K12 ACADEMICS — A FIELD GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

The Complete Guide to College Degrees

From associate to doctorate — every degree type explained, plus what each is for.

K12 ACADEMICS

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2026 EDITION

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Undergraduate

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UNDERGRADUATE

Associate Degrees

WHAT IT IS

An associate degree is a two-year undergraduate degree (about 60 credit hours), usually earned at community, technical, or junior colleges . It serves two main purposes: a lower-cost path toward a bachelor's degree (transfer), or direct preparation for a career in a technical or applied field.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

Associate degrees include transfer degrees (AA, AS) that span fields, and applied degrees (AAS, AOS) tied to a career area. Click a type to jump to its majors:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About two years of full-time study (roughly 60 credit hours); part-time students take longer. Many programs are offered online or in the evening for working students.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Associate programs combine general education (writing, math, science, social science) with courses in a major or applied field . Transfer degrees emphasize general education; applied degrees emphasize hands-on, career-specific training, sometimes with labs, clinicals, or internships.

EXPLORE FURTHER

This is a reference guide. Keep exploring the education resource:

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Undergraduate**
Length	**~2 years**
Awards	**AA, AS, AAS & more**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**
Where	**Community & technical colleges**
Cost	**Lowest-cost degree**

GETTING IN

Community colleges are often open-enrollment , requiring a high school diploma or GED . Some programs (like nursing or allied health) are competitive and have prerequisites or waitlists.

COST & FUNDING

Associate degrees are typically the lowest-cost path in higher education , especially at public community colleges. Financial aid, grants, and (in some states) tuition-free community college programs are available.

WHERE IT LEADS

Applied associate degrees (AAS) lead to entry-level careers in fields like healthcare, technology, and the trades. Transfer degrees (AA, AS) let students move into a bachelor's program , often via "2+2" agreements that count the associate toward the four-year degree.

HOW IT COMPARES

An associate degree sits above certificates and below a bachelor's degree . Transfer (AA/AS) degrees feed into bachelor's programs; applied (AAS) degrees are more job-focused and may transfer less readily.

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UNDERGRADUATE

Associate of Arts (AA)

WHAT IT IS

The Associate of Arts (AA) is a two-year transfer degree emphasizing liberal arts and general education. It's designed to cover the first two years of a bachelor's , then transfer — often via a "2+2" agreement — into a BA program.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The AA is broad and transfer-oriented:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About two years of full-time study (~60 credits); part-time takes longer, and evening/online options are common.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Mostly general education — writing, math, humanities, social and natural sciences — matched to a transfer pathway, with some introductory major coursework.

GETTING IN

Community colleges are often open-enrollment with a high school diploma or GED; some programs (e.g., health) are competitive with prerequisites.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Undergraduate (associate)**
Length	**~2 years / ~60 credits**
Purpose	**Transfer to a bachelor's**
Emphasis	**Liberal arts & general ed**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**
Cost	**Lowest-cost**

COST & FUNDING

Associate degrees are typically the lowest-cost path in higher education ; aid, grants, and (in some states) tuition-free community college apply.

WHERE IT LEADS

An AA is built to transfer into a bachelor's (usually a BA), saving cost on the first two years. It can also support entry-level roles.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus the AS , the AA is broader (humanities/social science transfer); versus the AAS , it's academic/transfer rather than job-ready.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

An AA fits students who want an affordable start toward a bachelor's in the arts, humanities, or social sciences.

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UNDERGRADUATE

Associate of Science (AS)

WHAT IT IS

The Associate of Science (AS) is a two-year transfer degree emphasizing math and science. Like the AA it covers the first two years of a bachelor's, but tilts toward STEM and health-science transfer pathways.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The AS leans STEM/health:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About two years of full-time study (~60 credits); part-time takes longer, and evening/online options are common.

WHAT YOU STUDY

General education with a stronger math and science core (calculus, biology, chemistry, physics) aligned to STEM/health transfer requirements.

GETTING IN

Community colleges are often open-enrollment with a high school diploma or GED; some programs (e.g., health) are competitive with prerequisites.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (associate)**
Length	**~2 years / ~60 credits**
Purpose	**Transfer (STEM)**
Emphasis	**Math & science**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**
Cost	**Lowest-cost**

COST & FUNDING

Associate degrees are typically the lowest-cost path in higher education ; aid, grants, and (in some states) tuition-free community college apply.

WHERE IT LEADS

An AS transfers into a bachelor's (often a BS) in science, technology, engineering, math, or health.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus the AA , the AS is more math/science-heavy; versus the AAS , it's academic/transfer rather than career-terminal.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

An AS fits students aiming for a STEM or health-science bachelor's who want an affordable first two years.

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UNDERGRADUATE

Applied Science (AAS)

WHAT IT IS

The Associate of Applied Science (AAS) is a two-year career and technical degree built to get graduates job-ready in a specific field — technology, healthcare, the trades, business support, and more — with hands-on training rather than a transfer focus.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The AAS is common in applied/career fields — e.g.:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About two years of full-time study (~60 credits); part-time takes longer, and evening/online options are common.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Career-specific, hands-on training (labs, clinicals, shops) with a smaller general-education core, often aligned to industry certifications and an internship.

GETTING IN

Community colleges are often open-enrollment with a high school diploma or GED; some programs (e.g., health) are competitive with prerequisites.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (associate)**
Length	**~2 years / ~60 credits**
Purpose	**Career-ready**
Emphasis	**Hands-on, job skills**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**
Cost	**Lowest-cost**

COST & FUNDING

Associate degrees are typically the lowest-cost path in higher education ; aid, grants, and (in some states) tuition-free community college apply.

WHERE IT LEADS

An AAS leads to entry-level employment in its field quickly. Some credits can transfer, but the AAS is designed as a career-ready credential.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus the AA/AS (transfer-focused), the AAS is job-ready and applied — less general education, more field training.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

An AAS fits students who want to enter a specific career fast and affordably — e.g., cybersecurity, nursing/allied health, or a skilled trade.

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor's Degrees

WHAT IT IS

A bachelor's degree is the standard four-year undergraduate degree (about 120 credit hours) and the dividing line between undergraduate and graduate education . It's the most common degree employers ask for and the gateway to master's, professional, and doctoral study.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

Bachelor's degrees come in several designations. The two broadest — BA (Bachelor of Arts) and BS (Bachelor of Science) — span nearly every field; the others are tied to a specific area. Click a degree type to jump to the majors you can earn with it:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours). Some students finish in three via accelerated tracks or credit; others take five (co-op programs, architecture, part-time).

WHAT YOU STUDY

A bachelor's combines general education, a major (in-depth study of one field), and electives — often with a minor, concentration, capstone, or internship. Roughly 120 credits total.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) standardized tests. Selectivity ranges enormously , from open-admission to highly competitive.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Undergraduate**
Length	**~4 years**
Awards	**BA, BS, BFA, BBA & more**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**
Where	**Colleges & universities**
Cost	**Varies widely**

COST & FUNDING

Cost varies more than any other degree — from lower-cost public in-state tuition to expensive private universities . Grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans are widely used; starting at a community college can cut cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A bachelor's opens professional careers across virtually every field and is the required foundation for graduate, professional, and doctoral programs .

HOW IT COMPARES

A bachelor's sits above the associate degree and below the master's . It's the standard four-year credential; the BA/BS label reflects emphasis, not rank.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A bachelor's degree suits students pursuing most professional careers or any graduate/professional study . It's the default four-year credential for career and further education.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor of Arts (BA)

WHAT IT IS

The Bachelor of Arts (BA) is one of the two most common bachelor's degrees. It's a four-year undergraduate degree that emphasizes breadth — more electives, foreign language, and humanities/social-science context alongside the major. The same subject is often offered as a BA or a BS; the BA leans broader and more flexible.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

A BA is offered across nearly every field. A few examples — click through to the major or family:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours); some fields run to five with co-ops or intensive sequences.

WHAT YOU STUDY

A BA devotes more of the degree to breadth — general education, electives, languages, and humanities — with the major requiring fewer technical/lab courses than a comparable BS. It builds writing, critical thinking, and communication.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) tests. Selectivity varies by school and program.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (bachelor's)**
Length	**~4 years / ~120 credits**
Emphasis	**Breadth, humanities & social s...**
Contrast	**Broader than a BS**
Fields	**Nearly every subject**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**

COST & FUNDING

Cost ranges widely — from lower-cost public in-state tuition to private universities — with grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans commonly used. Starting at a community college can reduce cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A BA prepares graduates for a wide range of careers and for graduate, professional, and law school. Its breadth and communication focus travel well across fields.

HOW IT COMPARES

The BA vs BS difference is emphasis, not rank: the BA is broader with more electives and humanities; the BS goes deeper into the field's technical core. Many majors offer both.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A BA fits students who want flexibility, breadth, and strong communication — and those in the humanities, social sciences, arts, and languages.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor of Science (BS)

WHAT IT IS

The Bachelor of Science (BS) is one of the two most common bachelor's degrees (alongside the Bachelor of Arts). It's a four-year undergraduate degree that emphasizes technical, scientific, and quantitative depth in the major — more required courses in the field, and often more math, science, and lab or applied work.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

A BS is offered across science, tech, engineering, health, and business fields. A few examples — click through to the major:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours). Some fields (like engineering) may run closer to five with co-ops or heavy sequences.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Compared with a BA, a BS devotes more of the degree to the major and its technical foundations — additional major courses, math and science, labs, and applied projects — with fewer free electives. The exact mix depends on the field.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) tests. Selectivity varies by school.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (bachelor's)**
Length	**~4 years / ~120 credits**
Emphasis	**Technical & scientific depth**
Contrast	**More focused than a BA**
Fields	**STEM, health, business & more**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**

COST & FUNDING

Cost ranges widely, from lower-cost public in-state tuition to private universities. Grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans are common, and starting at a community college can reduce cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A BS prepares graduates for careers in technical, scientific, and applied fields , and is the standard foundation for graduate, professional, and doctoral study in those areas.

HOW IT COMPARES

The BS vs BA difference is emphasis, not rank: a BS goes deeper into the field's technical core; a BA is broader, with more electives and humanities. Many majors are offered as either — the same subject, a different balance.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A BS fits students who want depth in a technical, scientific, or quantitative field and a strong foundation for careers or graduate study in that area.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA)

WHAT IT IS

The Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) is a professional undergraduate degree for visual and performing artists — art, design, theatre, dance, film, and creative writing. Compared with a BA in the arts, a BFA is far more studio- and performance-intensive , typically devoting about two-thirds of coursework to the art form.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The BFA is concentrated in the arts. Explore the fields:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours); some fields run to five with co-ops or intensive sequences.

WHAT YOU STUDY

A BFA centers on intensive studio work, performance, critique, and a portfolio or showcase , with a smaller core of general education. Students build a professional body of work.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) tests. Selectivity varies by school and program.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (bachelor's)**
Length	**~4 years**
Emphasis	**Studio & performance**
Focus	**~2/3 in the art form**
Fields	**Visual & performing arts**
Note	**Often a terminal undergrad art...**

COST & FUNDING

Cost ranges widely — from lower-cost public in-state tuition to private universities — with grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans commonly used. Starting at a community college can reduce cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A BFA prepares graduates for professional careers in the arts — as artists, designers, performers, and creators — and for an MFA, the terminal graduate arts degree.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus a BA in the arts , the BFA is much more hands-on and pre-professional; the BA is broader and more academic. Choose the BFA for depth in making/performing.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A BFA fits students committed to a professional path in visual or performing arts who want maximum studio/performance time.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor of Business (BBA)

WHAT IT IS

The Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) is a professional undergraduate business degree. It combines a broad business core — accounting, finance, marketing, management, operations, and economics — with a concentration, preparing students to enter the workforce in business roles.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The BBA covers the business fields:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours); some fields run to five with co-ops or intensive sequences.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Students take a business core plus a concentration (finance, marketing, management, accounting, supply chain, entrepreneurship, MIS), often with case work, teamwork, and an internship.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) tests. Selectivity varies by school and program.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (bachelor's)**
Length	**~4 years**
Emphasis	**Professional business**
Core	**Accounting, finance, marketing...**
Fields	**Business**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**

COST & FUNDING

Cost ranges widely — from lower-cost public in-state tuition to private universities — with grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans commonly used. Starting at a community college can reduce cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A BBA leads to business careers across industries and is a common foundation for an MBA later. Concentrations shape the entry role.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus a BS in Business/Economics , the BBA is more applied and management-focused; a BS may be more quantitative. Both lead into business.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A BBA fits students who want a practical, professional business education and a direct path into business roles.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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UNDERGRADUATE

Bachelor of Nursing (BSN)

WHAT IT IS

The Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) is a four-year professional degree that prepares students to become registered nurses (RNs) . It combines nursing science, health sciences, and extensive supervised clinical practice , and prepares graduates to sit for the NCLEX-RN licensing exam.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

The BSN is in the nursing and health fields:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of full-time study (roughly 120 credit hours); some fields run to five with co-ops or intensive sequences.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Coursework covers anatomy and physiology, pharmacology, pathophysiology, nursing care across the lifespan, public health, and leadership , paired with clinical rotations in hospitals and community settings.

GETTING IN

Admission requires a high school diploma or GED , transcripts, and often essays, recommendations, and (sometimes) tests. Selectivity varies by school and program.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Undergraduate (bachelor's)**
Length	**~4 years**
Field	**Nursing**
Leads to	**RN licensure (NCLEX-RN)**
Includes	**Clinical rotations**
Entry	**HS diploma or GED**

COST & FUNDING

Cost ranges widely — from lower-cost public in-state tuition to private universities — with grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans commonly used. Starting at a community college can reduce cost.

WHERE IT LEADS

A BSN leads to registered nurse roles and is increasingly preferred (or required) by employers over an associate-level ADN. It's the foundation for advanced practice (MSN, DNP).

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus an ADN (associate) , the BSN adds leadership, research, and public-health content and broadens career options; both lead to RN licensure.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A BSN fits students pursuing nursing as a profession who want the strongest foundation and pathway to advanced practice.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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SECTION 02 OF 04

Graduate & Doctoral

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master's Degrees

WHAT IT IS

A master's degree is a graduate degree earned after a bachelor's — typically one to three years — that lets students deepen expertise, specialize, change fields, or qualify for advanced roles and licensure .

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

Master's degrees split into broad academic types (MA, MS) that span fields, and professional master's tied to a specific area. Click a type to jump to its majors:

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); many are available part-time or online for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Master's programs feature advanced coursework in a focused field , often capped by a thesis, capstone project, comprehensive exam, or supervised practicum . Programs commonly run 30–60 credits.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters of recommendation, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT scores (increasingly optional) or relevant experience.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate**
Length	**1–3 years**
Awards	**MA, MS, MBA, MFA & more**
Entry	**Bachelor's degree**
Where	**Universities**
Cost	**Varies**

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary widely. Research-oriented master's may offer assistantships or funding; professional master's (MBA, MPH, etc.) are more often self-funded, with loans and employer support common.

WHERE IT LEADS

A master's supports career advancement, specialization, career change, and licensure in many fields, and can be a step toward a doctorate.

HOW IT COMPARES

A master's sits above the bachelor's and below the doctorate . Academic master's (MA/MS) lean toward research and further study; professional master's (MBA, MSW, MPH) prepare for practice.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

A master's suits people who want to specialize, advance, pivot careers, or meet a licensure/credential requirement beyond the bachelor's.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master of Arts (MA)

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Arts (MA) is an academic master's in the humanities, social sciences, and arts — deepening a field through coursework and often a thesis. It suits advancement, specialization, or a step toward a PhD.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced coursework in the field, seminars, research methods, and typically a thesis or comprehensive exam (~30–36 credits).

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate (master's)**
Length	**1–2 years**
Emphasis	**Humanities & social science**
Type	**Academic master's**
Entry	**Bachelor's degree**
Next	**Often to a PhD**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to advancement, teaching, research, and PhD study in humanities/social sciences.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus the MS , the MA leans humanities/qualitative; versus professional master's, it's academic.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those deepening a humanities or social-science field or heading toward a doctorate.

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master of Science (MS)

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Science (MS) is an academic master's in science, technology, engineering, math, and health fields — deepening technical and research skills, often with a thesis.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced technical coursework, labs/research, and typically a thesis or project (~30–36 credits).

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE	
Level	**Graduate (master's)**
Length	**1–2 years**
Emphasis	**STEM & technical**
Type	**Academic master's**
Entry	**Bachelor's degree**
Next	**Often to a PhD**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to advanced technical roles, research, and PhD study in STEM/health.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus the MA , the MS is more technical/quantitative; versus professional master's, it's academic/research.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those deepening a STEM or health field or heading toward a doctorate.

EXPLORE FURTHER

This is a reference guide. Keep exploring:

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

MBA

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) is the flagship professional business degree, building leadership and general management across finance, marketing, operations, strategy, and more — often for those with work experience.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

A management core plus electives/concentration, case method, teamwork, leadership development, and often an internship or capstone; many formats (full-time, part-time, online, executive).

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate (professional)**
Length	**1–2 years**
Emphasis	**Business leadership**
Type	**Professional master's**
Entry	**Bachelor's (+ often work exp.)**
Formats	**Full-time, part-time, online…**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to management and leadership roles and career pivots across industries; a common accelerator for advancement.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus an MS in a business field , the MBA is broad general management; the MS is specialized.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits professionals seeking leadership, management skills, or a career pivot .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master of Fine Arts (MFA)

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) is the terminal degree in creative fields — studio art, creative writing, design, theatre, film, dance. It develops a professional body of work and qualifies graduates to teach at the university level.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Intensive studio/creative practice, critique, and a thesis exhibition, performance, or manuscript , with seminars in theory and history.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate (terminal)**
Length	**2–3 years**
Emphasis	**Studio/creative practice**
Type	**Terminal arts degree**
Entry	**Bachelor's + portfolio**
Note	**Qualifies to teach at universi...**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to professional creative careers and university teaching (it's the terminal credential in the arts).

HOW IT COMPARES

Unlike academic master's, the MFA is a terminal practice degree — the arts equivalent of a doctorate for teaching.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits artists and writers seeking mastery of their craft and the credential to teach .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master of Education (MEd)

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Education (MEd) advances educators' practice and credentials — in teaching, curriculum, leadership, counseling, or educational technology — often while they work.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced coursework in an education specialty, applied projects, and often a practicum; many programs are part-time/online for working teachers.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate (professional)**
Length	**1–2 years**
Field	**Education**
Type	**Professional master's**
Entry	**Bachelor's degree**
Leads to	**Advanced roles/licensure**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to advanced teaching roles, specialist/leadership positions, and pay-scale advancement ; a step toward an EdD/PhD.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus an MAT (initial teaching license), the MEd typically serves those already teaching, deepening a specialty.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits educators advancing in curriculum, leadership, counseling, or ed-tech .

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Master of Social Work (MSW)

WHAT IT IS

The Master of Social Work (MSW) is the professional degree for clinical and advanced social work practice , and the pathway to licensure (LCSW). BSW holders often enter with advanced standing.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Usually one to two years full-time (some run to three); part-time and online options are common for working professionals.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced practice methods, a clinical or macro concentration, and a substantial supervised field placement ; CSWE-accredited.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree , transcripts, letters, and a statement of purpose; some programs require GRE/GMAT (often optional) or relevant experience.

COST & FUNDING

Costs vary; research master's may offer assistantships, while professional master's are more often self-funded with loans and employer support.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Graduate (professional)**
Length	**~2 years (advanced standing ~1...**
Field	**Social work**
Leads to	**Clinical licensure (LCSW)**
Entry	**Bachelor's (BSW = advanced sta...**
Includes	**Field placement**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to clinical social work, therapy, case management, and leadership ; required for LCSW licensure.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus a counseling (MA/MS) degree , the MSW centers the social-work perspective and its licensure track.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing clinical or advanced social work and licensure.

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

PhD

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest academic degree, awarded for original research and a dissertation that contributes new knowledge. It exists across nearly every field and is the standard credential for academic and research careers.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Typically 4–7+ years (applied doctorates like the EdD/DBA can be ~3–4, often part-time): coursework, comprehensive exams, and an original dissertation.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced coursework, comprehensive/qualifying exams , and an original dissertation defended before a committee, under a faculty advisor.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's or master's , a strong record, research/goal fit, letters, and a statement; admission is competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Traditional research doctorates are often funded (assistantship + tuition waiver); applied doctorates are more often self-funded and part-time.

AT A GLANCE

Level	Highest academic
Length	4–7+ years
Hallmark	Original research + dissertati...
Fields	Nearly all
Entry	Bachelor's or master's
Funding	Often funded

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to academic, research, and senior expert roles — faculty, scientists, and researchers.

HOW IT COMPARES

A research doctorate, distinct from a professional-practice doctorate (MD/JD/DDS) focused on licensed practice.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing research, academia, or the deepest expertise in a field.

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GRADUATE & DOCTORAL

Doctor of Education (EdD)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Education (EdD) is an applied doctorate for leaders and practitioners in education — superintendents, principals, higher-ed administrators — centered on solving problems of practice rather than pure research.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Typically 4–7+ years (applied doctorates like the EdD/DBA can be ~3–4, often part-time): coursework, comprehensive exams, and an original dissertation.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced coursework in leadership, policy, and research methods, culminating in a problem-of-practice dissertation ; often designed for working educators.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's or master's , a strong record, research/goal fit, letters, and a statement; admission is competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Traditional research doctorates are often funded (assistantship + tuition waiver); applied doctorates are more often self-funded and part-time.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Doctoral (applied)**
Length	**~3–5 years**
Focus	**Educational leadership/practic...**
Vs PhD	**Practice vs research**
Entry	**Master's typical**
Format	**Often part-time**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to senior educational leadership roles in schools, districts, and higher education.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus a PhD in Education (research/academia), the EdD is practice- and leadership-focused.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits education leaders who want a doctorate geared to practice.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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Professional & Clinical

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Doctor of Medicine (MD)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Medicine (MD) is the primary professional degree for physicians . After four years of medical school, graduates enter a residency (and often a fellowship) to train in a specialty before independent, licensed practice.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Four years of medical school, then a residency of 3–7 years (plus optional fellowship) to specialize.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Two pre-clinical years of science then two clinical clerkship years, with the USMLE licensing exams; specialization happens in residency.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**4 yrs + residency**
Field	**Medicine**
Leads to	**Physician licensure**
Entry	**Bachelor's + MCAT**
Next	**Residency & fellowship**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to licensed physician practice across specialties, entered through residency and (optionally) fellowship.

HOW IT COMPARES

Alongside the DO , one of the two US physician degrees; both lead to licensure and residency.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing medicine as physicians .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Osteopathic Medicine (DO)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) is one of the two US physician degrees. DOs are fully licensed physicians with the same practice rights as MDs, trained additionally in osteopathic manipulative medicine and a whole-person philosophy.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Four years like the MD, then a residency to specialize.

WHAT YOU STUDY

The MD curriculum plus osteopathic manipulative treatment (OMT) , with the COMLEX (and often USMLE) exams.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**4 yrs + residency**
Field	**Osteopathic medicine**
Leads to	**Physician licensure**
Entry	**Bachelor's + MCAT**
Next	**Residency & fellowship**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to licensed physician practice via residency, the same as MD graduates.

HOW IT COMPARES

Equivalent in licensure to the MD , with added osteopathic training.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing medicine who value the osteopathic approach.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Juris Doctor (JD)

WHAT IT IS

The Juris Doctor (JD) is the primary professional law degree in the US. After three years of law school and passing a state bar exam , graduates can practice as licensed attorneys.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Three years of full-time law school (part-time programs run longer).

WHAT YOU STUDY

Foundational law (contracts, torts, constitutional law), then electives, clinics, and legal writing; graduates sit for a state bar exam.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**3 years**
Field	**Law**
Leads to	**Bar admission → lawyer**
Entry	**Bachelor's + LSAT**
Next	**Bar exam**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to practice as an attorney and law-adjacent careers in business, government, and policy.

HOW IT COMPARES

The first professional law degree; the LLM is post-JD specialization, the SJD/JSD the research doctorate.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing law and attorney licensure .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Doctor of Nursing (DNP)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) is the terminal practice degree in nursing — for advanced-practice nurses (NPs, CRNAs, etc.) and nurse leaders, focused on applying evidence to improve care.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

One to four years depending on whether you enter from a BSN or an MSN, including clinical hours.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Advanced clinical or leadership coursework and a practice-focused DNP project .

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**1–4 years (by entry)**
Field	**Nursing**
Leads to	**Advanced practice / leadership**
Entry	**BSN or MSN + RN**
Vs PhD	**Practice vs research**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to advanced-practice nursing and nursing leadership at the highest practice level.

HOW IT COMPARES

Versus a PhD in Nursing (research/academia), the DNP is the practice doctorate.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits nurses pursuing the highest level of advanced practice or leadership .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) is the professional degree required to become a licensed pharmacist — an expert in medications, their effects, and safe use.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About four years of pharmacy school (after prerequisites), including clinical rotations; optional PGY1/PGY2 residencies follow for specialization.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Pharmaceutical sciences, pharmacology, and therapeutics with extensive clinical rotations ; the NAPLEX and a law exam license graduates.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**~4 years**
Field	**Pharmacy**
Leads to	**Pharmacist licensure**
Entry	**Prereqs (+ PCAT at some)**
Next	**Optional residency**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to licensed pharmacist practice in community, hospital, and clinical settings.

HOW IT COMPARES

A professional practice doctorate; pharmaceutical research is a separate PhD track.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing pharmacy .

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Physical Therapy (DPT)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) is the professional degree required to become a licensed physical therapist — helping patients recover movement and manage pain after injury, surgery, or illness.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

About three years of PT school, including extensive clinical rotations; optional residencies exist for specialization.

WHAT YOU STUDY

Movement science, therapeutic technique, and clinical rotations ; the NPTE licenses graduates.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**~3 years**
Field	**Physical therapy**
Leads to	**PT licensure**
Entry	**Bachelor's + prereqs**
Includes	**Clinical rotations**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to licensed physical-therapist practice in clinics, hospitals, sports, and rehab.

HOW IT COMPARES

Now the entry-level PT degree (replacing older master's-level PT).

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing physical therapy .

EXPLORE FURTHER

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PROFESSIONAL & CLINICAL

Dental Degrees (DDS/DMD)

WHAT IT IS

The Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) and Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) are the same degree with different names — the professional degree to become a licensed dentist . The education and licensure are identical; schools simply award one or the other.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Four years of dental school; specialties (orthodontics, oral surgery, etc.) add a residency .

WHAT YOU STUDY

Dental science and supervised clinical practice , with national/regional board exams for licensure.

GETTING IN

Requires a bachelor's degree and prerequisites , plus the field's admission test ; admission is typically very competitive.

COST & FUNDING

Professional degrees are among the most expensive , and debt can be significant; loans, scholarships, and service-based repayment are common.

AT A GLANCE

Level	**Professional (practice)**
Length	**4 yrs + optional residency**
Field	**Dentistry**
Leads to	**Dentist licensure**
Entry	**Bachelor's + DAT**
Note	**DDS = DMD**

WHERE IT LEADS

Leads to licensed dental practice ; specialization requires a residency afterward.

HOW IT COMPARES

DDS and DMD are equivalent — the letters are the school's tradition, not a difference in training.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Fits those pursuing dentistry .

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SECTION 04 OF 04

Non-Degree & Other

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NON-DEGREE & OTHER

Micro-Credentials & Badges

WHAT IT IS

Micro-credentials, digital badges, and continuing education are short, skill-focused, non-degree credentials that verify specific competencies . They're fast, flexible, and increasingly stackable toward larger credentials.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

- **Micro-credential / Digital badge** — Verified proof of a specific skill
- **MicroMasters / MicroBachelors** — Stackable platform programs
- **Nanodegree / Bootcamp certificate** — Intensive, career-focused training
- **Industry certification** — e.g., PMP, CPA, CFA, CompTIA, AWS (association/vendor-issued)
- **CEUs / CPD** — Continuing Education Units / Professional Development

HOW LONG IT TAKES

From a few hours to a few months — much shorter than a degree — and often self-paced and online .

WHAT YOU STUDY

Narrow, competency-based skill-building in a specific area (a tool, method, or role), assessed by demonstrating the skill rather than by seat time.

GETTING IN

Usually open with few or no prerequisites, making them widely accessible for upskilling and reskilling.

AT A GLANCE	
Type	Non-degree credentials
What	Specific skills & competencies
Length	Hours–months
Where	Universities, platforms, emplo...
Cost	Low–moderate
Note	Often stackable

COST & FUNDING

Low to moderate , and sometimes employer-sponsored . Industry certification exams carry their own fees.

WHERE IT LEADS

They demonstrate specific skills to employers, support career pivots, and satisfy continuing-education requirements — and many stack toward degrees or professional certifications .

HOW IT COMPARES

These are non-degree and competency-based — narrower and shorter than certificates or degrees — and are meant to complement , not replace, formal credentials.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

Micro-credentials suit people who want fast, targeted, affordable skill-building or professional development — often alongside a job or a degree.

EXPLORE FURTHER

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NON-DEGREE & OTHER

Honorary Degrees

WHAT IT IS

An honorary degree is conferred honoris causa — "for the sake of honor" — to recognize distinguished achievement or service . It is not earned through study and does not qualify the recipient to practice a profession.

THE DEGREES & DESIGNATIONS

- **LLD** — Doctor of Laws
- **LHD / DHL** — Doctor of Humane Letters
- **LittD / DLitt** — Doctor of Letters / Literature
- **ScD / DSc** — Doctor of Science (honorary sense)
- **DD** — Doctor of Divinity
- **DFA / DMus** — Doctor of Fine Arts / Music

HOW LONG IT TAKES

None — an honorary degree is conferred, not studied for. There is no program, coursework, or timeline.

WHAT YOU STUDY

None. The degree recognizes a person's accomplishments, contributions, or service rather than completion of a course of study.

GETTING IN

There is no application — recipients are nominated and selected by the institution , often to be honored at commencement.

AT A GLANCE	
Type	Honorary (not earned)
Latin	honoris causa
What	Recognition of achievement
Awards	LLD, LHD, DSc, DD & more
Requires	No study or tuition
Note	Not for practice

COST & FUNDING

No tuition or cost — the degree is a form of recognition.

WHERE IT LEADS

An honorary degree is an honor . It does not confer licensure or the right to practice , and using the title "Dr." from an honorary degree is generally discouraged outside ceremonial contexts.

HOW IT COMPARES

Honorary degrees share titles with some earned degrees (e.g., ScD, DD), but are awarded honoris causa rather than through study. They are not academic qualifications.

IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?

An honorary degree isn't something you pursue — it's bestowed by an institution to recognize notable achievement or service.

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