

Learn the ABCs of College Degrees

Here's a quick guide to the types of degrees offered at community colleges and four-year colleges and universities.

Community colleges offer diplomas and certificates and associate's degrees.

Diplomas and certificates demonstrate that you have a set of skills for a particular occupation. The length of time required to earn diplomas and certificates varies from 6 months to less than two years, depending on the occupation. Certificates and diplomas are available in subjects like auto mechanics, welding, cosmetology and practical nursing.

Associate's degrees are two-year degrees that provide preparation for a career or for transfer to a four-year college or university. Typical careers that require an associate's degree are dental assistant, teacher assistant and medical technologist. Students can also earn an associate's degree and then transfer to a four-year school to earn a bachelor's degree.

Four-year colleges and universities offer bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, professional degrees and doctoral degrees.

A bachelor's degree is awarded after four years of study at a college. The bachelor of arts (BA) and bachelor of science (BS) are the most common, and both include general education courses, courses in a declared major and electives. This degree is also called an undergraduate degree. Examples of careers that require bachelor's degrees are teaching and engineering.

A master's degree is an advanced degree earned in a specialized field after the completion of a bachelor's degree. Most master's degrees require two or three years of full-time study and include writing a thesis or taking comprehensive exams. School counselors, physical therapists and social workers are examples of people with master's degrees.

Becoming licensed in a recognized profession requires a professional degree. Professional degrees are awarded in a number of fields, including dentistry, ministry, law, medicine, pharmacy and veterinary medicine. The length of study varies for each profession.

A doctoral degree, also known as a doctorate, is the highest education degree you can earn. A doctoral degree indicates expertise in a specialized field. You must spend 3 to 5 years after completing a master's degree doing extensive research and a dissertation.

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