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The U.S. Colleges Offering the Best Value

These schools keep costs low and put graduates on pathways to lucrative careers

By [Kevin McAllister](#) Sept. 18, 2023 10:00 am ET



Baruch College boasted the lowest net price of any school in the WSJ/College Pulse 2024 Best Colleges in the U.S. ranking. Photo: GHI/Education Images/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Baruch College offers the best value of any university in the country, according to the new [Wall Street Journal/College Pulse college rankings](#).

Public schools dominate the list of colleges that offer students and families the best bang for their buck, taking 35 of the top 50 slots.

California schools also pepper the upper echelon of the value ranking, with nine of the top 20 schools located in the Golden State. Of those nine colleges, six belong to the California State University system, led by its Los Angeles campus, No. 3 on the value list.

(You can see our full overall ranking, as well as rankings focused on student experiences and schools' impact on graduate salaries and social mobility, [here, along with the methodology behind them all.](#))

The question of how much a college degree can boost future earnings and how that compares with its cost has become a centerpiece of the college decision process, as many Americans have [come to doubt](#) the value of a degree.

Guided by research conducted by the public-policy think tank Third Way, our best-value calculation looks at how quickly a degree from each college pays for its cost through the salary boost it provides its students. We do that by estimating the net price of a four-year education at each school, and comparing that to how much higher the median salary of the school's graduates is, 10 years after enrollment, than that of high-school graduates in the state where the school is located.

Net price is the average overall cost of attending the college for students who receive federal financial aid, including tuition and fees, room and board, and books and supplies, taking into account any grants and scholarships.

Colleges that finished atop the best-value list both kept costs low and put graduates on pathways to lucrative careers. Baruch boasted the lowest net price of any ranked college, at an estimated \$7,744 for four years, and a \$45,078 boost in median salary 10 years after enrollment, bigger than the boost for three-quarters of the schools in the ranking. That means that, by this calculation, the estimated time to pay off a Baruch education is about two months.

Colleges Offering the Best Value

How long it would take to pay for the estimated average cost of a degree based on the median salary for the school's alumni 10 years after enrollment.

<u>Best Value Rank</u>	<u>College</u>	<u>Years to Pay Off Net Price</u>
1	Baruch College	2 months
2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	2 months
3	California State University - Los Angeles	3 months
4	University of Florida	3 months
5	Stanford University	4 months
6	Princeton University	6 months
7	California State University - Fullerton	6 months
8	University of Pennsylvania	8 months
9	Columbia University	8 months
10	Florida International University	9 months

Timeframes are displayed rounded to the full month. Exact ties are listed in alphabetical order.
Source: WSJ/College Pulse 2024 Best Colleges in the U.S. ranking

“Our faculty understand that our students come to Baruch to get a good education so that they can have a great career—not just a first job, but a great career that follows,” says Linda Essig, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Baruch.

Many departments at Baruch have faculty who are responsible for creating connections in industry for students, Essig says. She also credits the college’s push to improve four-year graduation rates as another way Baruch has committed to keeping costs low.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ranked second for value, and fifth-ranked Stanford University—which both also are among the top five in the overall ranking—also pair high earnings premiums with relatively low costs. MIT graduates had the highest median salary among all ranked colleges, and both Stanford and MIT had estimated four-year net prices below \$30,000. No other school in the top 14 of the overall ranking had an estimated net price for four years below \$40,000.

In total, salary boosts cover the estimated cost of a college education in less than a year for 27 schools in the WSJ/College Pulse ranking.

The estimated payoff time at Brigham Young University is just over that, at one year and two months. “BYU is really affordable compared to a lot of other schools I was interested in,” says Emma Ausman, a senior at the university studying computer science. “It means that instead of going into debt for school, I can work on saving money.”

Even as some employers have [de-emphasized the four-year college degree](#), the skills synonymous with a degree and the doors they can open still justify the costs for many students and parents.

“Computer science is one of those fields where you can kind of get a job without having a degree, just based on doing certifications or doing courses online,” says Hamzah Masri, a student at Florida International University, which ranks 10th best for value. But, he says, “you really have to prove yourself to a company to show them why you deserve to work for them. I think a degree makes it a lot easier.”

Still, ballooning student debt remains a nationwide concern that, on the individual level, can take a serious toll on one’s [financial future and psychological health](#).

“What we’re really hearing is that value is the top priority,” says Essig, the Baruch provost. “And that’s about the full value proposition, not just the price, but the combination of a reasonable price, a really high-quality education and strong student outcomes.”

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