

# Higher Education Degrees Skills and Employment Outcomes

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A higher-education degree can improve employment opportunities, earnings, access to regulated professions, and long-term mobility, but it does not guarantee a “bright future” or make every degree equally valuable. The original essay correctly argues that education develops knowledge, communication, and critical-thinking abilities and can provide access to occupations that normally require credentials. It should also recognize cost, debt, completion risk, field of study, work experience, economic conditions, geography, discrimination, and personal goals. Skilled trades, apprenticeships, professional certificates, military training, and employer-based learning can also lead to stable and well-paid work. The strongest conclusion is not that everyone must attend university. It is that students should compare educational routes according to the skills, credentials, cost, and labor-market outcomes relevant to the life they want.

## Education and Average Labor-Market Outcomes

Population data show a broad relationship between educational attainment and employment. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2024 workers aged twenty-five and older with a bachelor’s degree had median usual weekly earnings of \$1,543 and an unemployment rate of 2.5 percent, compared with \$930 and 4.2 percent for workers whose highest credential was a high school diploma. Graduate and professional degrees had higher median earnings and lower unemployment rates on average (BLS, 2025). These figures support the original argument that education can improve economic opportunity.

Averages do not predict one individual’s future. They combine people from different fields, regions, ages, industries, and family backgrounds. Earnings also exclude some benefits of education and some costs, including tuition, interest, time out of the labor force, and delayed savings. The decision requires more than comparing one salary figure.

## What a Degree Signals to Employers

The original essay states that a degree signals knowledge, communication, intelligence, reliability, and the ability to learn. Employers may use a credential as evidence that a candidate completed a sustained course of study, met deadlines, and developed subject knowledge. In regulated occupations such as teaching, engineering, nursing, law, and medicine, an approved degree may be a formal requirement before licensing or advanced training.

The signal is imperfect. A degree does not prove that every graduate can write clearly, solve unfamiliar problems, work ethically, or collaborate. Employers increasingly ask for portfolios, assessments, internships, references, and demonstrated skills. Universities therefore should not rely on the credential alone; they must create opportunities for students to practice and show what they can do.

## Human Capital and Skill Development

Higher education can build human capital through disciplinary knowledge and transferable skills. Students learn to find and evaluate information, analyze evidence, communicate, manage projects, use specialized tools, and respond to feedback. Laboratory, studio, clinical, placement, and field experiences connect theory with professional practice.

These outcomes are not automatic. A student can complete courses through short-term memorization without developing durable understanding. Program quality, teaching, curriculum, student engagement, and access to support influence learning. The value of college comes partly from the work performed during the degree, not merely from possession of the certificate.

## Different Degrees Produce Different Outcomes

Field of study affects typical earnings, unemployment, and underemployment. Engineering, nursing, computer science, education, business, social science, arts, and humanities lead toward different labor markets. Within each major, outcomes vary according to occupation, region, graduate education, and experience. A degree with modest average earnings may still be valuable to a student committed to a public-service or creative profession.

The New York Federal Reserve's labor-market tracker shows that outcomes for recent graduates vary by major and that underemployment remains a substantial issue. In the first quarter of 2026, recent college graduates had unemployment of about 5.7 percent and underemployment of 41.5 percent (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2026). This does not mean that education has lost value. It means that entry into graduate-level work can be difficult and that a degree should be paired with career preparation and experience.

## Underemployment

Underemployment occurs when graduates work in jobs that do not normally require a college degree or do not fully use their training. Some underemployment is temporary during career entry; some persists. Graduates may accept such work because of recession, location, family obligations, visa restrictions, or limited experience. A job below the usual credential level can still provide income and skills, but prolonged mismatch may reduce returns on educational investment.

Institutions should publish realistic outcome data and provide internships, work-integrated learning, alumni networks, and career advising. Students also need guidance about how their major connects with multiple occupations rather than one narrow job title.

## Entry-Level Earnings and Lifetime Development

The original essay correctly observes that a new graduate may earn less than an experienced construction worker, plumber, or other skilled worker. Career comparisons should be made across an appropriate period and should include training cost, earnings progression, benefits, employment stability, physical demands, autonomy, and personal preference. A skilled trade can provide strong earnings earlier because apprenticeship combines work and training. A profession requiring university may begin later but offer different advancement.

Lifetime-earnings estimates are useful at population level but can exaggerate certainty. They are affected by who completes a degree, hours worked, occupational choice, health, caregiving, economic change, and differences in opportunity. Students should not borrow heavily on the assumption that a general average will automatically become their own income.

## Employment Security and Adaptability

Education can support adaptability because graduates have experience acquiring new knowledge and navigating complex information. When an occupation changes, broader skills may help a worker move into another role. A degree can also satisfy screening requirements for positions unrelated to the original major.

The original essay overstates this point by suggesting that graduates always have greater security. Layoffs affect highly educated workers as well, and some specialized skills become obsolete. Security comes from continuing learning, professional relationships, financial resilience, performance, and demand for the work. Credentials open doors but do not keep them open without development.

## The Value of a Major Beyond Its Title

An English graduate may work in education, publishing, communication, marketing, law, public service, research, or administration. A history graduate may use evidence analysis and writing in policy or business. This supports the original claim that a degree does not confine a person to one occupation. Transfer depends on the graduate's ability to explain how learning applies to the employer's problem.

Students can strengthen transfer by creating portfolios, learning industry tools, taking relevant electives, completing placements, and describing achievements through outcomes. "Good

communication skills” is more credible when supported by reports, presentations, editing, client work, or research.

## Professional and Regulated Occupations

Some careers legally or practically require specific degrees. Teachers, nurses, architects, engineers, lawyers, physicians, and other professionals follow accredited education and licensing pathways. A student should verify requirements before enrolling because a general degree with a similar title may not qualify for professional entry.

Licensing also involves examinations, supervised practice, background requirements, continuing education, and fees. The degree is one stage rather than the entire pathway. International students or migrants may face additional credential-recognition rules.

## Skilled Trades and Alternative Pathways

The original essay appropriately notes that construction and plumbing can pay well without a conventional four-year degree. Apprenticeships allow people to earn while learning and can lead to licensed, technical, or supervisory careers. Associate degrees and certificates also prepare students for healthcare, technology, manufacturing, logistics, and public-safety occupations.

These routes should not be described as inferior options for people unable to attend university. They require skill, judgment, and continuing learning. Career guidance should compare routes honestly and allow movement between them through credit recognition and further education.

## Cost, Debt, and Return on Investment

A degree’s return depends on the net price after grants, the amount borrowed, completion time, income during study, and post-graduation earnings. A low-cost public program with strong completion and placement may provide better value than an expensive institution with similar outcomes. Leaving without a credential can be especially difficult because the student may hold debt without receiving the full labor-market signal.

Students should review verified tuition, living expenses, program completion, debt, transfer policy, accreditation, and employment data. Marketing claims about average salary should identify the population and method. An informed decision includes a conservative plan for repayment rather than assuming best-case earnings.

## Nonfinancial Benefits

Higher education can increase civic knowledge, confidence, cultural exposure, friendship, health literacy, and the ability to understand complex public issues. It may provide access to mentors, libraries, laboratories, arts, sports, and communities of inquiry. These benefits are difficult to price but can be central to a person's life.

Nonfinancial value does not excuse poor quality or unaffordable cost. Institutions receiving substantial public and private resources remain responsible for student learning, completion, accessibility, and truthful information.

## Equity and Unequal Opportunity

Students do not enter higher education with equal financial support, school preparation, time, health, family responsibility, or professional networks. First-generation, low-income, disabled, rural, minority, and working students may face barriers unrelated to ability. Completion policies should therefore include advising, accessible instruction, emergency support, childcare, transport, and mental-health services.

Employers also contribute to inequality when they require degrees for jobs that do not genuinely need degree-level knowledge. Skills-based hiring can widen access when selection methods are valid and transparent. Removing an unnecessary credential should not mean lowering job standards; it means measuring the relevant competence directly.

## Technology and Changing Skills

Artificial intelligence, automation, digital platforms, and changing business models alter occupational tasks. A degree completed today cannot contain every skill needed over a forty-year career. Students need foundational knowledge, digital competence, ethical judgment, and the ability to learn continuously. Short courses and employer training can update skills after graduation.

Technology also makes information easier to access, but access is not the same as understanding. Universities remain valuable when they provide structured learning, expert feedback, research opportunities, and communities that challenge unsupported claims.

## How Students Can Improve Employment Outcomes

Students can investigate occupations early, speak with alumni and professionals, use career services, obtain internships, join relevant projects, and practice recruitment processes. Work experience helps

students understand workplace expectations and provides evidence beyond grades. Networking should be genuine relationship building rather than collecting contacts only when a job is needed.

Students should also develop a clear account of their education. Instead of saying only “I have a degree,” they can explain what problems they solved, which methods they used, and what they learned from failure. Employers hire people to perform work, not credentials in isolation.

## Responsibilities of Institutions and Employers

Universities should align programs with disciplinary standards and evolving practice without turning every course into narrow job training. They should publish outcomes, support students, and maintain academic integrity. Employers should provide realistic entry opportunities, structured training, and fair selection rather than demanding extensive experience for every junior role.

Public policy can support affordable education, apprenticeships, lifelong learning, and transitions for workers affected by technological or economic change. The choice between college and work should not be determined solely by family wealth.

## Conclusion

A higher-education degree is often associated with higher earnings and lower unemployment, and it can provide access to professional occupations, transferable skills, networks, and personal development. It is not an automatic guarantee of employment, security, or high income. Recent graduates can face unemployment and substantial underemployment, and outcomes differ across majors, institutions, regions, and individual circumstances. Skilled trades, apprenticeships, certificates, and associate degrees are valuable alternatives or complements. The best educational decision compares cost, completion, required credentials, likely work, personal interest, and long-term adaptability. A degree creates the greatest value when the student develops demonstrable skills, gains relevant experience, and continues learning after graduation.

## References

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