

Graduation, Now What?

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As a mom of a graduating senior, I'm navigating a whirlwind of emotions. The prospect of sending my child out into the vast world is both exhilarating and terrifying. I find myself second-guessing every parenting decision I've ever made. Have we equipped them with enough knowledge and skills? Are they on the right path? The questions are endless, and the doubts, relentless.

In reflecting on my own children's future, I often find solace in the journey of the young minds I encounter through our local 4-H program. I'm immensely grateful for the foresight of those far wiser than myself who crafted the 4-H Pathway.

Today's youth are tomorrow's workforce, and the importance of post-secondary education is indisputable. Research highlights the growing number of high school graduates enrolling in further education, yet many lack the essential skills needed to thrive in their careers. This reality underscores America's pressing career readiness gap, with only a fraction of college students feeling adequately prepared for the workforce.

Enter 4-H, the nation's largest youth development organization. With a proven track record in cultivating critical skills required in today's workplace, 4-H empowers youth to explore, learn, practice, and experience a diverse range of opportunities inherent in its various project areas.

Here in Utah, 4-H goes beyond mere exposure, deliberately integrating research-based Career Readiness resources and curriculum into every facet of its program. The 4-H Pathway comprises four crucial steps:

Explore: "I might like to do this." By introducing youth to various topics before high school through engaging experiences like fairs and technology events, early interest in specific fields can blossom, enhancing performance and engagement.

Learn: "I can do this." Project-based learning deepens youths' understanding of skills relevant to their interests. An overwhelming majority of Utah 4-H participants express a desire to pursue careers aligned with their 4-H projects.

Practice: "I'm interested in this." 4-H provides hands-on activities and fosters social connections that lay the groundwork for successful careers, allowing youth to explore their passions in a supportive environment.

Experience: "I will be this." Real-world training opportunities are indispensable. Research indicates that a significant percentage of students who dropped out of high school might have stayed if they had access to experiential learning, including internships and service projects.

As I watch my own child take this pivotal step into adulthood, I'm reassured by the structured pathway and hands-on approach offered by organizations like 4-H. It's not just about academic credentials; it's about equipping our youth with the practical skills and confidence needed to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce. And with programs like 4-H leading the way, I'm hopeful for the bright futures that lie ahead for our graduating seniors.

Utah State University. (n.d.). *Career readiness*.

USU. <https://extension.usu.edu/utah4h/programs/career-readiness/>