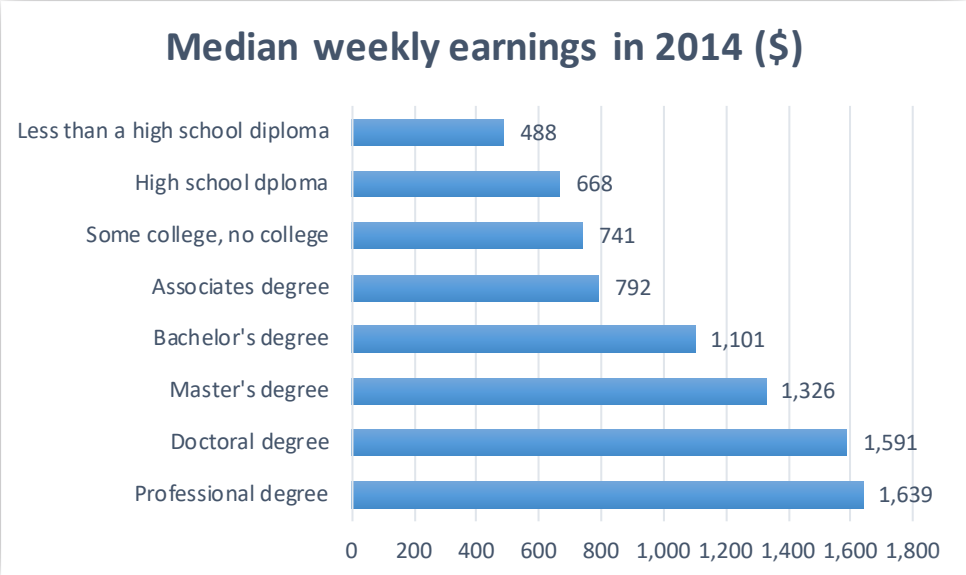
Supporting the Educational Goals of Young Adults with Mental Health Conditions

Why Is It Important to Support the Educational Goals Of Young Adults?

College education or training can be the passport to economic self-sufficiency for young adults with a mental health condition. Research has shown that young adults with mental health conditions struggle to complete high school and college more so than any other disability group.[1-5] However, post-secondary education or training is possible for anyone, especially accompanied by the use of accommodations, assistive technology, and strategic supports. You can help influence a young person to set and achieve a post-secondary education goal.

Post-secondary education is a protective factor that can insulate all people, especially those living with a mental health condition, from long-term unemployment, poverty, and system dependence, including the receipt of Social Security Insurance (SSI).[6,7] Post-secondary education is not limited to attending a college or university, and includes vocational education, trade school, and on the job training. Any of these types of post-secondary education can provide a pathway out of dead end and entry level jobs and move young adults toward the "primary labor market", which provides access to jobs that have benefits, such as health insurance and sick time. These jobs also often provide the "informal accommodations" that can make a job a success. It is important to prioritize education for young adults. The sooner a young person can begin to work in the primary labor market the higher the rate of return on their educational investment will be.[8,9]



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers

Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor

Cultivating Motivation Toward Educational Goals

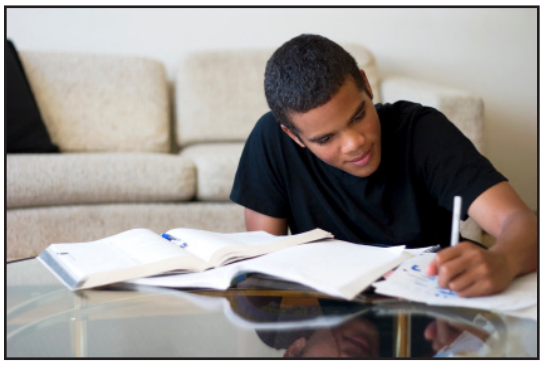
A first step is often to cultivate the interest and motivation to start or go back to school. Sometimes, young adults living with mental health conditions lack role models for completing higher education. Families and others may actively discourage a young person from trying. **Some things you can do to cultivate interest are:**

- Use motivational interviewing skills such listing the pros/cons of college
- Explore what they want to be at age 30; identify any dreams or aspirations related to financial goals
- Tie a young adult's dreams to the education that will be needed to achieve them
- Discuss the benefits of additional education; help young adults recognize the setbacks of not getting additional education

- Learn what are their perceived barriers to higher education and provide solutions
- If the young adult is planning to return to school, discuss their previous experiences to find out what happened. Ask questions such as "Why did you leave" What made school hard? What did you like about school? What did you do well? What did you need help with?" Did you have anything in place before that worked?

Strategies To Help Young Adults Achieve Educational Goals

Refer young adults to programs that have shown success in helping young adults graduate from high school and succeed in post-secondary education. Such programs can work with the young adult to set goals and teach the skills that they may need to develop to do better in school.



These organizations should include some of the following strategies:

- Help young adults to improve their executive functioning skills, that is teach skills essential to college success such as related to calendaring, task management (e.g., to do lists), prioritizing assignments, and breaking down large assignments into smaller manageable tasks.

Other areas to focus on include:

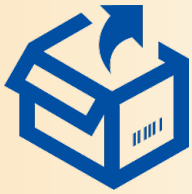
- Working with the young adult to develop a structured, but flexible schedule for study and class time, develop note-taking & test taking strategies, help to develop/find study groups and tutoring resources
- Helping the young to set up a system to maintain organization for individual courses (e.g. 3 ring binders, spiral notebook and folders, setting up laptop folders, Google Calendar, reminders, etc.); and
- Teaching the young adult how to put all assignments/deadlines into a calendar/planner and in their phone and help them learn how to prepare for the upcoming week

- Help with financial aid such as completing the required Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA; https://fafsa.ed.gov), identify if there are any loans that are in default, and help to find other sources of financial aid (e.g., scholarships, grants, personal loans, work study, etc.).
- Check in with the young adult to make sure that they have all of their books and materials by the second week of school
- Be aware of the add/drop and withdrawal periods. Check-in with the young adult before the end of them to help them assess if the classes and times are a good fit.
- Let the young adult know that it is common for all students to be stressed by school, especially at the beginning. Explore ways that young adults can reduce stress. Remind them that practicing self-care is even more important during school than when only working.
- Encourage participation extracurricular activities to develop and promote friendships and social connectedness.
- Keep on top of grades and attendance in class; do not assume that everything is going well. If the young adult is having problems with attendance, assignment completion, and test taking, ask them what's happening; for example, ask: "What is keeping you from finishing your assignments/getting to class? Is it always a problem or only sometimes? When is it easy to do it? When is it hard?" Then work with them to find ways to improve.

Acquire Educational Accomodations

- Encourage students to seek out educational accommodations and assistive technology by registering with the Office of Student Disability Services. To do so, young adults may need to explore how their condition affects their ability to perform in classes. If they had an Individualized Education Plan or a 504 plan in high school, ask them to think about what did and did not work.
- Be creative and persistent in acquiring accommodations that are **"outside the box"** of typical accommodations for students with other disabilities and better suited to the unique needs students with mental health conditions.

Some examples of "outside the box" accommodations are:



Advance warning or "pre-processing":

- If classes make a young adult nervous, it may help if the professor lays out what is going to happen at the start of class. This allows for "pre-processing" so that s/he can prepare mentally for what's to come, easing any anxiety about not being prepared for class.

Professors limit or change the way demand responses are requested:

- Being called upon in class or "demand responses", can cause a lot of anxiety. Limiting being called upon in class unless a young adult's hand is raised can be requested as an accommodation. If the professor has established a need for in-class participation that counts towards a final grade, the accommodation can be that the professor prepares the young adult before calling on them in class so that the student has time to ready themselves.

Broken time:

- If a young adult struggles with having to focus for a long period of time, a "broken time" accommodation may help. "Broken time" is different from "extended time." Having "extended time" involves having 150% of the time originally given to take an exam, or some call it, "time and a half." In "broken time," they work for a period of time on classwork during which they are allowed to take short breaks. They spend the same amount of time on the activity as everyone else, but the time is just broken up.

✸ Check out our tip sheet, Outside-the-Box College Accommodations and Job Accommodation Network (JAN) for more information on accommodations.

What About Going To School and Working?

Some young adults may want or need to work while going to school. Work with them to weigh the pros and cons of both work and school.

Some items to consider during this discussion:

- How much work is needed for income and the ramification for how many classes can be taken
- The flexibility of work and class schedules to accommodate both
- The degree to which work will positively impact their self-esteem and social connections
- The degree to which work hours and energy spent on work will impact school
- Time spent commuting between home, school, and work
- Adequate time for rest, leisure, treatment for mental health or physical health issues, and family/friends
- The important thing for you and the young adult to remember is that s/he can always try out either school only or work and school and then make a different choice during the semester
- Talk about ways that they can strike a healthy work (school)-life balance

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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Find these other helpful resources at the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research Website for publications:

- **Tools for School: Accommodations for College Students with Mental Health Challenges**
- **Outside-the-Box College Accommodations: Real Support for Real Students Tools for Schools II**
- **What is a 504 Plan and How Can it Help My Teen?**
- **My Mental Health Rights on Campus**
- **Teens on IEPs: Making my Transition Services Work for Me**

Resources for Creating an Education Goal Plan:

- **ReachHire - Tapping Campus Resources: http://reachhirema.org/going-to-school/college-life-pointers-for-success/tapping-campus-resources/**

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