



Education After High-Control Religion

A 9-Step Guide to College, Financial Aid, Scholarships & Affordable Education

Leaving a high-control religion often means learning to make important decisions for yourself, including choices about education and career. If you were discouraged from higher education, never had the opportunity to attend college, or simply aren't familiar with the U.S. college system, the process can feel overwhelming. It doesn't have to be.

Financial assistance through federal and state aid, scholarships, affordable schools, and alternative education pathways may make college or career training more accessible than you think. This 9-step guide walks you through the process.

1. Explore Your Interests, Strengths & Career Options

You don't need your entire career figured out before starting college.

After spending years in an environment where educational and career choices may have been influenced by someone else's expectations, it can take time to discover what you actually want. ***Begin by asking yourself:***

- What subjects interest me?
- What are my natural strengths?
- What kinds of activities energize me?
- Do I prefer working with people, ideas, information, or things?
- What kind of work would I find meaningful and rewarding?
- What kind of lifestyle do I want my career to provide?
- Do I need a degree for the career I'm considering?

Try a Free Assessment - Self-assessment tools can help you identify interests, preferences, and potential strengths and give you ideas for fields and careers to explore.

Career interests:

[O*NET Interest Profiler](#)

This free tool, developed through the U.S. Department of Labor's O*NET program, helps identify your career interests and connects them with occupations you may want to investigate.





Personality:

[16Personalities](#)

This free assessment provides insight into personality preferences, strengths, and potential work environments.

You can also explore the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) through the official Myers-Briggs organization:

[MBTI Online](#)

Remember: These assessments are tools for self-reflection, not prescriptions for your future. Use the results as a starting point and consider them alongside your interests, abilities, values, financial goals, and real-world experience. If you're still unsure, that's okay. You can begin with general education courses while exploring different fields.

2. Find an Affordable, Accredited School

Look at community colleges, public universities, trade schools, apprenticeships, certificate programs, and online degree programs. A four-year university isn't the only path to a rewarding career. Community college can be an especially affordable starting point. You can complete general education courses, earn an associate degree, or transfer credits toward a bachelor's degree.

Trade schools, apprenticeships, and career-training programs can also provide direct pathways into skilled professions. As several members of our community discussed, education doesn't always mean a traditional four-year degree.

Compare:

- Tuition and fees
- Financial aid
- Accreditation
- Degree or program requirements
- Transfer policies
- Online and in-person options
- Graduation and completion information
- Career information for the program
- Time required to complete the program





Helpful resource:

[College Scorecard](#)

Don't choose a program simply because it is advertised as "fast" or "cheap." Look at the entire cost and what the credential can actually do for you.

3. Complete the FAFSA (*For students in the United States*)

The FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) is the starting point for federal financial aid.

A. Create your free StudentAid.gov account before completing the FAFSA.

[Create a StudentAid.gov Account](#) You may need information such as your Social Security number, tax information, income, assets, and information about your college choices. **The FAFSA is free.** *Be cautious of websites or services that charge you simply to submit it.*

B. Complete the FAFSA for the academic year in which you plan to attend school.

[Complete the FAFSA](#) Your FAFSA information may be used to determine eligibility for:

- **Federal Pell Grants**
- **Federal Work-Study**
- **Federal student loans**
- **State financial aid**
- **Some college-based aid**

Note: For the 2026–27 award year, the maximum Federal Pell Grant is \$7,395. Your actual award depends on your circumstances, enrollment, and other factors.

[Pell Grant Information](#) Don't assume you won't qualify. Complete the FAFSA and let the financial-aid process determine your eligibility.

[StudentAid.gov Help Center](#) Your financial-aid office can also help with: FAFSA questions, verification, state aid, scholarships, financial-aid appeals, and more.

Note for students outside the United States: Other countries have their own systems for government student aid, grants, and scholarships. Check with your country's education or student-aid authority for available programs.





4. Apply for State Aid & Scholarships

Federal aid isn't the only assistance available. Depending on where you live, your state may offer grants or other financial assistance. Your college may also offer scholarships.

Look for scholarships for:

- **Adult learners**
- **First-generation college students**
- **Low-income students**
- **Community college students**
- **Returning students**
- **Students entering specific careers**
- **Students with particular life experiences**

Try searches such as:

"Adult learner scholarship"

"first-generation college scholarship"

"Community college scholarship"

"Scholarship for [your intended career]"

[Scholarship Tips from Federal Student Aid](#)

A tip from our community: Don't stop after applying for one scholarship. Search your school's scholarship office, local organizations, professional associations, national scholarship databases, and organizations related to your particular circumstances or career interests. Even smaller scholarships can add up.

5. Understand Your Financial Aid Offer

Once your college processes your FAFSA, you'll receive information about the aid available to you.

Grants and scholarships: Generally, do not have to be repaid.

Work-study: Money you earn through eligible employment.

Loans: Money you borrow and generally must repay with interest.

Don't accept a loan simply because it is offered.





Compare the school's total cost of attendance with your grants and scholarships to determine what you will actually need to pay or borrow.

Evaluating Financial Aid Offers

Ask questions

One of the strongest lessons from our community discussion was: **use the resources available** to you. If you don't understand your financial-aid package, contact the financial-aid office. **Ask questions about grants, scholarships, work-study, loans, payment plans, and other assistance.**

You don't need to understand all the terminology before asking for help.

6. Consider Online College, Part-Time Study & Flexible Options

Online college can be a good option for adults balancing school with work or other responsibilities. **Look for an accredited, degree-granting college or university** that participates in federal financial aid.

Before enrolling, ask:

- **Is the school accredited?**
- **Will FAFSA/Pell funding apply?**
- **How much will the entire degree cost?**
- **How many credits can I transfer?**
- **How long do students typically take to graduate?**
- **Does the program lead to the career I want?**

Don't choose a school simply because it advertises a "fast" or "cheap" degree.

And remember: **part-time is still college**. Several members of our community discussed balancing education with work and other responsibilities. You may not be able to take a full course load, and that's okay.

Taking fewer classes may allow you to maintain employment, protect finances, and give yourself enough time to succeed academically. **Find a pace you can realistically sustain.**





7. Consider Alternative Pathways to Earn College Credit

Students can reduce the number of university courses needed by completing transferable college-level courses through alternative providers.

Sophia Learning
[Sophia Learning](#)

Study.com
[Study.com](#)

Both offer self-paced courses eligible for transfer credit at participating colleges.

Modern States & CLEP
[Modern States](#)

Modern States offers free college-level courses designed to prepare students for CLEP examinations. CLEP exams can allow students to demonstrate college-level knowledge and potentially earn college credit. **Important: Colleges differ in which CLEP exams they accept and how much credit they apply.**

Before paying for a course or taking an exam:

1. Choose your degree.
2. Choose your university.
3. Identify the requirement you need.
4. Find the equivalent course or exam.
5. Ask your university whether that exact course or exam will transfer.
6. Ask what requirement it will satisfy.
7. Get confirmation in writing when possible.

Then take the course or exam. Sophia and Study.com do not award your bachelor's degree. Your degree comes from the accredited college or university that accepts the transfer credits. **The Golden Rule: Never assume a course or exam will transfer.**





8. Know Your Options, Use Your Advisors & Build Support

Don't try to navigate everything alone. One of the clearest themes from our community discussion was the importance of benefiting from the people and resources available.

Speak with your academic advisor for help:

- **Choosing classes**
- **Understanding degree requirements**
- **Selecting or changing a major**
- **Planning transfers**
- **Avoiding unnecessary courses**
- **Understanding deadlines**
- **Finding tutoring and academic support**
- **Exploring career pathways**

If you're unsure what classes to take, make an appointment with your advisor. You are not expected to understand the college system immediately.

Build a new support network:

For many people leaving a high-control religion, returning to school can also be an opportunity to meet people outside the world they grew up in.

Consider:

- **Student clubs**
- **Study groups**
- **Campus events**
- **Academic organizations**
- **Volunteer opportunities**
- **Career organizations**
- **Support groups**

You don't have to replace your former community all at once. Build your new support system gradually.





9. Take the First Step

If the process feels overwhelming, take it one-step at a time.

- ☐ Explore your interests and potential careers
- ☐ Research two or three schools or training programs
- ☐ Create your StudentAid.gov account
- ☐ Complete the FAFSA
- ☐ Make an appointment with an admissions, academic, or financial-aid advisor

You may be starting college at 18, 30, 45, or 60. There is no expiration date on learning. One of the most encouraging themes from our community discussion was **the importance of a growth mindset**. Don't let fear of making the wrong choice prevent you from making any choice. **You can learn, adjust, change direction, and try again.**

For someone rebuilding a life after high-control religion, **education is the best foundation**. It can be an opportunity to explore ideas, develop skills, meet people outside the world you grew up in, and decide for yourself what you want your future to be.

A Note from The Liberati

This guide provides general educational information and is not financial, legal, or academic advice. Financial-aid rules, deadlines, tuition, and transfer policies can change, so always verify current information with Federal Student Aid, your state, and the school or program you are considering.

A special thank you to the members of our community who shared their experiences, advice, and helpful resources. Thank you for being an inspiring example of what is possible when we give ourselves permission to learn, grow, and build the lives we want.

We wish you every success on your educational journey and hope this guide helps you take the next step toward a future of your own choosing.

