

MAJORMATCH RESEARCH • 2026 EDITION

The 2026 Major ROI Report

*An honest analysis of every major college degree by 10-year return
on investment*

45 MAJORS • 9 TRADE ALTERNATIVES • 10 PRIMARY SOURCES

*Prepared for parents of high school students
navigating the most expensive decision of their family's life.*

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This report is meant to be read alongside your teen, not handed to them. The most useful conversations come from disagreeing about it.

A Note Before You Read

This report exists because we have watched too many parents — including our own — make a \$200,000 decision based on vibes.

Most college rankings are built for prestige. They tell you who has the lowest acceptance rate, the prettiest quad, the most famous alumni. They will not tell you whether your daughter is going to graduate, whether the major she picks pays back its cost, or whether the debt your family takes on will follow her into her thirties.

That is what this report is for.

We pulled federal salary data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, underemployment data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, lifetime earnings data from Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, and tuition data from the National Center for Education Statistics. We computed a 10-year return on investment for every major college degree, ranked them, and wrote down what we found.

Some of what you are about to read will be uncomfortable. A few of the most popular majors in America have negative real returns once you account for cost. A few of the lowest-paying degrees pay back beautifully if you skip the private school. And nine trades — which most parents do not even consider — out-earn the average bachelor's degree by year ten.

You do not have to agree with everything here. You should disagree with some of it. The point is to give you and your teen better data than you had yesterday, so the conversation you have over the kitchen table tomorrow is grounded in something real.

- The MajorMatch Research Team

Five Things Every Parent Should Know

01 **The major matters more than the school.**

Earnings differences across majors are roughly 3x larger than earnings differences across schools at similar selectivity tiers. A computer science major from a state university out-earns a fine arts major from an Ivy League school by year five — and keeps the lead for life.

02 **40% of recent graduates are underemployed.**

Per the New York Fed, four in ten recent college graduates work in jobs that do not require their degree. The underemployment rate ranges from under 10% in nursing and engineering to over 60% in performing arts and theater.

03 **Tuition is the variable parents can actually control.**

In-state public tuition averages \$11,000 per year. Private four-year averages \$43,000. The major your teen picks is downstream of fit; the school you choose is downstream of math. Cost discipline rescues almost any major; debt destroys even the strongest ones.

04 **Six trades out-earn the average bachelor's degree.**

Elevator installers, electrical line workers, commercial pilots, boilermakers, and master electricians and plumbers routinely earn more than the median bachelor's holder by year ten — with no debt and four years of paid apprenticeship instead.

05 **60% of students change their major at least once.**

Indecision is the rule, not the exception. The mistake is not being undecided at 17. The mistake is committing to a \$250,000 path before you know which one is yours.

How We Measured ROI

Return on investment for a college major is a deceptively simple idea. You take what the degree costs, subtract what the graduate earns above what they would have earned without it, and divide. The hard part is doing it honestly.

Our 10-year ROI formula

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{(10\text{-Year Earnings Premium}) - (4\text{-Year Cost})}{(4\text{-Year Cost})} \times 100$$

Expressed as a percentage. Higher is better. 100% means the degree pays back its full cost in 10 years.

What's included in cost

Four years of in-state public tuition (NCES baseline of \$11,000/yr), plus reasonable room and board, books and fees, and the opportunity cost of four years not earning a typical high-school-graduate wage. Total baseline cost: roughly \$130,000 over four years.

What's included in earnings

Median earnings of bachelor's-degree holders in that major, ages 22 through 32, sourced from the NY Fed Labor Market Outcomes data (2024) and BLS OEWS. We use the median, not the mean - it is more honest about the typical graduate's outcome.

What's not included

Graduate-degree premiums (which would inflate philosophy and biology), prestige-school premiums (which would inflate Ivy-League economics), and lifetime earnings beyond age 32 (which would inflate slow-growth majors). We chose the conservative window deliberately - what your teen earns in their twenties is what determines whether they can afford a house, marry, have kids, or pay off debt before forty.

CONTEXT

The Cost of College in 2026

Sticker prices have climbed faster than wages for forty straight years. The cost of a four-year college degree, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled since 1990. Here is what your family is actually paying:

Tuition Type	Annual	4-Year Total
In-state public university	\$11,000	\$44,000
Out-of-state public university	\$28,000	\$112,000
Private four-year college	\$43,000	\$172,000
Community college (first 2 yrs)	\$4,000	\$8,000

Add room, board, books, and fees and you can roughly double those tuition figures. A four-year private college, sticker price, is now a \$300,000 decision — more than most American families have ever spent on anything except their house.

THE PARENT MATH

If your teen attends a \$43,000-per-year private school for a major that earns the median bachelor's wage, they will not break even on the degree until they are 41 years old. The same teen at an in-state public school with a \$65,000-starting-salary major breaks even at 27. The major matters. The school costs more.

The 15 Highest-ROI Majors

These are the 15 four-year college majors with the strongest 10-year financial returns in America today. Engineering and computer science dominate the top of the list — they have for thirty years and they will for another decade.

What surprises most parents is how thin the top of the list is. After the top 15, ROI drops sharply. By rank 25, you are looking at majors where the median graduate is making about what a skilled trades worker makes — minus four years of tuition and lost wages.

A few notes before you read:

- These are MEDIAN outcomes. Half of graduates earn more, half earn less. Your teen is one person, not a median.
- Underemployment rate is the percentage of graduates working in jobs that do not require their degree. Below 10% is excellent. Above 30% is a warning sign.
- ROI percentage is computed against an in-state public university cost baseline. Private school cuts these returns roughly in half.
- Mid-career income is the median earned by graduates 10 years post-degree. It is the number that determines whether your teen can buy a house, support a family, and retire.



Petroleum Engineering

10-Year ROI: 412%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$130,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$172,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 1.4%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 13%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$38,000	10-YEAR ROI 412%

Exceptional financial outcome. Worth pursuing even at private-school cost.



Computer Engineering

10-Year ROI: 368%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$88,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$138,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.2%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 18%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$36,000	10-YEAR ROI 368%

Exceptional financial outcome. Worth pursuing even at private-school cost.



Aerospace Engineering

10-Year ROI: 348%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$80,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$130,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2.8%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 16%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$35,000	10-YEAR ROI 348%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Chemical Engineering

10-Year ROI: 339%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$80,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$128,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.0%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 19%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$36,000	10-YEAR ROI 339%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Electrical Engineering

10-Year ROI: 336%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$80,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$124,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.1%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 17%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$34,000	10-YEAR ROI 336%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Computer Science

10-Year ROI: 325%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$80,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$120,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 4.8%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 22%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$32,000	10-YEAR ROI 325%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Mechanical Engineering

10-Year ROI: 312%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$75,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$115,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.0%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 20%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$34,000	10-YEAR ROI 312%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Industrial Engineering

10-Year ROI: 298%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$75,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$112,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2.9%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 21%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$33,000	10-YEAR ROI 298%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Nursing (BSN)

10-Year ROI: 285%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$75,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$95,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 1.3%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 9%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$30,000	10-YEAR ROI 285%

Strong long-term ROI. Pairs well with public-university cost discipline.



Civil Engineering

10-Year ROI: 271%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$70,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$108,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.2%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 23%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$33,000	10-YEAR ROI 271%

Solid return at in-state tuition. Avoid private-school sticker price.



Finance

10-Year ROI: 262%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$70,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$115,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 3.7%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 30%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$32,000	10-YEAR ROI 262%

Solid return at in-state tuition. Avoid private-school sticker price.



Economics

10-Year ROI: 248%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$68,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$112,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 4.0%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 32%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$32,000	10-YEAR ROI 248%

Solid return at in-state tuition. Avoid private-school sticker price.



Construction Science

10-Year ROI: 241%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$68,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$105,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2.5%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 14%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$30,000	10-YEAR ROI 241%

Solid return at in-state tuition. Avoid private-school sticker price.



Supply Chain Management

10-Year ROI: 235%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$68,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$102,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2.8%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 18%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$31,000	10-YEAR ROI 235%

Solid return at in-state tuition. Avoid private-school sticker price.



Accounting

10-Year ROI: 228%

MEDIAN STARTING SALARY \$65,000	MID-CAREER INCOME (10YR) \$100,000	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 2.7%
UNDEREMPLOYMENT RATE 24%	MEDIAN GRADUATING DEBT \$31,000	10-YEAR ROI 228%

Decent ROI only at public-university cost. Run the debt math before committing.

The 30 Lowest-ROI Majors

Before you read this list, two warnings.

First: a low-ROI major is not a bad major. It is a major where the income, divided by the cost, does not pay back well within ten years. That is a financial fact, not a moral judgment. Many of the careers on this list are deeply meaningful, socially important, and worth pursuing for the right person under the right cost structure.

Second: the cost structure is what matters. A philosophy major from an in-state public university with no debt is a different financial outcome than a philosophy major from a \$250,000 private university. The major is the same; the math is opposite. If your teen is drawn to one of these majors, the right move is not to talk them out of it — it is to refuse to take on six-figure debt for it.

THE DANGER ZONE

If your teen is committed to a major on this list AND the school they want is private or out-of-state public, the math does not work. The combination of low-earning major plus high-cost school produces graduates who are still paying off their loans in their forties and cannot buy a house. The single most important parental veto is on cost — not on the major itself.

The 30 majors that follow are ranked from lowest ROI to highest. Median earnings, unemployment, and underemployment data come from the New York Fed and BLS.

#	MAJOR	MEDIAN	MID-CAREER	UNEMP.	UNDEREM
1	Drama & Theater Arts	\$36,000	\$56,000	7.8%	62%
2	Fine Arts	\$35,000	\$55,000	7.1%	60%
3	Anthropology	\$38,000	\$60,000	6.5%	56%
4	Philosophy	\$40,000	\$65,000	5.6%	53%
5	Performing Arts	\$36,000	\$55,000	7.6%	64%
6	Liberal Arts (General)	\$38,000	\$58,000	5.9%	55%

#	MAJOR	MEDIAN	MID-CAREER	UNEMP.	UNDEREMP.
7	Sociology	\$40,000	\$60,000	5.4%	51%
8	Psychology (BA)	\$40,000	\$65,000	4.7%	48%
9	Studio Arts	\$36,000	\$55,000	6.8%	60%
10	Religious Studies	\$38,000	\$58,000	5.0%	46%
11	Mass Media	\$42,000	\$65,000	6.3%	54%
12	History	\$42,000	\$65,000	5.0%	50%

#	MAJOR	MEDIAN	MID-CAREER	UNEMP.	UNDEREM
13	English Literature	\$40,000	\$65,000	4.8%	51%
14	Communications	\$45,000	\$70,000	4.6%	50%
15	Journalism	\$42,000	\$67,000	5.5%	48%
16	Foreign Language	\$42,000	\$68,000	4.5%	48%
17	Art History	\$40,000	\$62,000	5.0%	56%
18	Family & Consumer Sciences	\$40,000	\$60,000	4.6%	53%

#	MAJOR	MEDIAN	MID-CAREER	UNEMP.	UNDEREM
19	Leisure & Hospitality	\$42,000	\$62,000	5.1%	50%
20	Early Childhood Education	\$40,000	\$50,000	3.4%	24%
21	Social Work	\$42,000	\$55,000	3.6%	25%
22	Elementary Education	\$42,000	\$52,000	2.9%	18%
23	Theology	\$40,000	\$55,000	3.8%	42%
24	Special Education	\$43,000	\$55,000	2.8%	20%

#	MAJOR	MEDIAN	MID-CAREER	UNEMP.	UNDEREM
25	Criminal Justice	\$45,000	\$62,000	5.3%	54%
26	Recreation & Wellness	\$42,000	\$58,000	5.0%	50%
27	Hospitality Management	\$42,000	\$60,000	4.9%	48%
28	Animal Sciences	\$42,000	\$62,000	4.5%	50%
29	Nutrition Sciences	\$42,000	\$60,000	4.0%	42%
30	General Studies	\$42,000	\$60,000	5.5%	55%

9 Trades That Out-Earn the Average Bachelor's

Most parents reading this report were raised in a system that had two tiers: college-bound and not. That system no longer reflects reality.

The median bachelor's degree holder in America earns \$60,000 by year ten of their career. That number, sourced from the BLS, is the line. Above that line, the degree was worth it on pure economics. Below, it was not.

Nine skilled trades clear that line — most of them by a wide margin — with no four-year debt and four years of paid apprenticeship instead of paid tuition. The economics here are not close. A 22-year-old journeyman electrician who started at 18 has earned roughly \$200,000 in cumulative wages while their college peer has accumulated \$35,000 of debt and is just starting their first salaried job.

These nine trades are not for every teen. They are physically demanding, often weather-exposed, and require a level of mechanical aptitude and discipline that not everyone has. But for the teen who has those traits — and there are more of those teens than the school system identifies — the financial outcome is better than 80% of college majors.

Worth a serious conversation if your teen is restless in school but capable with their hands.

Elevator Installer/Repairer

MEDIAN INCOME

\$99,000

TOP 10%

\$140,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$0

TRAINING PATH

4-yr apprenticeship (paid)

Average elevator mechanic out-earns 75% of bachelor's degree holders.

Electrical Power Line Installer

MEDIAN INCOME

\$85,000

TOP 10%

\$122,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$0

TRAINING PATH

3-yr apprenticeship (paid)

Linemen with 5+ years routinely clear \$100K with overtime.

Commercial Pilot (non-airline)

MEDIAN INCOME

\$99,000

TOP 10%

\$170,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$60,000

TRAINING PATH

FAA license + flight hours

Regional/cargo pilots reach airline pay within 5-7 years.

Boilermaker

MEDIAN INCOME

\$72,000

TOP 10%

\$105,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$0

TRAINING PATH

4-yr apprenticeship (paid)

Heavy industry, union pay, strong overtime in petrochemical regions.

HVAC Technician (Master)

MEDIAN INCOME

\$62,000

TOP 10%

\$98,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$8,000

TRAINING PATH

2-yr trade school + 3-yr apprentice

Owner-operators at 10 years routinely clear \$150K.

Plumber (Journeyman)

MEDIAN INCOME

\$65,000

TOP 10%

\$105,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$0

TRAINING PATH

4-5-yr apprenticeship (paid)

Master plumbers in major metros clear \$130K; many own businesses by year 10.

Electrician (Journeyman)

MEDIAN INCOME

\$65,000

TOP 10%

\$104,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$0

TRAINING PATH

4-yr apprenticeship (paid)

Master electricians and IBEW union members frequently clear \$120K.

Wind Turbine Technician

MEDIAN INCOME

\$62,000

TOP 10%

\$85,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$6,000

TRAINING PATH

2-yr technical degree

Fastest-growing trade per BLS — 45% projected job growth through 2032.

Dental Hygienist

MEDIAN INCOME

\$87,000

TOP 10%

\$108,000

TRAINING DEBT

\$14,000

TRAINING PATH

2-yr associate degree

Two-year degree, four-figure debt, near six-figure income — one of the best ROI paths in America.

How to Use This Report With Your Teen

This report has more numbers in it than most teens will tolerate in one sitting. Do not hand it to them. Use it to structure four conversations across the next few months.

01 **The reality conversation**

Show them the cost-of-college table on page 6. Most teenagers do not know what college actually costs because parents shield them from it. They cannot make a serious decision about a \$200,000 commitment until they understand the dollar amount. This is a one-paragraph conversation, not a lecture.

02 **The interest conversation**

Ask them to pick three majors that genuinely interest them — not what they think you want to hear. Look those three up in this report. Talk through the median income, the underemployment rate, and the daily reality of the careers each major leads to. The point is not to talk them out of any of them. The point is to make the trade-offs visible.

03 **The cost conversation**

Set a family budget for college. Walk through what that budget makes possible — in-state public, community college plus transfer, scholarship-eligible private, paid trade apprenticeship. The budget is the constraint that turns abstract preferences into real choices.

04 **The match conversation**

Have your teen take the MajorMatch assessment. Compare what surfaces against the three majors they were drawn to. Where they agree, you have confidence. Where they disagree, you have the most useful conversation of all.

Frequently Asked

Q. Why is petroleum engineering ranked #1 if oil isn't the future?

A. Because right now, in 2024-2025, petroleum engineers earn more on average than any other bachelor's-level major and have unemployment under 2%. The energy transition is real, but it's also slower than headlines suggest, and many petroleum engineers transition into renewable energy, geothermal, and hydrogen — all of which use the same core skills. The data is the data.

Q. What about teaching, social work, and other 'mission' careers?

A. They show up low on a 10-year ROI ranking because the income is low relative to the cost of the degree. That doesn't mean they're bad choices. It means a parent should know going in that this path requires a financial plan — public university, scholarships, in-district tuition — not a \$250K private school. Mission careers don't pay back six-figure debt.

Q. Is a low-ROI major always a bad choice?

A. No. ROI is one lens, not the only lens. A philosophy major who graduates with no debt from an in-state public university and goes into law or consulting can do extremely well. The variable that matters most is total debt at graduation — not the major itself. Cost discipline can rescue almost any major; debt destroys even the strongest ones.

Q. How accurate is this data?

A. All salary, unemployment, and underemployment figures come from BLS OEWS 2024, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Labor Market Outcomes report (2024), and Georgetown CEW (2024). Tuition figures come from NCES. Where datasets disagree, we used the source with the most recent collection year. ROI calculations use a 10-year window, in-state public tuition baseline, and the standard human capital model.

Q. What if my teen has no idea what they want to do?

A. That's the most common situation in America right now — about 60% of college students change their major at least once. The single best move is to delay the major commitment: enroll undecided, take general-education credits at community college, or use a structured assessment like MajorMatch to surface fit before committing \$200K+. Indecision is not a problem. Indecision plus six-figure tuition is.

Sources & Citations

Every salary, unemployment, and earnings figure in this report is sourced from federal data or peer-reviewed economic research. Where datasets disagreed on a specific major, we used the source with the most recent collection year. Below are the primary sources used.

- 01 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics — Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS), 2024
- 02 Federal Reserve Bank of New York — Labor Market Outcomes of College Graduates by Major, 2024
- 03 Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce — The Economic Value of College Majors, 2024
- 04 National Center for Education Statistics — Tuition, Fees, and Room & Board Rates, 2023-24
- 05 National Association of Colleges and Employers — First-Destination Survey, Class of 2023
- 06 U.S. Department of Education — College Scorecard, 2024 release
- 07 BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2024-25 edition
- 08 Federal Reserve — Survey of Consumer Finances, 2022
- 09 Trade Industry Reports: NECA, MCAA, IBEW, UA, NCATT, ICTSI Apprenticeship Data
- 10 Strada Education Network — The Value of Higher Education by Major, 2023

A NOTE ON DATA TIMELINESS

Federal labor market data is updated annually. The figures in this report reflect the most recent BLS, NY Fed, and Georgetown CEW releases as of January 2025. We update this report each January as new datasets are released.

ABOUT

MajorMatch

MajorMatch is a research-driven college major assessment built for parents of high school students.

We were founded on a simple premise: the way most American teens pick a college major is broken. They are asked to commit to a \$200,000 decision, often by age 17, with no real data, no honest conversation about cost, and no structured assessment of fit. Most pick based on what their friends are doing, what their parents nudged them toward, or what sounds prestigious. The results are predictable — 60% change majors, 40% are underemployed at graduation, and a third are still paying off loans in their forties.

We built MajorMatch to be the structured assessment that should have existed all along. Forty research-backed questions across cognitive style, work preferences, value alignment, and aptitude. The output is a ranked list of majors that actually fit your teen — not a personality archetype, not a BuzzFeed quiz, but a real recommendation grounded in two decades of vocational psychology research.

Take the MajorMatch Quiz

15 minutes. Real assessment. Honest output.

majormatch.us/quiz

*The most expensive decision your family will ever make
should not be made by accident.*

majormatch.us