

Walking with Youth

As They Discern Life After High School

Current high school students experience a considerable amount of stress when it comes to making decisions for life after high school graduation. Presbyterians place an intrinsic value on higher education, and many youth experience stress when deciding which college to attend. For some students, they are branded with a college onesie on the day of their birth. For others, they may be the first person in their family to consider higher education. Ministry leaders (paid, volunteer, or otherwise), should have at least a few ideas handy for when the time comes to walk with youth as they discern life after high school. Here are some best practices for helping youth discern life's next steps.

Begin with Scripture

High school students need healthy ways to discover more about their true self and who they were created to be. This exploration should be rooted in scripture and in community. One suggestion is 1st Corinthians 12:4-11. When studying this scripture in preparation for unpacking it with youth, try to remember what it was like to be a junior or senior in high school. For some, the possibilities of the future are exciting, and for others, the future is anxiety producing. Students can look more confidently to the future if they understand they are equipped with gifts given by God. Help students understand that gifts can be strengthened with experiences, healthy community, and spiritual disciplines.

Capitalize on Meaningful Experiences

If your program calendar is already full, and the thought of adding another event is overwhelming, then don't stress! Instead, notice what programming has significant influence for your particular context. In a 2021 survey conducted at Presbyterian College, 50 current college students shared the top church experiences that had the most positive influence on their lives. The top three influences for this group were:

1. Friendships within the youth group
2. Week-long youth conferences
3. Mission trips

Find ways to incorporate discussion about post-high school life into the programming that has positive influence. It is likely that the experiences with the *most* positive influence will be linked to experiences that offer lots of quality time as a group. For additional programming ideas, see the "Practical Ways to Walk with Youth" section.

"How could your church leaders have helped?": A Student Perspective

The same group of 50 college students were asked, "how could your church leaders have helped you better prepare for life after high school?" The responses had a common theme of connection. Students are seeking ways to be relational and ministry leaders can help. Below are a sample of the responses.

- "Going to school in another state where I didn't know anyone, my church leaders could have connected me to their mutual friends who lived and worked in ministry in the town of where I was going."
- "Maybe have some youth group nights for seniors like 'what to expect in college' and hear the experiences of current college students."

- “Given us more opportunities to talk with college students and/or college chaplains.”

Practical Ways to Walk with Youth

Based on the feedback of the current college students surveyed, high school juniors and seniors will benefit from vocational discernment and from interactions with current college students and/or staff. Ideas to create meaningful milestone traditions for youth in this season of life are below.

- Invite a college representative to youth programming. January and February can be a beneficial time of year for both juniors and seniors to begin thinking about life’s next steps. For example, the Office of Church Relations at Presbyterian College can visit your youth group or host your group on campus. Topics of discussion can include:
 - Introduction to vocational discernment
(In this stage of life, vocational discernment centers more on understanding the true self and what gifts and passions come naturally.)
 - How to find a community of faith in college
 - For parents/guardians: how to navigate financial aid
- Organize a tour of a college campus
 - Offer to take groups to tour colleges that are near your town, close to a mission trip site, or close to a weekend retreat location.
 - Contact the campus chaplain or the director of church relations before the tour. The chaplain or church relations role can help personalize the experience.
- Host a panel of college chaplains or current college students
 - Allow time for the panel to share experiences and offer advice for making the transition from high school to college. Encourage students to prepare questions ahead of time to ask the panel.
- Help students understand their spiritual gifts and how that can shape their course of study.
 - Having intimate knowledge of one’s spiritual gifts and an idea of vocations that spark energy and joy is a powerful tool when entering college.

The Church has a responsibility to help youth bridge their faith journey from high school to college. It is important, particularly in the junior and senior year of high school, that students begin to articulate their sense of identity as a child of God with specific gifts and passions. Presbyterian College has a vocational discernment workshop for this purpose. It can be offered in-person or virtually. Contact [Perrin Tribble](#), for additional information.

A Few Helpful Resources

The following resources are used in the workshop provided by Presbyterian College. The first three resources are engaging. The last resource is a PDF that unpacks each of Holland Party types and suggests possible majors or programs.

- [Spiritual Gifts Survey](#)
- [Knowdell Motivated Skills Worksheet and Card Sort](#)
- [The Holland Party Game Types](#)

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Office of Christian Formation: www.pcusa.org/formation

Presbyterian Youth Workers’ Association: www.pywa.org

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