A variety of opportunities exist after high school graduation. You may be eager to enter the workforce right away, or you may be considering a career, such as a teacher, that requires additional education and training.

As you explore options, you need to focus on bringing your career and educational aspirations together. Different careers have different education and training requirements. Learn the requirements of your career choice and elevate your future!

The workforce

If you want to enter the workforce directly after graduation, take opportunities to assess whether a particular industry is a good fit for you and is in high demand in your area before you seek additional training or education. Ask your school counselor about work-based learning opportunities in your school (see pages 12 and 13). The Virginia Employment Commission (www.vec.virginia.gov) offers help to anyone looking for job placement, interview training, or résumé writing.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships combine job-related technical instruction with structured on-the-job learning experiences. Participants in these programs earn wages at jobs and take related courses, typically working toward degrees. See our profile of an apprentice on page 13. For more information, visit the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry’s Web site at www.doli.virginia.gov.

Service learning

You may have served as a volunteer who has collected canned goods for a local food bank or raised money for a local nonprofit. Volunteering can help you gain useful leadership and business skills for a career. Some service-based organizations—such as Teach for America, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps—give participants opportunities to gain valuable work experiences while earning salaries or stipends.

Military

If you want to serve your country, get an education, earn a paycheck, and have a satisfying career, you should consider a career in the Armed Forces. The military offers on-the-job training and provides work experience that can be applied to many civilian careers. To enlist, you must be at least 17 and have a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate.
Community colleges

Community colleges provide quality education at a cost lower than four-year colleges and universities. Community colleges offer degrees that can lead straight to positions in high-demand technical fields or can transfer to four-year colleges. Through system-wide agreements, students who graduate from one of Virginia’s 23 community colleges with associate degrees and maintain certain grade point averages are guaranteed admission to more than 25 of the commonwealth’s colleges and universities. For more information, visit [https://www.vawizard.org/vccs/TransferGAA.action](https://www.vawizard.org/vccs/TransferGAA.action).

Four-year colleges or universities

A degree at a four-year college or university is required for some careers but is optional for others. Make sure you choose a college or university that matches your career interests. You won’t have to declare a major right away, but use the career Web sites on page 4 to narrow your choices. That way, you’ll start college with the confidence that you are in the best place to obtain marketable skills to enter the workforce.

Proprietary colleges/career colleges

Perhaps you want a four-year college degree in the future but don’t feel ready right now. Proprietary colleges often offer flexible class schedules and that meet the needs of full-time workers. These schools offer everything from bachelor’s and master’s degrees to specific career and technical training. Be sure to evaluate each school for its credentials, cost, school placement, and loan opportunities.

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What is an industry credential? 
Will you have to earn one to graduate?

As of the 2013–2014 school year, all 9th-grade students (graduating class of 2017) who plan to graduate with a Standard Diploma are required to earn an industry credential. Many students, parents, and teachers don’t know much about industry credentials, how to earn them, or how they can help after graduation. Knowledge is power, and since you are taking control of your academic and career planning, you need to know. So, read on!

There are many Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses that provide students with the technical knowledge needed to earn a credential. The credential may give you an advantage over others when pursuing further education and a career.

Here are some frequently asked questions that may help you as you move forward with plans for graduating from high school and earning industry credentials.

1. **What is an industry credentialing examination?**
   It is an exam that assesses your knowledge in a specific technical area. If you successfully complete certain courses within a CTE area and pass an approved exam, you can earn one (or even two) verified credits required for graduation.

2. **How do I earn a credential for graduation?**
   You must pass a credentialing exam from a list that has been approved by the Virginia Board of Education (see below). Each exam has a passing score. If you pass the exam, you earn that credential AND complete the credential graduation requirement. The best news is that you have a certificate in hand that you can be proud of and use to help yourself as you move forward with plans after high school.

3. **Which industry credentials will satisfy the graduation requirement?**
   There are more than 300 industry credentials on a list that is approved by the Virginia Board of Education. The list can be found at this link: [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/career_technical/path_industry_certification/index.shtml](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/career_technical/path_industry_certification/index.shtml). You may have heard of many of the exams: Microsoft Office Word, PowerPoint, and Excel; the Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth Examination; the Career Readiness Certificate; and SkillsUSA are just a few.

   The easiest way to determine what credential fits best with a CTE course you are taking is to speak to your teacher or school counselor.

4. **When is the best time to take a credentialing exam?**
   It is usually best to take a credentialing exam right after you complete a course or courses that cover the material on the exam. Makes sense, right?

5. **What does the credential do for me?**
   Earning an industry credential does not guarantee you a job, but it does look great on your job application and résumé. It also very well may be the deciding factor in your being hired over someone else without a credential. Credentials are valued by employers as a demonstration of workers’ knowledge, skills, and experience.

6. **What is the Virginia Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth Examination?**
   It is an exam that meets the credential requirement for graduating with a Standard Diploma. Employers from Virginia worked together to determine the kind of behaviors and skills that students need to enter any work environment and have the non-technical skills (soft skills) necessary to meet workplace expectations. A good work ethic, speaking and listening skills, creativity, teamwork, and Internet safety are just a few of the behaviors and skills covered by the exam.

   The information for the exam is covered in every CTE course offered in Virginia. So, if you have taken a CTE class, you have learned these skills. You have a good chance of passing the exam and meeting the credential requirement for earning a Standard Diploma.

Need more information?  
See your CTE teacher or school counselor!