



Step Ahead

Your Guide to Higher Education

DegreeSearch.org 2009

Thinking about going back to school? We can help. Deciding which degree to pursue, where to apply, and how to pay for college can be overwhelming, to say the least. **But it doesn't have to be.**

With a little bit of preparation, and a few helpful tips, we'll get you started on the right foot — ready to advance your education, boost your career and enrich your life.

In this guide to higher education, we'll cover three major steps along your path to academic enlightenment. How prepared are you? Use the following checklist to find out!

Education Preparedness Checklist



1. Make a plan

Decide what you're looking for and what's important to you

- Decide on a career path (*consider taking free aptitude tests for direction*)
- Choose a degree level (*based on which degree you've already earned*)
- Decide if you want to attend classes online or on campus
- Talk with friends, family or professionals who can help support and guide you in your decision

2. Consider your options

Request information from a few different schools and compare them

- Request information from two or three schools — if you only requested info from one school, you may compare additional options [here](#)
- Research the schools and programs you selected
- Research your financial aid options
- Obtain a copy of your college (*or high school*) transcript
- Prepare for your call with the “Questions For My Call” worksheet (*page 13*)

3. Enrollment and beyond

Make the commitment and take your life to the next level

- Enroll
- Explore the resources available to you
- Find a friend
- Focus on development
- Update your resumé (*leverage your degree*)
- Get your dream job!



Step 1: Make a plan

Congratulations! By considering a college degree, you have already set out on the right path. There is significant evidence to support the fact that people who earn a higher degree get paid more and are more likely to be employed.

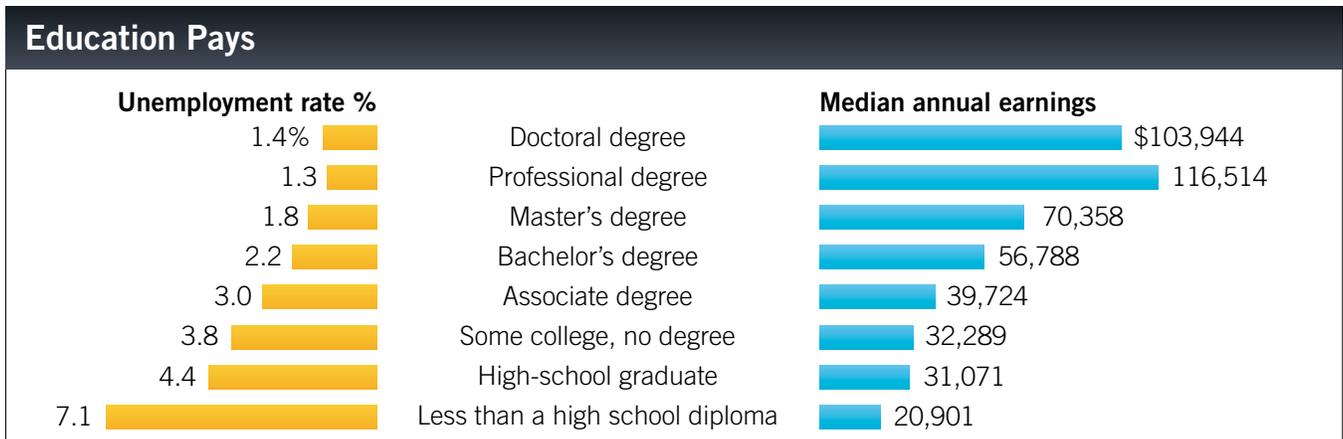


Fig 1.1 Source: 2007 [Bureau of Labor and Statistics](#), Current Population Survey

While the choice to advance your education may seem obvious, the choice of which school to attend can be just the opposite. There are so many college options out there that it can be confusing to sort through the possibilities. Defining an education plan can help you focus your search right away. Before even looking at colleges, ask yourself a few questions:

1. Can I afford school?

Regardless of the price, your degree will be well worth the cost. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), college grads earn an average of \$1 million more than high school graduates over their working life. Fortunately, even if tuition feels overwhelming, financial aid and scholarships abound. Don't worry, we'll go over all of that in more detail in Step 2 (*page 12*).

2. Why do I want a degree?

This “why” can highly influence which degree you should pursue. There are five common circumstances for wanting a higher degree, and each has its own education path. They are: the forgotten half, the mover upper, the specialist, the lane changer, and the diversifier. Which one fits you?



THE FORGOTTEN HALF

A report by the [William T. Grant Foundation](#) found that nearly half of adults in the United States have never attended college. They called this half of the population the “forgotten half,” stating that they are “the thousands of young men and women who aspire to work productively but never quite ‘make it’ to that kind of employment.” The obstacles they face are crippling:

- Their opportunities are shrinking for a job with a future
- Young workers age 20-24 suffer extraordinarily high unemployment rates
- Their income is in decline and has been for decades

It’s never too late to earn your degree. You stand to gain so much — not only the benefit of employability and higher income, but refined skills, a greater depth of understanding and the confidence and pride that can only come with great sacrifice and accomplishment. If you’ve never attended college, your choices are wide open:

- [Diploma](#) – Fastest graduation: generally 6-18 months. This is a good option if you are interested in trades like massage therapy or aviation technology.
- [Associate degree](#) – Fast graduation: generally 12-24 months. If you have an associate degree, you can usually apply your credits forward, somewhat reducing the time it will take to earn a bachelor’s degree.

- [Bachelor's degree](#) – Longest to graduate: generally 2-5 years. If you already have an associate degree, it may only take half that time. Of all undergraduate degrees, bachelor's have the greatest career outlook. Not only do bachelor's graduates earn more, the [U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics Occupational Outlook for 2016](#) states that 26% of new jobs will require a bachelor's degree or higher.



THE MOVER UPPER

In general, if you're looking for a way to increase your salary, a higher degree is the obvious path. For example, the average bachelor's graduate makes 43% more per year than an associate graduate. Most careers follow straightforward degree advancement. If you already hold a bachelor's degree in accounting, you should have no problem finding a school that offers a master's in accounting.

Degree advancement is fairly sequential. This means you must earn a lower degree to advance to the next step. The following chart can help you navigate the steps of degree advancement.

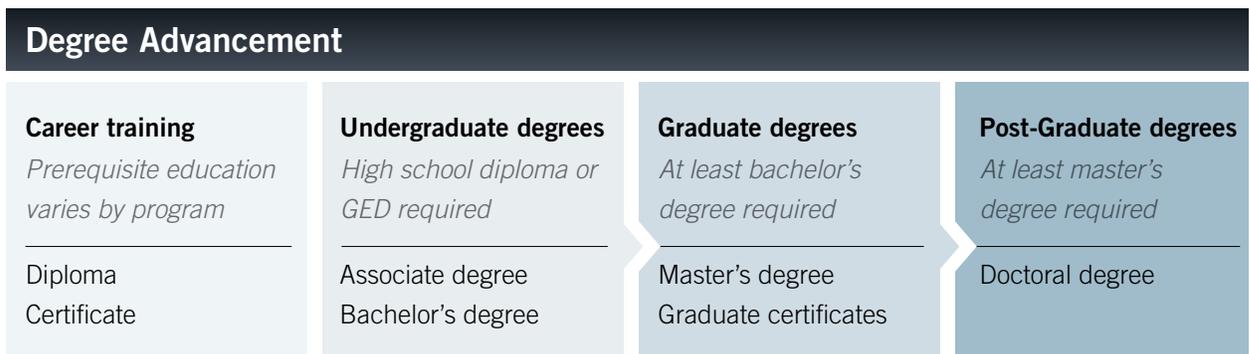


Fig 1.2



THE SPECIALIST

Picking a specialty can be challenging. Let's suppose you earn a general degree such as a Bachelor of Science in Business, so that you can be flexible when the time comes to choose a job. Years down the road, it may become clear that your *true* interest is in accounting or marketing. Earning a higher degree will broaden your knowledge of the topic at hand and sharpen your problem solving skills and industry insight.

Certificates are another way of specializing. Many technology jobs, for example, offer pay advancement upon completion of a course in a new computer language. Specialization certificates are also beneficial in health care and education careers.



THE LANE CHANGER

Are you happy at your job? If you're not, it might be time for a change. After years of working in sales, maybe you feel your true calling is in nursing. Your job should be something you love. If you feel passionate about something, your job can be much more fulfilling if you pursue that goal.



THE DIVERSIFIER

You already have a degree. Maybe your undergraduate degree was in graphic design and you feel like an MBA would help you manage your own design firm, or you're a business major with a knack for programming. You can have it all! The more degrees the merrier. Find something that will complement your skill set and strengthen your earning potential.

3. What is my career or life path?

What are your interests? Where do you excel? If you pursue that, you have a much better chance of being successful. Where do you want to be in 10 years? Is the degree you're considering a good launching point to reach that goal? If not, forget about it, and pick one that is.

4. What works best for me?

Your main attendance choices in education are traditional campus classes, online courses, or a mixture of the two. Do you have kids or a day job? You may need the flexibility of online courses. However, if you are not very self-motivated, you may prefer the structure of a traditional campus education. You can read more about the pros and cons of the different options here:

- [Distance Learning vs. Traditional College](#)
- [The Top Ten Benefits of Learning Online](#)



5. Who can help me decide?

If you're not sure what you want to do, there are lots of ways to figure it out.



FRIENDS AND FAMILY

The people who know you best are your friends and your family. Involve them in your decision. Get feedback as you consider factors like: degree level, area of study, emphasis, campus type, and time to graduate. They can be a great source of guidance and strength to you throughout the process.



CAREER COUNSELOR

If choosing a career path is intimidating or confusing, it may be helpful to enlist additional help. A career counselor will listen to your circumstances and guide you through some personality assessment tests to help point you in the right direction. They can also teach strategies for job hunting and help you develop a resume. [The National Career Development Association](#) offers some great tips in this article:

- [How to Find a Career Counselor](#)



ENROLLMENT ADVISOR

Each school has a team of enrollment advisors who can offer professional advice as you weigh your educational options. They can help you decide which program best fits your unique circumstances. Their role is to guide you through the enrollment process and ensure that the program you choose will give you a competitive advantage in the real world.



ONLINE TOOLS

There are dozens of tools online to help you understand your career options. The links and resources below should help you discover your strengths and options.

Personality Tests

The great philosopher Plato is often credited with teaching “Know thyself.” Knowing who you are and what your strengths are can be a great asset on the road to career enlightenment. Consider these free online personality tests.

- <http://www.kisa.ca/personality>
In spite of its plain interface, this Myers-Briggs/Jung personality profile test delivers accurate assessments (*follow the links on the results page*)
- <http://www.41q.com>
Answer 41 questions to get your free Myers-Briggs/Jung profile
- <http://www.signalpatterns.com>
Based on 100 or so questions, this site delivers an in-depth personality breakdown with career suggestions (*an email address is required*)

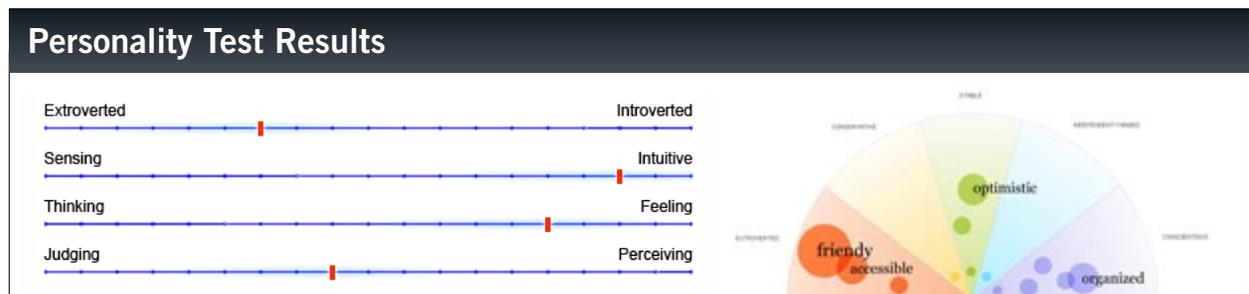


Fig 1.3 Results from 41q.com (left) measure personality on a sliding scale of 8 polarized traits. Signal Patterns (right) works in a unique way, plotting 10 trait categories on a color wheel.

Aptitude Tests

Aptitude is defined as “the natural ability to do something,” as in “John has a remarkable aptitude for swimming.” Some careers may require an aptitude test

as part of their application process, in order to measure your proficiency level in the skills required for the job. More often, however, aptitude tests measure your reasoning and mental processes, rather than your physical skills.

- <http://www.3smartcubes.com>
Get tested on 7 areas of aptitude: Verbal, Numerical, Perceptual, Spatial, Technical, Acuity and Analytical
- <http://www.careerpath.com>
A 37 question career assessment test offered by CareerBuilder.com
- <http://www.testq.com>
TestQ offers a large variety of aptitude and self-assessment tests like [What Should I Major In?](#), [What's My IQ?](#), [Am I Left- or Right-Brained?](#) and [Are You Management Material?](#)

Career Resources

Most of the tests listed above will reference potential career matches or make a few job suggestions. Let's suppose your test results said you would make a good nurse. What exactly does a nurse do? How much do they make? What kind of education is required? Is there prerequisite training other than a degree? Here are a few links that can help you answer these important questions:

- <http://www.bls.gov>
Type a career name in the search field, for example *nurse*, and the resulting page will give you a wealth of helpful information like job description, growth outlook, requirements, typical earnings, etc.
- <http://www.salary.com>
Try the salary wizard on their home page — enter your zip and job title to see what people in your area are making
- <http://www.careerbuilder.com>
This is a great resource of tests and articles like [6 Career Secrets You Won't Learn in School](#) and [25 Best Jobs for 2009](#)

Step 2: Consider your options

Play the field

Finding the right school is a little like dating. You don't have to know exactly what you want to move ahead, you just have to put yourself out there. The best thing to do is find at least three or four prospects who offer programs that feel like a fairly good match. The tricky thing is, it's hard to tell a lot about a school until you feel them out a little bit. Read more about the school online and, more importantly, talk to a school representative. Comparing several different schools should help one or two rise to the top as the best contenders.

First contact

If you request information from a school, your first contact will likely be with an admissions advisor – an informed representative who can answer your questions about their school, available programs, the faculty, financial aid or even job placement after graduation. They will also ask you a few questions to determine your eligibility for admission.

Being prepared with a few questions will help you better determine if this is the school for you (*see the “Questions For My Call” checklist below*). Almost more important than what is said on the call is what you can learn about the school from your encounter. How responsive were they? How quickly did they call you after your request? How respectful were they over the phone? How helpful was the call? Evaluating this generally helps you understand the mission and mentality of the school. Will you be just another student, or will this school be able to understand your needs and give you the best possible education?

Checklist: Questions For My Call

Note: These questions are not required, but this checklist will help you start thinking about what you should be asking an enrollment advisor. We've left some blank space for you to write in your own questions.

- How much is tuition?
- When do classes start?
- Is financial aid available? What are my financial options?
- How soon can I graduate?
- What credits can I transfer/apply toward my degree?
- What resources are available to me? (*post-grad job placement, personal counselor, eLibrary, etc.*)
- What more can you tell me about the program I selected?
- What classes or curriculum will be covered in my program?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____



Enrollment advisor

Your next contact will likely be with an enrollment advisor. Set aside a fair amount of time for this call (about an hour). Remember, requesting information is not a commitment to enroll. It is your chance to test drive a school. You are in the driver seat. Ask questions and get what you need to make an informed decision. The call should not feel pressured or stressful, it is meant to help orient you and assist you in your progress. If it doesn't feel right, maybe you should "just be friends." But if all goes well, you'll know what to do.

Sealing the deal

The actual enrollment process is fairly straightforward. In most cases, you will need to complete an application form and pay a nominal, non-refundable application fee. This varies by school, but will usually be around \$50. You will also need to provide some documentation regarding your previous education, usually a transcript from high school or the last college you attended. To obtain one, simply call the administrative office of the institution you attended. The fee is typically under \$20.

Financing

An important consideration for education is financing. Some schools may have their own financing, grants and scholarships (you should ask about this in the call). If they don't have those programs in place, they can still point you in the right direction as far as financing options.

If you're not sure where to start, here a few helpful articles and sites that can point you in the right direction:

- [How Does Student Financial Aid Work?](#)
- [Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#)
- [Simple Tuition](#) (*offers many helpful articles and loan tools*)

Step 3: Enrollment and beyond

Once you've taken the steps to define your educational goals, determine a career path, find the right school, and secure your financing, you're ready to enroll. Keep in mind that enrollment is just the beginning. To successfully complete your degree, you must maintain your focus and motivation. We've compiled a few tips and resources we hope will help sustain you through your efforts.

Take advantage of resources

When you speak with the enrollment advisor, ask them about resources that will be available to you as a student. Some schools, for example, have convenient eLibraries, free course counseling or job placement services. Take time to introduce yourself to your professors (*either via chat or on campus*) and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Explore scholarships that are available, and what is required to attain them. Requirements like 3.0 GPA or a minimum amount of credit hours/semester are common among scholarships, and can serve as good education guidelines to help you reach your goal.



Job placement
eLibrary
Course counseling
Scholarships

Find a friend

Millions of people take courses online. Find at least one (*from your classes, chat rooms, wherever*) who can be a buddy through this process. You may gain additional insight into the process and you can be a great motivational strength to each other.

Stay motivated

You're on a roll right now, so it may be hard to imagine, but at some point you *will* lose motivation. This is almost guaranteed. Be prepared for it, and decide now how you will overcome it.

- [Adult Education: How To Stay Motivated](#)

Focus on development

College is really a testing ground — you are learning things there to survive in the real world. And there are some basic skills that every college graduate should know.

- **Time management** - You'll have to meet dozens of deadlines throughout your college career. Learn how to be punctual, pace yourself, anticipate problems, and complete assignments. Learn to set milestones to help you toward your goals. These skills will be priceless and serve you well in any career field.
- **Writing skills** - Learn how to write well. You don't have to be William Wordsworth by any means. But, can you write a paper using proper grammar, punctuation and capitalization? Can you compose an email without a single "LOL" or emoticon? Do you know the difference between *your* and *you're*? Are you familiar with basic word processing programs?
- **Personal finance** - Learn how to budget your money. Pay your bills on time and be smart about what you buy. Keep credit card purchases to a minimum where possible. This will help you plan for the future, and enjoy healthier credit.

- **Teamwork** - Make an effort to work with other people. You can gain invaluable insight and share the workload through your courses. If you want to work in management, look for opportunities to be a leader. Working with other students will prepare you to better collaborate in the work force.
- **Networking** - You never know when that skinny kid from your history class is going to show up on some “Entrepreneur of the Year” list. Just by attending college, your classmates show great determination and promise. Your connections will invariably serve you down the road.
- **Experience** - If you already know your career path, seek out additional experience in your field. If you’re interested in nursing, consider volunteering for a health organization like the Red Cross, or apply for an entry-level job in nursing. If you don’t know your career path, be aggressive about trying new things, to feel your way into what you want to do. Focus on classes, projects and experiences that will better prepare you for your career.

Update your resumé

By the time you graduate, you'll have more than just a degree to add to your resumé. You should have a wealth of relevant skills and experiences to jump-start your career. Most schools have career counselors to help you polish your resumé and interviewing skills.

Leverage your degree

Leverage is defined as “power ... to influence people, events, decisions.” Once you graduate, leverage your degree to find a job or get a promotion. In an article titled, “[Put Your Degree to Work](#),” [Jobweb.com](#) offers some good advice to graduates: “After graduation, you must become an expert in sales and the product is you. What are your selling points? What can you do to make yourself more marketable?”

You must demonstrate your potential value to your employer or prospective employers. Earning a degree shows that you have the determination to see projects through to the end, and that you have a desire for growth. Marketing your new education, skills and experience will all work to your advantage — helping you stand out from the competition in the race for career advancement. Remember, you shouldn't expect to get an offer just because you earned a degree. It will take determination to get the job you want.

The article above concludes that, “Your job search is your job. Put in the time and effort you need to show an employer you're the right candidate for the job.”



It's possible to graduate and never gain an education. You will get as much out of your education as you put into it. **Remember, the rewards for higher learning are significant:**

| |
|--|
| ✓ Higher earning |
| ✓ Lower unemployment rate |
| ✓ Improved opportunity for career advancement |
| ✓ Gain valuable knowledge |
| ✓ Personal growth through accomplishment |
| ✓ Advance your career in a more meaningful way |

You've taken a huge step in the right direction. We wish you the best of luck in your educational endeavors. To request information about college degrees, please **visit degreesearch.org**.