

10 Tips for Navigating the College to Career Path

College marks the time an individual takes an important step toward financial independence. Research shows that young adults can improve their future earning potential by heeding the following ten pieces of advice.

1. **Prepare before beginning college.** Understand the opportunities offered by the various programs in higher education. Considerations should include everything from choosing a school to picking a major. For example, community colleges and certificate programs tend to have higher returns on investment in the short term, while in the long run, colleges that award bachelor's degrees are often the better investment.
2. **Attend school when faced with poor job prospects caused by a recession.** Add to your education if you are having trouble obtaining a job during difficult economic times. Because a first job has a huge impact on future earnings and opportunities, it's better to enter the job market during an economic recovery.
3. **Opt for postsecondary education if possible.** More education typically translates into better pay and yields better employee benefits than less education does.
4. **Choose a major/field of study carefully.** Paychecks may depend more on the chosen discipline than the level of education obtained. Research which majors will reap the greatest rewards.
5. **Don't be sucked in by elite college brands.** Occupation choice and program of study determine salary more than the name of a college. High-profile institutions do spend more per student; however, when it comes to labor-market returns (the supply and demand for labor) the occupation and major matter more.
6. **Understand the limitations of a field of study.** While important, the field of study itself does not determine earnings. For example, the top 25 percent of humanities and liberal arts majors earn more than the bottom 25% of architecture or engineering majors.
7. **Know the cost/benefit ratio of a major.** Long-term earnings vary greatly by major. Humanities, education, and psychology majors rarely catch up to the highest-earning majors, generally found in professions related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM disciplines).
8. **Seek curriculum that offers broad, cross-discipline learning as well as deep learning in one area.** The knowledge gained from studying the liberal arts combined with specific career education has value; indeed, this combination acts in a complementary fashion. In this way, a bachelor's degree provides a balance of knowledge tailored to a field as well as learning from a wide range of subjects.
9. **Focus on competencies required in individual occupations and common occupational clusters.** Look for educational programs designed to yield the general competencies valued throughout business: communication, teamwork, sales and customer service, leadership, problem solving, and complex thinking. When choosing a college and major, consider these important outcomes.
10. **Realize when the deck is stacked against you.** Women and underrepresented groups face unjust obstacles and systemic biases. Therefore, people in these populations need to take additional measures to optimize their opportunities in the labor market.