

| Vocational<br>(2 years' program)  |   | Academic<br>(4 or more years' program)  |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technical School  | Community College   | College<br>(undergraduate)  | University<br>(graduate)  |
| Certification and/or licensing  | Associate degree<br>(AA, AS)  | Bachelor's degree<br>(BA, BS)   | Bachelor's, Masters, and/or Doctorate<br>(BA/BS, MA/MS, PhD.)                 |
| construction, electronics, technical repair, equipment operator, welding, culinary arts, et al. | academic fields, paralegal, business mgmt., administrative asst., computer programmer, et al. | English, Political Science, Art, Business, Psychology, Economics, Culture Studies | same as College but more specialized (e.g., Literature, Linguistics, Finance) |

In recent years, the growing emphasis on “standards” and basic education has caused a kind of inflation of the customary “time-to-degree” aspect of college. In other words, what might have taken you 2 years of full-time study (at 12 hours classtime per week) in the 1980’s might today take 3 years. Schools on the whole try to fit a lot of learning into a small space of time—it’s just that lately they’ve been trying to fit even more in, so as to meet demands of the employer marketplace.

Everybody who comes to college the first year is a stranger to everybody else. It’s a bit like kindergarten for adults—consequently, the “friends” you acquire at this phase are all equally lost, and you are all equally fresh. But this will become later on your basic crowd or network for getting around the obstacles in school and finance—they are your “pool” of informants, to which you also are a contributor. Being a “lone wolf” student may help you focus closely on your studies, but having a few fellow sufferers nearby can be a greater help in the rough times.

Theoretically, your education can last as long as your desire: when you want to be “done,” you can typically leave with a degree of some level. From 2 years to 10 years, the horizon for learning is pretty broad. The toughest years are the first two—at this time you’re trying to get used to the “system,” find your way around, and develop a study routine. But beyond this you may find that the learning is so exciting and interesting that you’re in no hurry to go so fast—these can be profoundly rewarding years for you personally. Take the “long view” of your education, therefore, and follow your interests rather than your (sometimes overwrought) demands of yourself.

## **COLLEGE MYTHS & COLLEGE REALITIES**

**Myth: You have to be smarter than the average person to go to college.**

On the contrary, in the U.S., you ARE average if you attend at least some college during your lifetime. Over the last 20 years, Americans have increasingly sought some amount of higher education or special training. What they find on arrival is that it's not "smarts" so much as "commitment" that colleges demand—after all, knowledge can be acquired with time, while drive and motivation depend a lot on the individual.

**Myth: Unless you have high SAT or ACT scores, you won't get into college.**

Not true: more and more colleges are turning to other measurement standards besides Entrance Exams. Moreover, the value of your test score depends on which school you want to attend, and when: for example, the typical community college student is not asked to submit SAT scores when she "transfers" to a 4-year state college, but she may need them if she were coming directly out of high school or hoping to compete for certain prestigious scholarships. More often than not, test scores are only a basic reference for the admissions process; the "levels" they imply are not always a decisive factor.

**Myth: You should have lots of "free time" to go to college.**

The majority of college students have outside responsibilities, whether to a family or a job. Much depends on the kind of learner you happen to be—if you are good at multi-tasking, allocating "time" for school may not pose much difficulty. It is true that college does take up your time (studying, going to class, completing assignments, etc.) but if you consider it as a kind of "job" in itself, where you are investing in your own career future, then the "time" itself has validity and worth. For successful students, time at college is not leisure time—it is work time.

**Myth: Before you apply to school, you gotta have a lot of money saved up.**

Colleges and Universities are businesses—that is, large corporate institutions which "sell" a "product" (learning) to consumers. By this arrangement, the higher the product's quality the more it costs to get—but this doesn't mean that the expense all comes out of your pocket. Commonly, the second-largest office on a campus (next to Admissions) is the Financial Aid Office: these people work directly with new enrollees, one on one, to develop resources (grants, scholarships, government aid, loans, work-study, etc.) which will pay for education. In other words, once you enroll at a school, you are immediately eligible for all sorts of money (more so if you're over 21 and not a dependent). They cover not only school expenses, but often self-support expenses—so that you won't have to become homeless in order to get a degree.

**Myth: Academic institutions are "harder" than Vocational schools.**

Instead, it's that they are each DIFFERENT. If you go into the Academic side of schooling, you'll usually be aiming for a broad-spectrum education in a given field; in the Vocational side of schooling, you're usually aiming at a specific kind of job. Academia is for those who want to have a professional or administrative kind of career, while Vocational is for those who prefer a

hands-on, service-level approach. Academic degrees take a bit longer on average than Vocational degrees, and so the “payoff” of the education may not arrive as fast (although it will probably be greater in its rewards and status). But ultimately the income factor is not consistent when trying to decide between Vocational and Academic degrees—depending on the job market, you may stay poor or you may get rich.

**Myth: Once you enroll, you can't just up and leave for a different program or school.**

Unlike purchasing a loaf of bread, you can decide at any time during your education career that you'd prefer a different “brand.” You can change your major, too, whenever you wish. The problem with such changes is that they involve lots of paperwork and/or extra time to complete your degree. In some situations, the change may affect your financial aid package. Thus, most students may change a major but probably not a school, simply because of the labor it takes to “start all over.”

**Myth: Once you've got a degree, it's easy to get a job in your field.**

Not necessarily—if you enter a work field that has a lot of “graduates” in it already, then you'll face some difficult competition securing your chosen job. You may often have to settle for something second-place, just to stay within your expertise. For example, just because you graduate with a Theater degree doesn't mean you'll become a big time Actor; you may have to work as a stage hand or as a scriptwriter for a small company. There are also lots of areas which have great “moral” or spiritual rewards, but poor material or financial rewards (like Teaching). While people with an advanced degree overall have higher incomes than high school graduates, a large percentage remain economically challenged or unable to locate a “match” to their fields.

**Myth: The quality of the school is equal to the extracurricular activities it has (sports, “commons” areas, clubs, “student life” organizations, etc.).**

A football team or a new stadium may provide a college with fame and television time, but this doesn't tell much about the degree of learning it fosters. Obviously, a wealthy school has more money to spend on resources, but again it doesn't mean this is spent in the areas you wish to pursue. Sometimes the best learning environments have lousy chess clubs, and sometimes not.

**Myth: A College environment will be just like High School, except it's more money.**

One way or another, we all pay for education—whether you are a parent paying taxes to the State for K-12 schools, or you are a college student paying directly for your tuition. It is not how you “pay” that makes college different from high school, however: it is the social and psychological setting. For example, in high school, for the most part you are told what and how you will learn; in college, you choose what you will learn, and you alone determine whether you will finish. This difference shows itself in amazing ways among the people you find there—essentially, everyone is responsible for him or herself, professors treat students more like equals than inferiors, and efforts to “break the mold” (intellectually) are welcomed not discouraged. The price of this freedom is that you're expected to be productive—just like a job—in order to get the benefit.

**Myth: With so many young people around, you should have an active social life in college.**

Bottom line: dating and partying at college are natural enough, but those who make it their main exercise do not do well in the school's eyes. Few of them even finish. So be clear about why you're going—college is for learning, and a bar is for getting drunk (LOL).

**Myth: College teachers provide more individual attention than High School teachers.**

Not so much. College classrooms are usually overcrowded and taught by underpaid professionals—especially the classes that are considered “lower division” or prerequisites. This is a lot like secondary school. If you manage to keep up, however, and get through the first year or two, your arrival at more specialized courses will probably result in relationships with individual professors. This doesn't mean they will have lots of time for you, but it does mean that they may take a personal interest in your success. This can be very valuable when you need some extra help or support. A college will also have specific programs to provide individual attention and support if you're struggling.

**Myth: online college courses provide the same learning as do regular-enrolled college courses.**

Online college courses can be quite tough, but are still generally “correspondence” types of education—in other words, they are cheaper for you and fast cash for the college, but usually low in prestige and/or educational substance. Most people never finish these courses, because they lack conditions for discipline. Current statistics suggest that, for the average college freshman, it's money wasted.