



**Postsecondary education** is the umbrella term for all higher education after earning a high school diploma or equivalency. This resource will examine three different categories of postsecondary programs, how they differ, and how they fit together: technical, undergraduate, and graduate programs.

## THE LANDSCAPE

### Career and Technical Education:

Also commonly referred to as “trade schools” or “vocational programs,” this type of postsecondary program focuses on practical training for certain career paths. Technical programs focus on developing and applying real-world skills. Learn more about different types of technical educational credentials in the next section.

**Undergraduate Programs:** Higher education programs that students can take after completing high school, which includes associate and bachelor’s degrees. Most undergraduate programs offer opportunities to develop analytical, critical thinking, and writing skills, with an emphasis on General Education. There are also some technical degrees that are considered undergraduate programs, and these have less general education and more hands-on skill-building. Learn more about the various types of undergraduate programs later in this resource.

**Graduate Programs:** Education programs that take place after a bachelor’s degree are often called graduate or postgraduate programs. These programs are advanced degrees with a more specific, in-depth focus than undergraduate programs, providing students with professional expertise in a given field. Some professions require graduate level education, but many other valuable professions do not.





## GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Master's programs can begin after a bachelor's and typically take 2-3 years, depending on the program. Some master's programs can transfer into more advanced doctorate degrees.

Doctoral programs can begin after a bachelor's or master's and take 3-7 years or longer.



## TECHNICAL COLLEGE

After high school, certificate and diploma programs typically take up to two years, with no prior college required.

## HIGH SCHOOL CREDENTIAL

After finishing high school, there are many different educational paths to take.



## UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

After high school, an associate degree takes two years full-time. It can stand alone or transfer into a four-year bachelor's degree, which would require two additional years.

Bachelor's degrees typically take four years full-time.





## A CLOSER LOOK AT CAREER AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE

### WHAT IS TECHNICAL EDUCATION?

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, sometimes called trade or vocational programs, typically prepare students for immediate employment, and they offer education for specific skilled labor industries. Some technical college programs are designed to allow students to stack multiple **credentials** on top of each other, all within one program.

Technical education can be offered at the high school level or at the college level. Prisons are required to offer some form of CTE, but it may not be college-level. If you aren't sure if the career and technical programs being offered are **postsecondary** programs or not, ask if the programs are being provided by a specific college.

The three major kinds of technical education credentials are certificates, diplomas, and A.A.S. degrees, which are explained in greater detail below.

**Certificates:** Certificate programs are short-term and prepare students with a narrow and specific set of skills. Some certificate programs can be taken as an extra add-on to another degree if a student wants to gain additional skills. Certificate programs vary in length from a few weeks up to a year. In some cases they can last more than a year. Typically these credits are not transferable to other programs or degrees.

**Diplomas:** Diploma programs are also focused on developing practical workforce skills in a specific specialty. They typically include more instructional and practical hours than certificate programs. These programs tend to be more thorough and take longer to complete, often lasting up to two years. Many diploma programs will also have certificates embedded within the program path, which allows students completing the program to begin employment in their field before completing the diploma.

**Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.) Degrees:** A.A.S. degree programs fall under this technical education category and the undergraduate degree category covered later in this resource. These programs offer an associate degree designed to prepare students for a career and to enter the workforce immediately.

A.A.S. programs tend to be longer, lasting two years, full-time. Like diploma and certificate programs, they also emphasize practical skills and hands on learning, but A.A.S. programs have more theoretical learning too and include some General Education courses. Unlike other associate programs (the A.S. and A.A.), A.A.S. degrees are not designed to be transferred.

### WHAT ARE CERTIFICATIONS & LICENSURE?

Students who are enrolled in CTE programs may also have an opportunity to gain industry **certifications**, but these are granted by private, professional organizations. Certifications are professional credentials used to confirm a person's skill set and ability, typically by passing a test.

**Licensure** is a different process involving governmental oversight. Governments decide which professions need to be regulated and set the licensing process that someone is required by law to follow in order to work in that profession. Most professional licensing is overseen by individual state licensing boards that are unique to each industry, and their rules vary greatly.







## WILL I BE PROHIBITED FROM LICENSURE?

Occupational **licensure** policies may impose restrictions for some people who have been convicted of felonies or misdemeanors, but these barriers vary significantly by industry and by state. In recent years, advocates have succeeded in passing laws and policies to eliminate some overly restrictive licensing requirements that created barriers for justice-impacted people.

Unfortunately, it isn't feasible to provide a list here of all of the policies impacting licensure – there are too many different kinds of licensure, different jurisdictions, different kinds of policies, and different kinds of convictions. Here is a brief summary of a few things you can expect and explore:

- **Prison education programs** that accept federal financial aid **cannot** offer programs leading to a professional licensure that prohibits formerly incarcerated people from becoming licensed. In other words, colleges aren't allowed to offer programs within a prison if their students won't be allowed to get licensed in the state where the program is located, in that specific career in the future. If you are concerned about your eligibility to obtain professional licensure at the end of your current prison education program, speak with your advisor or instructor.
- Find out what Second Chance or Fresh Start laws have been passed in your state to support formerly incarcerated workers. Some states have passed laws protecting your right not to be discriminated against in the licensure process. Other states have created new ways for you to appeal unfair licensing board decisions. Ask your instructors or advisors if there are any laws that might protect you.
- Generally speaking, the most common licensure laws exclude people who have convictions directly related to that professional field, or they prohibit licensure in specific professions that require caring for vulnerable populations.
- Many licensing boards do require people to disclose prior convictions. Generally speaking, you can expect this **may** be part of the application process. Just because an application asks the question, don't assume you are automatically disqualified. Many licensure boards use a subjective, case-by-case evaluation. Convictions can lead to automatic disqualification for some boards, but that is not always the case, and it is important to know your rights.
- If you have access to the internet, the "Restoration of Rights Project" is a great place to research individual state laws. You can visit their website at <https://ccresourcecenter.org/restoration-2-2/>. Navigate to your state and the section entitled "Criminal Record in Employment and Licensing."
- Don't forget that you are not alone! There may be other formerly incarcerated professionals who have blazed a path in your chosen career field. Be encouraged to ask questions and advocate for yourself.







## A CLOSER LOOK AT UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

### WHAT ARE UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES?

Undergraduate degrees are academic programs pursued after completing high school, and they include associate and bachelor's degrees. Most undergraduate degrees are made up of a broad core curriculum and a specific area of focus, usually called a **major**.

Associate and bachelor's degrees can stand alone, or they can fit together. You can think of an associate degree as the first two years of a four-year bachelor's degree. In other words, a student who completes an associate degree could choose to go on to transfer to a bachelor's program and finish their final two years. At the end of those four years, the student would have an associate degree and a bachelor's degree. Another student may have spent those same four years pursuing one bachelor's degree at a four-year school. Generally speaking, neither of these paths (earning both degrees or only a bachelor's degree) is considered more valuable than the other.

#### LEARN MORE

For more information about bachelors and associate degrees, see the *Navigating Forward* resource **Components of an Undergraduate Degree**.

### WHAT ARE ASSOCIATE DEGREES?

Associate degrees typically require about 60 credit hours and traditionally take two years.

**Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.)** degrees focus on technical training and prepare students for immediate employment. These degree programs are best suited for individuals wanting to work in a specific skilled trade or wanting to seek employment immediately upon graduation. A.A.S. degrees are not designed to transfer into a bachelor's degree program or to prepare students for additional studies. Some A.A.S. credits may be transferrable to other programs, but the majority of content is not.

**Associate of Science (A.S.) and Associate of Arts (A.A.)** are typically designed to be able to transfer into bachelor's degree programs, and to prepare students for additional studies. The majority of classes will be **General Education**, with a few classes in a specific **major**.

The difference between A.S. and A.A. degrees is very small. Associate of Science degrees indicate an emphasis on sciences or math and Associate of Arts degrees indicate an emphasis on **humanities** or arts, but in practice the two degrees may be exactly the same except for one or two courses.

**For example:** At some schools, the only difference is that the A.A. program requires a foreign language course.

### WHAT ARE BACHELOR'S DEGREES?

Bachelor's degrees typically require about 120 credit hours and take four years of full-time enrollment to complete. These programs typically consist of general education courses in the first two years and major-specific courses and **electives** in the last two years.

Bachelor's degrees are most commonly known as **Bachelor's of Science (B.S.)** or **Bachelor's of Arts (B.A.)** degrees, depending on the student's program of study. Other kinds of bachelor's degrees exist as well, like a Bachelor's of Business Administration, expressed as a B.B.A., but a B.S. and a B.A. are the most common.

While associate degrees are also considered "undergraduate degrees," a bachelor's degree is required in order to pursue more advanced degrees, like those awarded in graduate school.

### PLANNING YOUR PATHWAY:

Many college credentials are stackable, and colleges sometimes develop pathways for transfer students to plan out their courses in advance. Transfer credit is determined by the **receiving college**, so you may need to speak with representatives from your future school in order to build a transfer plan now. If you do have a specific future degree in mind, but you're enrolled in a different program now, speak to your advisor about your goals.





## A CLOSER LOOK AT GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Graduate degrees are advanced degrees completed after a bachelor's degree and include master's degrees and doctoral degrees.

### WHAT IS A MASTER'S DEGREE?

A master's degree generally takes two to three years to complete in traditional school settings, with the credit hour requirements varying by program. Common master's degrees include Master of Science (M.S.), Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), and Master of Education (M.Ed.).

Within a master's program, your coursework will be focused on the academic, theoretical, and practical training you will need within your chosen area of study. Even electives are related to your future career field. Master's programs typically allow students to balance work and study, but field placements and research opportunities, which can be degree requirements, are often unpaid.

Like an associate degree, a master's degree can stand alone, but it can also sometimes transfer into a more advanced degree program like a doctoral program.

**Postgraduate Degree:** The term "postgraduate" refers to any education pursued after the completion of a bachelor's degree. This includes master's and doctoral degrees, but it is a broader term that can also include postgraduate certificates and diplomas, as well as postdoctoral research programs.

### KEY TERMS

Key terms in **blue** can be found in the *Navigating Forward Glossary* if you'd like more information.

### WHAT IS A DOCTORAL DEGREE?

Doctoral degrees are the highest formal level of education offered by universities and can take as many as 3-7 years or more to complete.

Common doctoral programs include Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), Juris Doctor (J.D.), Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), and Doctor of Education (Ed.D.).

A doctoral degree indicates mastery of a discipline, and although requirements differ significantly by field, doctoral programs commonly require advanced research or highly specialized training. Candidates for Ph.D.s, who commonly pursue careers teaching or researching at the college level, are required to publish a dissertation – original research that they must defend to a panel. Doctors of Medicine, on the other hand, are required to perform clinical rotations and practically apply their training.

While most prison education programs do not offer doctoral programs, you could discuss this possibility with your professor or advisor if you want to learn more.

**Terminal Degree:** The term "terminal degree" is used to indicate the highest degree in a given field. For many disciplines, this would be a doctoral degree, but there are some fields where a master's degree or some other credential is the highest level of education achievable.





## PAYING FOR POSTSECONDARY PROGRAMS

### HOW CAN I PAY FOR TECHNICAL AND ASSOCIATE PROGRAMS?

The **Federal Pell Grant** can be used to cover the cost of certificate programs and associate degree programs as long as the program leads to a certificate or degree and takes at least a year to complete. However, Pell has a lifetime limit for each student, and using some of those dollars to pay for a one or two-year program could mean that less financial aid will be available to you if you later choose to pursue a bachelor's degree. Students who are considering pursuing a bachelor's degree should keep financial aid limits in mind when deciding whether a program is right for them. Your state may have additional financial aid programs specifically for students pursuing associate and technical programs, so talk to your program advisors or financial aid representatives about these options as well.

#### DID YOU KNOW?

In some states, certificates can be translated into credit hours through a process called **Prior Learning Assessment**. Maintain copies of your certificates now if you want to apply them later.

### HOW CAN I PAY FOR A BACHELOR'S DEGREE?

Pell Grants can be used to cover the costs of pursuing a bachelor's degree for students that are eligible and demonstrate substantial financial need. Many institutions have costs that exceed the maximum Pell Grant amount you can receive each year, so you may need additional funding sources, especially if you are transferring from a **PEP** to a traditional campus where tuition and fee rates may be different.

#### KEY TERMS

**PEP** stands for Prison Education Program.

Other key terms in **blue** can be found in the *Navigating Forward Glossary* if you'd like more information.

### HOW CAN I PAY FOR A MASTER'S DEGREE?

You are not eligible for the Pell Grant once you have completed a bachelor's degree, which means the Pell Grant cannot be used for most graduate programs. Some graduate programs offer paid work opportunities for students in the form of Graduate Assistant (GA) roles. This includes teaching assistants (TAs), who assist faculty with their teaching responsibilities, research assistants (RAs), who assist faculty with research and writing responsibilities, as well as other administrative assistant roles on campus. You may be eligible for additional financial aid opportunities, like grants, loans, and scholarships, so ask the college what assistance is available.

#### LEARN MORE

For information about how financial aid works, including financial aid key terms, diagrams and charts, please see the resource, **Financial Aid Overview**, and the resource, **Pell Eligibility**.

### HOW CAN I PAY FOR A DOCTORAL DEGREE?

Many doctoral programs offer tuition waivers, stipends, and work opportunities, but financial support is not guaranteed, and stipends may not fully cover your living expenses. Pell Grants do not cover doctoral degrees, so other aid might be necessary.







## JOURNAL ACTIVITY

Use the space provided to answer a few brainstorming questions. Spend some time thinking about all of the resources you have read so far and capture your initial thoughts in writing.

What educational goals do you have? Take some time to think about the things you would like to learn about or explore in college and write them down below.

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In what ways might college be challenging and in what ways might college be a source of joy or relief? Spend some time thinking and writing about how taking college classes might shift your perspective.

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What is your ideal career path? What do you still need to learn in order to be successful in that career? What questions do you have about the educational steps you need to take for your dream career?

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