

Just the Facts: Returns on College Investment

Public skepticism about the value of a college education—particularly its value relative to costs, or “ROI”—can hold merit but is often uninformed. As a Guardian of the public trust, you share responsibility for improving public awareness of college value. Facts to know¹:

Fact: A college education is the surest way to achieve financial stability (*see p. 7-8*).

- Average lifetime earnings estimates run from \$450,000-\$625,000 greater for bachelor’s degree holders than high school graduates, net of expenses and foregone earnings.
- College graduates are 47% more likely to have health insurance and 72% more likely to have retirement plans through their employers.
- Unemployment rates for college graduates are typically about half those of high school graduates; 99% of jobs created since 2009 have gone to those with at least some college.

Fact: Most college graduates come out with manageable debt, or none at all.

- Less than two-thirds of college-goers take out federal loans; among 2016 graduate-borrowers, average totals were \$27,000 (public) and \$32,000 (private).
- For-profit college-goers average lower student debt and higher default rates.
- National student loan debt stands at \$1.4 trillion. About 40% of that is held by those with advanced degrees—96% of whom report satisfaction with their education in return.

Fact: College comes with many advantages *see (p. 10)*.

- By age 26, college graduates with student debt are more likely to own a house than high school graduates.
- By age 34, those who attended at least some college are more likely to be married.
- College graduates are more likely to hold prestigious jobs and report personal happiness.

Fact: College graduates strengthen American communities and the economy (*see p. 6; p. 11-12*).

- Participation in school, community, service, and religious organizations is twice as high among bachelor’s degree holders; they are three times as likely to lead them; they donate to them sums more than twice as great as high school graduates, on average.
- The average lifetime taxes paid per college graduate—net of government expenditures—is \$381,000, compared with \$26,000 per high school graduate.
- The CBO projects net federal student loan revenues of \$135 billion from 2015-2024.

Fact: College decisions are not risk-free.

- Deciding not to go to college can pose risks; attending some college but not finishing often means a partial return on individual and public investments.
- Students transfer, pause, or discontinue their studies for a variety of reasons, and the American higher education sector must help more students finish college.

¹ Outlined in [Return on Investment in College Education](#)