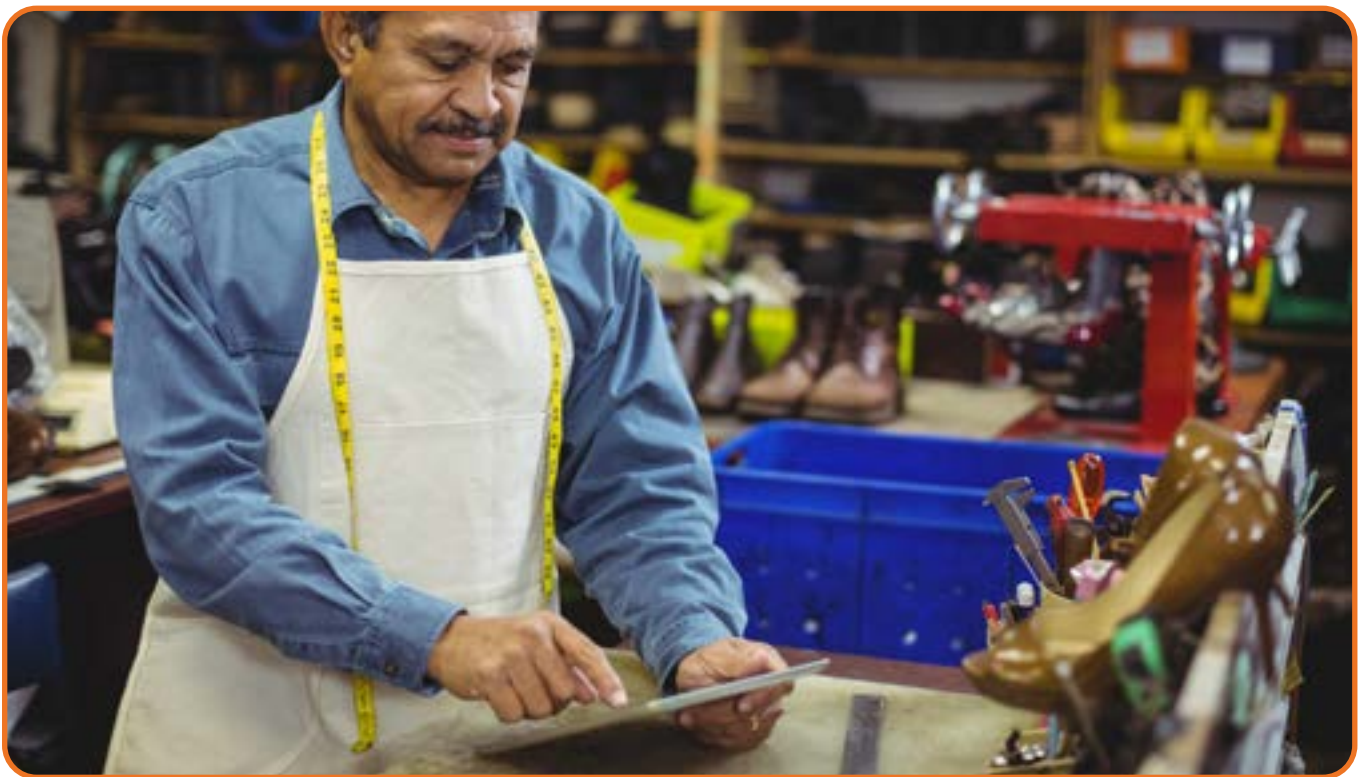


# Unit 5:

## Alternative Post-Secondary Options



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# 1) INTRODUCTION



There are a wide variety of options available to students after completing high school and while pursuing a bachelor's degree at a traditional college or university is often seen as the standard path for post-secondary education in the United States, **there are a growing number of alternatives and an increasing number of people choosing an alternative path.** There have been alternate options for post-secondary education for decades such as trade schools and work-based training, but recent years have yielded a wider variety of options such as bootcamps and online micro-credentials. "Since 2000, participation in certificate programs, apprenticeships, and competency-based education programs has increased rapidly, and MOOCs [Massive Open Online Course] and bootcamps have emerged and grown quickly in a short time. As one example, the number of certificates awarded by Title IV–eligible post-secondary institutions increased by 73 percent from 2000 to 2013, a period during which the number of bachelor's degrees awarded increased by 49 percent" (Brown and Kurzweil 3). For many students, for many reasons, a direct-to-college pathway is not the best option and college in general may not be their best option.

As with all considerations of post-secondary options, these alternative options should also be researched and addressed through the activities and suggestions found in **[Unit 2 - Guiding Youth Through College and Career Decisions](#)** of this toolkit.

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## Advantages and Disadvantages of Post-Secondary Alternatives

There are many benefits to pursuing an alternative post-secondary pathway. “While there is a great deal of variation, alternative credentials and pathways typically take less time, have more flexible formats, and are more directly aligned with employer-defined skills than traditional degree programs” (Brown and Kurzweil 3). Many certificate and licensure programs last as little as one to two years and cost less than pursuing a bachelor’s degree. These programs may be offered by trade schools, community colleges, private organizations, nonprofit organizations, traditional colleges and universities, employers, or industry associations and be taught in-person, online, or on the job. Perhaps most importantly, these alternatives often focus more directly on the skills needed to perform a specific job and work within a specific industry than bachelor’s degrees; meaning that students should be able to walk away from these programs and right into employment.



One major down-side to alternative post-secondary options is that they often lack quality assurance and thorough assessment of the value they are providing, as well as longitudinal data to support evidence of their success. In other words, they may make false claims, have insufficient data to support their claims, or simply not deliver on the promises they make to participants. Alternative pathways can also be quite costly and may not offer scholarships or financial aid that is typically available to college-going individuals. Additionally, “employers routinely report that advancement in management, creative, and professional roles requires not only ongoing skill development but also critical thinking, communication skills, and adaptability. These more general professional competencies are rarely the focus of short-term skills-focused programs but are (or should be) the domain of degree programs” (Brown and Kurzweil 42).

## The Impact of COVID-19 on Post-Secondary Options



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting closures will have significant and lasting impact on education systems at all levels that is hard to predict. However, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s COVID-19 Monthly Update on Higher Education Enrollment, “undergraduate enrollment is running 4.0 percent below last year’s level, and... overall post-secondary enrollment is down 3.0 percent as of September 24 [2020]. Most strikingly, first-time students are by far the biggest decline of any student group from last year (-16.1percent nationwide and -22.7 percent at community colleges).”

This impact stretches all the way through the education pipeline from high school to the workforce. Current high school juniors and seniors have limited access to the ACT and SAT exams which are typically required for college entrance. In some cases, colleges and universities, such as Case Western Reserve University, have waived this requirement for the current / forthcoming

semester stating that they will not require scores from these tests for applications (Horn). Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 has reached the workforce-learning arena and companies and organizations have been forced to cancel in-person training and companies are increasingly concerned about the talent pipeline from colleges and universities since recruiters aren't able to be on-campus.

"It's often said that education is "countercyclical" to the market, meaning that demands for educational services increase in times of economic downturn" (Horn), but that is no guarantee in these unprecedented times. "Given the uncertainty around the length of this recession, and the availability of short-term "bootcamp" like programs, people may be unwilling to enroll in longer (and often costlier) programs. Bootcamps and other programs that offer income-share agreements (ISAs) to help students finance their education face both an opportunity and challenge" (Horn). As people are already facing job losses, the lure of pursuing a program that requires no up-front costs is appealing, but the business model for these types of programs threaten their very existence since they only get paid if their graduates find employment.

## HOW TO SELECT THE BEST FIT FOR POST-SECONDARY TRAINING

In their [Career and College Planning Guide](#), Howard County Public Schools recommends this short checklist to help youth select the training that is right for them. This applies most directly to career and trade schools, but can also be applied more broadly to all post-secondary experiences.

- Make sure the school is authorized to operate.**
- Find out about support services offered.**
- Find out if the school is accredited.**
- Find out if the school qualifies for federal financial aid.**
- Ask about the admissions policy.**
- Ask about the refund policy.**
- Check the program carefully.**
- Get all the policies in writing, in the school catalog.**
- Check out the instructors' qualifications.**
- Read and understand what you sign.**
- Ask about job placement.**



## Activity: Post-Secondary Alternatives Presentation

In this activity, students will research an alternative post-secondary pathway and give a small presentation. This activity could be done in one session or over the span of a few days.

- 1) **Assign or have students select** one of the following alternative post-secondary pathways: certificates, licenses, two-year degrees, or military.
  - You can also break this list down into smaller categories if you like.
  - Students can work as individuals, pairs, or small groups depending on how you'd like to structure the activity.
- 2) **Provide time for students to research the pathway** and complete information on the [Alternative Post-Secondary Pathways Research](#) sheet.
  - You will also want to make sure to point students in the direction of solid resources to use for their research. The resources listed below in each pathway section can provide a good starting point.
- 3) **After completing their research, instruct students to create a brief presentation** about their assigned or chosen pathway that includes all the information from their research.
  - You may choose to add in additional questions / prompts to further guide their research.
- 4) **Students will share their presentations** with the group and answer any resulting questions or be able to point others toward more information.



### General Resources for Alternative Post-Secondary Options

- [Private Career Schools in Maryland](#), Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC)
- [Non-Degree Credentials, Work-based Learning, and the American Working Class](#), American Enterprise Institute
- [Types of Post-secondary Options](#), Maryland Public Schools
- [Post-High School Options, Career Schools in Maryland - Career and College Planning Guide \(p.4\)](#), Howard County Public Schools
- [Selecting a Private Career School: A Consumer's Guide for Students](#), Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC)
- VIDEO: [Comparing Vocational vs. 2-year vs. 4-Year Colleges](#), Khan Academy
- [Gaining Traction After High School Graduation: Understanding the Post-Secondary Pathways for Baltimore's Youth](#), Baltimore's Promise
- [Grads2Careers](#), Baltimore City Public Schools, Mayor's Office of Employment Development
- [Secondary Transition Planning Guide for Individuals with Disabilities](#), Maryland Public Schools
- [National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Build Your Path - A Guidebook for Built Environment Careers](#), Maryland Center for Construction Education & Innovation // [Related Videos](#) // [Related Podcasts](#)



## 2) CERTIFICATES



**Post-secondary certifications are vocational awards that require less than two years to complete**, usually in middle-skill jobs with a goal to quickly prepare workers for the job. “Certificates are the fastest growing post-secondary credential, and second only to Bachelor’s degrees in the number earned each year” (Carnevale, et al, “Certificates”). Certificate programs are typically offered by community colleges, trade schools, and through non-degree courses at colleges and universities. Most certificate programs are designed for people with a high school diploma or GED.

**“People usually earn certificates to help them prepare for a specific occupation;** in other words, certificates are for people who want to train for a job rather than to earn a college degree. In some cases, however, a certificate can pave the way to college because certain programs’ credits count toward a future degree. And for some people, certificate programs help them prepare for licensure, certification, or other career-related qualifications” (Torpey 3).

**Program Length:** Certificate programs can last anywhere from a few months to several years.

- Short-term certificates require less than one year of instructional time.
- Medium-term certificates require one to two years of instructional time.
- Long-term certificates require two to four years of instructional time.



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**Types of Jobs:** There are a multitude of jobs that certificate programs can lead to, mostly within the fields listed below:

- Aviation
- Agriculture / Forestry / Horticulture
- Auto Mechanics
- Business / Office Management
- Computer and Information Services
- Construction Trades
- Cosmetology
- Culinary / Food Service
- Drafting
- Electronics
- Healthcare
- Metalworking
- Police / Protective Services
- Refrigeration, Heating, and Air Conditioning
- Transportation and Material Moving

**For more information about specific certifications for these jobs:**

- [Appendix A from the Maryland Community Colleges Continuing Education: Workforce Training Reports \(p. 10\)](#), Maryland Association of Community Colleges
- [Certificates: A Fast Track to Careers](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Types of Certificate Programs](#), Campus Explorer



**Earning Potential:** “Certificate holders’ earnings are similar to those of workers with some college but no degree, and at the midpoint between a high school diploma and an Associate’s degree” (Carnevale, et al, “Certificates” 19). **On average, certificate holders earn slightly less than \$35,000 a year.** “People who work in the occupation in which they earned their certificate usually benefit more financially than those who work outside their certificate field” (Torpey 11).

## General Resources for Certificates

- [Certificates: A Fast Track to Careers](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Will I Need a License or Certificate for My Job?](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees](#), Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce
- [Types of Training: Certifications](#), CareerOneStop
- [Certification Finder](#), CareerOneStop
- [Exploring Post-secondary Certificates and Their Relationship to Earnings: High School Graduates at Age 25](#), Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center
- [What Are Certificate Programs?](#), Campus Explorer
- [Do Students Benefit from Obtaining Vocational Certificates from Community Colleges?](#), The Brookings Institution
- [Accredited Online Certificate Programs](#), Accredited Schools Online
- [Certificate Programs that Lead to Well-Paying Jobs](#), The Balance
- [10 Six-Month Certificate Programs That Lead to High-Paying Jobs](#), Indeed

### 3) LICENSES



Licenses, just like certifications, **demonstrate that an individual has specific knowledge or skills necessary to perform a certain job.** Licenses are required, by State law, for workers in certain identified fields as a measure to ensure that only individuals who are skilled, competent, and ethical practice in a given occupation. In order to obtain a license, you must provide evidence that you meet the state's standards for that occupation or career. "Steps include completing specified training, logging a designated amount of work experience, and taking a licensure exam. Most exams assess knowledge of work processes, codes, policies, standard practices, and more" ("Licensed Occupations"). Many licenses require a degree as part of the standards for a particular profession, such as lawyer, doctor, or teacher.



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The terms 'certification' and 'license' are often used interchangeably, however, they are not the same. **The key difference between them is that a certification is not usually required for a job, but a license is legally required for anyone practicing certain professions.**

**Types of Jobs:** In many states, licensed occupations include the following list of professions:

- Building Contractors
- Counselors
- Cosmetologists
- Doctors
- Electricians
- Land Surveyors
- Lawyers
- Nurses
- Teachers
- Therapists



**Earning Potential:** As with all professions, the earning potential of licensed occupations can vary depending on the level of education or experience and the state where the individual practices. "Workers with licenses earn considerably more than those without: \$18.80 per hour for the median unlicensed worker versus \$25.00 for the median licensed worker" (Nunn).

## General Resources for Licenses

- [Licensed Occupations](#), CareerOneStop
- [Do You Need a License?](#), CareerOneStop
- [License Finder](#), CareerOneStop
- [Maryland Community Colleges Continuing Education: Workforce Training Reports](#), Maryland Association of Community Colleges
- [More and More Jobs Today Require a License. That's Good for Some Workers, but Not Always for Consumers](#), Harvard Business Review
- [Will I Need a License or Certificate for My Job?](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

## 4) TWO-YEAR DEGREES



A two-year degree, typically known as an **associate degree**, can prepare someone for some of the fastest growing professions in a relatively short amount of time. The completion of an associate degree can increase earning potential, lead to further education, and more employment opportunities. Associate degrees generally offer more flexibility in what to study and how to study it through scheduling and online learning options. Pursuing an associate degree has many benefits such as:

- **Saving money** - If the goal is to earn a bachelor's degree, starting out with an associate degree can be a cost-saving way to make progress toward a bachelor's without committing to a 4-year college or university right out of high school.
- **A chance to catch up** - For students with low grades exiting high school, pursuing an associate degree can provide an opportunity to gain more educational experience before transferring to a more traditional college or university.
- **Programs and coursework tailored to industry expectations** - If entering a career is more of a focus, an individual can gain more hands on experience (via co-ops, internships, and work-study opportunities integrated into the degree program) and industry-relevant skills through an associate degree than pursuing a bachelor's degree.
- **Learn and gain more experience** - Starting out with an associate degree can provide more time for individuals who don't know what they want their career to look like to explore their options. This could be a good opportunity to try out a few

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different interests while still gaining experience, learning new things, earning credit, and saving money. Trying on a variety of careers is much less expensive at a community college than a 4-year institution.

### **Types of Associate Degrees:**

- **Occupational degrees** train individuals for specific occupations. With an occupational degree, graduates should be able to move directly from coursework into a job.
- **Transfer degrees** are designed as a stepping stone to a bachelor's degree. When planned and executed properly, all classes and credit earned during this type of associate degree will transfer to a 4-year college or university.

**Program Length:** It typically takes about 2 years, 60 credits, or 20 classes, to complete an associate degree offered by public community colleges, private 2-year colleges, for-profit technical institutes, and many 4-year colleges and universities.

**Types of Jobs:** There are a wide variety of jobs available to those with associate degrees in an even wider variety of industries and fields. To get a better idea of the jobs available to associate degree holders, visit these resources:

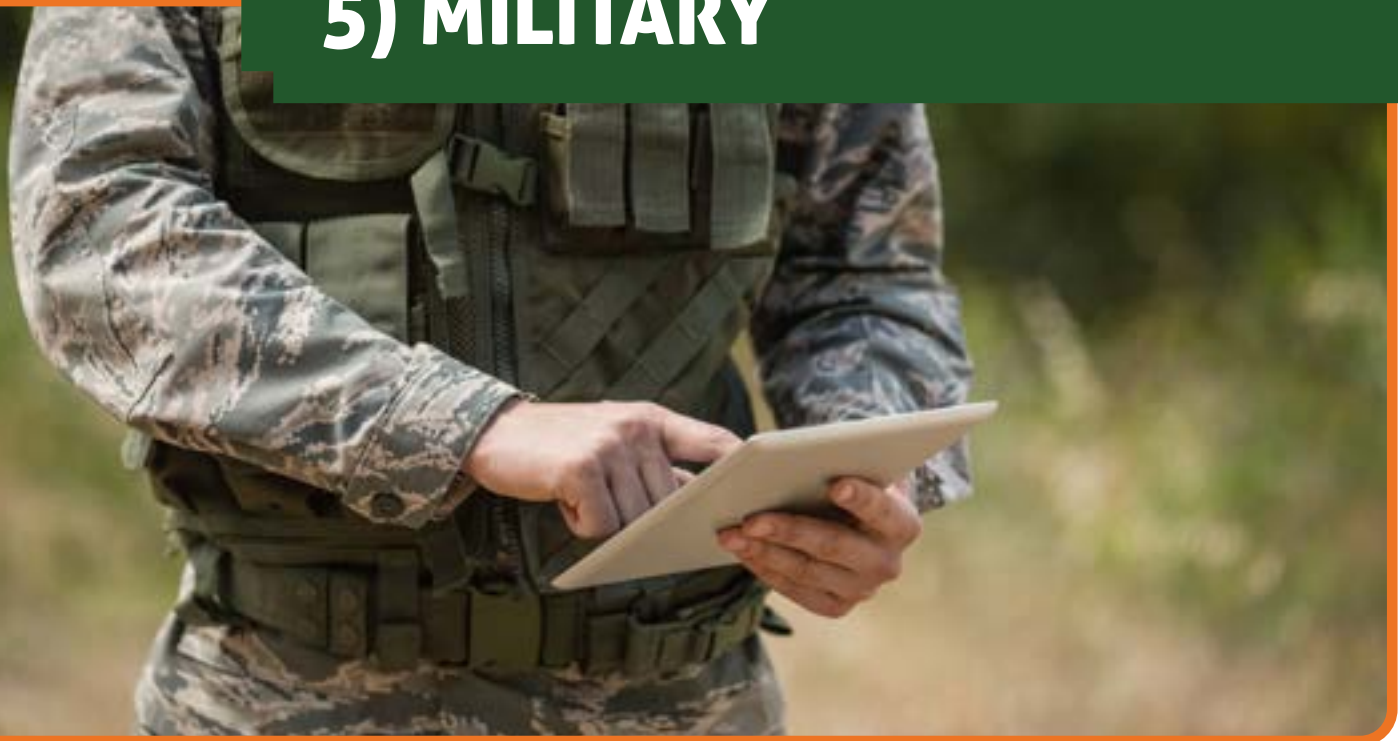
- [Associate Degree: Two Years to a Career or a Jump Start to a Bachelor's Degree \(pg. 5\)](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Highest Paying Associate Degree Jobs](#), University of the Potomac

**Earning Potential:** Individuals with an associate degree only (no higher degree earned) earn a weekly income of \$874 on average, compared with \$749 for high school graduates with no diploma and \$1,281 for those with a bachelor's degree ("The Economics Daily").

## **General Resources for Two-Year Degrees**

- [Why Community College?](#), Maryland Association of Community Colleges
- [Maryland Community Colleges](#), Maryland Association of Community Colleges
- [Associate Degree: Two Years to a Career or a Jump Start to a Bachelor's Degree](#), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [Two Year Public Designated Statewide Programs](#), Maryland Higher Education Commission
  - Certain community college programs are designated as statewide programs and students may enroll in these programs at the same rates as in-county residents if a particular program is not offered by the local community college or a student cannot enroll due to enrollment limits.
- [Academic Program Inventory](#), Maryland Higher Education Commission
  - Search for programs offered at colleges and universities in Maryland
- [The Pros and Cons of Pursuing a 2-Year College Degree](#), OSAU
- [Highest Paying Associate Degree Jobs](#), University of the Potomac
- [24 Highest Paying Associate Degree Jobs](#), GetEducated.com

# 5) MILITARY



Joining the military after high school comes with a vast array of considerations and potential benefits. It is definitely a serious decision that should not be taken lightly, but if one decides to enlist, there can be some major lifelong benefits. Some jobs within any of the five branches of the U.S. military mimic that of a civilian job, where the individual works Monday through Friday with typical hours. Other positions, however, may involve more commitment, more unpredictability, and more volatile situations. A few of the potential benefits include:

- A steady paycheck and potential for bonuses
- Education benefits through programs such as the GI Bill and Tuition Assistance Program
- Advanced and speciality training
- Possibility for travel
- Tax-free room and board
- Health and Dental care
- Special home loans and discounts
- Highly sought-after skills, leadership, and training experience

There are both full- and part-time service options available for military service. For example, enlisting in the Army Reserves means that, under normal circumstances, you “work” one weekend a month and two weeks a year for training. People who are enlisted in the Army Reserves still have lives and jobs outside their military obligations, such as other meaningful employment. Learn more about [full- and part-time options](#) from the U.S. Department of Defense.





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## Careers & The Branches of Military

- [Service Branches](#), U.S. Department of Defense
- [Things to Consider When Choosing a Military Branch to Join](#), Sandboxx
- [Air Force Careers](#)
  - [Space Force Careers](#)
- [Army Careers](#)
- [Coast Guard Careers](#)
- [Marine Corps Careers](#)
- [Navy Careers](#)
- [U.S. Military Careers](#), LiveAbout.com
- [Full and Part Time Options](#), U.S. Department of Defense
- [Enlisted and Officer Paths](#), U.S. Department of Defense

## Benefits

- [Careers and Benefits](#), U.S. Department of Defense
- [Salary and Compensation](#), U.S. Department of Defense
- [Military Pay Charts](#), MilitaryRates.com
- [10 Benefits of Joining the Military After High School](#), Operation Military Kids

## Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Test

- [What is the ASVAB Test?](#), U.S. Army
- [ASVAB Fact Sheet](#)
- [ASVAB Career Exploration Program](#)
- [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery \(ASVAB\) Practice Test](#)

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**El paquete de herramientas de preparación universitaria y profesional es una iniciativa del Maryland Out of School Time Network. Para obtener más información y encontrar más recursos, visite [www.mostnetwork.org/initiatives/CCR](http://www.mostnetwork.org/initiatives/CCR)**