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The 25 Colleges With The Highest Payoff

CUNY Brooklyn College offers a great return on investment for its students, who typically recoup the... [+] CUNY

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From MIT to the City College of New York, these 25 schools send graduates out into the world with high earnings potential and little if any student debt.

By [Francesca Walton](#), Forbes Staff

College is an investment, and one more and more Americans are leery of. Most [now say a college degree isn't worth taking on student debt](#). A new [Gallup poll](#) finds a third of Americans—triple the number of a decade ago—have little to no confidence in higher education, with costs (along with politics) underlying this growing disenchantment.

So here's the good news: There are lots of schools on *Forbes'* [America's Top Colleges](#) list that actually produce an excellent return on investment. This is about more than just the sticker price. Go to a cheap school that produces lousy job prospects and taking on even a few thousand in debt (plus the lost time you spent studying) may not be worth it. Pick an “expensive” school that reduces the net cost with [generous aid](#) and catapults its graduates into lucrative careers and your investment could pay off, big-time.

To determine which of *Forbes'* top 500 colleges offer the best return on investment (ROI), we looked at each school's price-to-earnings premium, a calculation by the think tank Third Way that shows the number of years it takes graduates to recoup the net cost of their education. We also factored in the schools' debt-to-percent-borrowed index, a figure that *Forbes* created for the top 500 colleges list that takes into account how many students take on debt to attend the school, and how much debt those graduates leave with.

Combined, these measures gave us 25 schools that offer a low-debt education and promise high earnings potential. In other words, a high average ROI. Some of them come as no surprise—science and technology heavy-hitters [Stanford University](#) and the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), for example, both offer their students stellar ROIs. Others, like the nine City University of New York (CUNY) schools on this list, are less well known, particularly outside of New York.

To learn more about each school, click on the college name. To see where each school ranks in the top 500, [click here](#).

[Princeton University](#)

Princeton University continues to take the #1 spot not only in the top 500, but also in terms of students' return on investment. The New Jersey Ivy League university offers nearly 40 majors and certificate programs; the most popular majors are computer science, economics, and public policy. Over the years, more graduates have gone into the finance and technology sectors than any other industry (with business, consulting, and hedge funds also being well represented). The median salary for a Princeton graduate ten years after receiving their diploma is just under \$200,000, and the university's generous financial aid (backed by a huge \$34 billion endowment) ensures that students graduate with little to no debt.

Stanford University

"Ivy-plus" Stanford University in California is known nationwide for its focus on STEM programs and its pipeline to high-paying Silicon Valley jobs. Many students end up in the technology and startup space, and within a few years of graduating, the median Stanford grad brings home \$100,000 or more per year. Only around 5% of students take out federal loans to attend the university, with the median loan amount totaling \$9,851.

CUNY City College of New York

CCNY is the first of nine City University of New York schools on this list, and the oldest in the 25-college public system. It was also the first free public institution of higher education in America. It's no longer free, but undergraduate tuition for New York state residents is just [\\$6,930 a year](#). Psychology, biology and computer science are popular majors at the public college in midtown Manhattan, and graduates recoup their net cost in just six months, according to Third Way data.

California Institute of Technology

Graduates of the California Institute of Technology earn a median salary of \$132,140 six years after enrolling (and for many bachelor's-degree holders, two years after graduating). The science and technology-oriented school in Pasadena, California offers its graduates a price-to-earnings premium of 0.73, meaning it takes graduates about nine months to recoup the cost of their education.

CUNY Hunter College

CUNY's Hunter College, located on the upper east side of Manhattan, offers more than a hundred undergraduate and postgraduate majors across its five schools. Only 6.5% of students

take out loans to attend the college, and their median loan balance is \$8,812. Hunter College graduates typically recoup their net cost within half a year, per Third Way data.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology boasts high salaries for its graduates—MIT alumni earn a median \$105,000 six years after graduating. A tiny 4% of MIT students take out federal student loans (with their median debt being \$12,462) and 95% of borrowers are able to make a dent in their loan principal within five years of graduating. The Cambridge-based university is known for its intense science and technology programs, with computer science, mechanical engineering and math among the most popular majors.

CUNY Brooklyn College

Only 7% of students take out federal loans to attend CUNY Brooklyn College, and their median loan total sits at \$9,218. Once graduated, Brooklyn College students make up the net cost of their education in just over half a year, according to Third Way data. The school accepts 55% of applicants, and popular majors include psychology, accounting, and business administration and management.

CUNY York College

CUNY York College in Jamaica, Queens, offers its undergraduates 60 majors to choose from, including nursing, social work and health services. About 5% of students take out federal loans to attend York College, and their median loan total is just \$7,500, one of the lowest figures of the 25 schools on this list. Graduates recoup their net cost in just over a year, according to Third Way.

CUNY Queens College

CUNY Queens College, neighbor to York College, also offers its students a stand-out ROI: graduates recoup their net cost within nine months (low-income students do so within six months), and just 8% percent of students take out loans, with a median student debt of \$8,580. The college accepts 70% of its applicants, and enrolls nearly 12,400 students.

CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice

The CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice offers students an education in criminal justice and forensic science, and many graduates go on to work in local police forces, earn law degrees, or work in public policy. The 7% of students who borrow to attend the school take out a median \$9,250 in loans, and graduates recoup their net cost in about 10 months. Low-income students recoup their cost in around half a year.

Harvard University

Less than 3% of students borrow federal dollars to attend America's oldest college, Harvard University, thanks in large part to the comprehensive aid packages the school grants to all students showing financial need. Like Princeton, Harvard's generosity is funded by its \$50 billion endowment. After graduation, Harvard alumni need a little over a year to recoup their net cost, and low-income students specifically take about six months to do so.

Rice University

Rice University in Houston, Texas, which made its top-ten debut on this year's *Forbes' America's Top Colleges* list, is known for its engineering and computer science programs. Graduates earn a median salary of \$88,000 six years after graduating, and an impressive \$152,100 ten years out. Rice alumni recoup their net cost in just about a year after graduating, per Third Way data.

CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

Noticing a trend? CUNY Bernard M Baruch College is the seventh CUNY school on this list, cementing the New York system's reputation as a cost-effective option for bachelor's degree seekers. The Manhattan college offers 29 majors, with finance and accounting being the most popular. Graduates recoup their net cost within about five months, and low-income graduates do so in about two months, the fastest of any school on this list. About 10% of students borrow to attend the school, taking out a median \$10,000 in loans.

Berea College

The median loan balance for students at Berea College in Kentucky is a low \$3,516, which is no surprise given the school charges \$0 in tuition. About 10% of students take out federal loans to cover other costs, such as room and board, books and supplies. Graduates of the small school take about 15 months to recoup their net cost, per Third Way data.

CUNY Lehman College

Popular programs at CUNY Lehman College in the Bronx include psychology, healthcare administration and accounting. Nearly 11% of students take on debt to attend the school, with a median federal loan balance of \$8,500. It takes graduates about nine months to recoup their net cost, and low-income students need about seven months to do so.

Yale University

Thanks to generous Yale financial aid, only 5% of students take out federal loans to attend this Ivy League school in New Haven, Connecticut and the median debt load for those graduates sits at \$11,648. But paying back those loans shouldn't be too hard, since two years after graduating with a four year degree, Yalies have a median salary of \$81,765 and eight years later, the median is \$168,300. Graduates take about 14 months to recoup their net cost, according to Third Way.

University of Florida

The University of Florida is the largest school on this list, counting nearly 33,000 undergraduates, 12% of whom take on student loans. Students who borrow take out a median \$14,000 to attend the public university in Gainesville, and five years after graduating, three-quarters of those borrowers are able to make a dent in their loan principal. Popular majors among Gator Nation include engineering, marketing and communications. Earlier this year, the University of Florida was named one of [*Forbes' New Ivies*](#), in part because of its high reputation among employers.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Worldwide

For students interested in aviation and aerospace programs, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida offers a great return on investment. Graduates need about 14 months to recoup the net cost of their degree, and low-income graduates specifically take about 16 months. Ten percent of students borrow federal dollars to attend the university, with a median loan amount of \$14,250.

CUNY College of Staten Island

Only 9% of students borrow to attend the College of Staten Island, and their median federal loan burden is \$8,846. Graduates, including low-income graduates, can recoup their net cost within about a year and a half. Popular majors at the New York university include psychology, social science, and business.

University of Chicago

The rigorous University of Chicago, often dubbed an “Ivy-plus” school, is popular for its social sciences, mathematics and economics programs. Graduates recoup their net cost within about a year and a half, though low-income students can do so in less than a month, thanks largely to sizable financial aid packages that bring tuition, fees and housing costs to near-zero. About 5% of students borrow to attend the university, with a median debt load of \$13,368.

Brigham Young University

Mormon mainstay Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, offers popular programs in business, biomedical science and engineering. About 10% of students borrow to attend the university, taking on median federal student debt of \$8,310. Graduates need about a year and a half to recoup the net cost of their education, and low-income students can do so in a little less than a year.

University of Pennsylvania

Graduates of the University of Pennsylvania earn a median \$89,100 six years after graduating, and a median \$171,800 ten years out. These high salaries allow graduates to recoup their net cost within about a year and a half, though low-income students can do so in less than a month because of the university’s comprehensive financial aid. Popular majors at the Ivy League university include finance (at Penn’s Wharton School of business), social sciences, biology and nursing.

Claremont McKenna College

Claremont McKenna College, part of the seven-school Claremont College consortium in southern California, enrolls about 1,400 students. Around 16% of students take out federal loans to attend the college, with a median debt balance of \$11,948. Six years after graduating, alumni earn a median of \$86,700, and \$167,000 ten years out.

California State University-Dominguez Hills

California State University-Dominguez Hills in Carson, California enrolls around 12,000 undergraduates. After walking away with their degree, graduates need about 10 months to recoup their net cost, and low-income students specifically take about eight months. One in five students borrow money to attend the university, with an average federal loan balance of \$11,902. Popular majors at the state university include business administration, psychology and criminal justice.

Vanderbilt University

At Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, just under 10% of students take out federal loans and they end up with a median debt of \$12,913. The university offers 70 undergraduate majors, including economics, social science and computer science. It takes graduates about a year and a half to recoup the net cost of their degree, and low-income students can do so within about eight months.

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