

The Power of Degrees and Credentials for New Mexico's Graduates

ASSOCIATE'S DEGREES

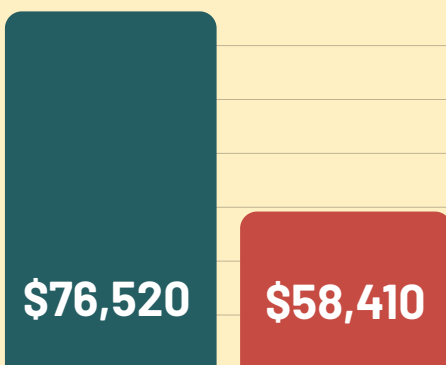


This fact sheet helps New Mexico students and families understand the value of an associate's degree, how to choose the right program, and how to make college affordable.

When is an associate's degree right for me?



Nationally, an associate's degree household income out-earns high school graduate



Households **with**
an associate's
degree.

Households
without a
degree.

What is an associate's degree?

An associate degree is awarded to students who complete a planned program of college-level coursework (often about two years of full-time study) aligned to a specific major or career pathway. Early College High School pathways are most frequently aligned to help students earn an associate's degree valued by employers, with 30 hours of Dual Credit courses by high school graduation.

Examples of associate-degree pathways that are often aligned to regional workforce needs include education-related transfer pathways, engineering technologies, legal studies, and healthcare[1].

How should I choose the best associate's degree to pursue?

Putting in the time and resources to earn an Associate's Degree is a significant commitment. Make the most of those investments by beginning with the end in mind: "Where will my education take me?" Some of those considerations include:

- What Associate's Degrees are in high demand from New Mexico employers?
- What careers are of greatest interest to me?
- What Associate's degrees do those careers require?
- What colleges offer these degrees, and what are their job placement rates for graduates?
- Where can I learn that/those degrees at the best cost and in the least amount of time?

When deciding, it's also helpful to get real-world experience in a job or industry through work-based learning:



Job shadowing



Internships



Apprenticeships



Part-time or summer jobs

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Work-based learning supports career readiness: it builds skills and helps students learn which college majors and training programs connect to careers they may enjoy.

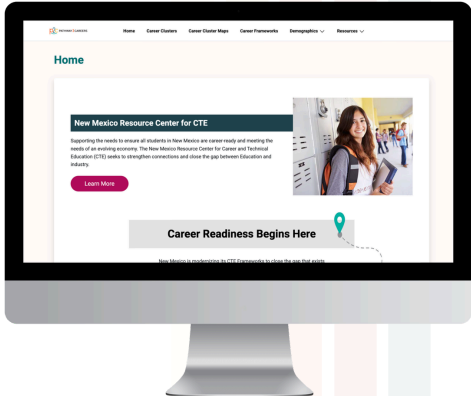
Students can also get hands-on experience and connect with industry professionals by participating in a Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO). Learn more about CTSOs [here](#).

How can I learn more about aligning my education with a future job or career?

In New Mexico, the best way to learn about Career Pathways to industries and occupations is to visit the [New Mexico Resource Center for CTE](#). These pathways align education with high-demand, growing occupations that pay living wages or higher.

The site connects all of the dots to help you navigate your career journey:

- Explore the jobs in your community by choosing your school district on the [Career Clusters](#) Page. Compare wages, number of jobs, and projected growth, as well as the education needed.
- [P2C Career Explorer](#) helps students understand interests, values, and career clusters, and then explore jobs aligned to those answers.
- On the [Career Frameworks](#) page, jobs are linked to the skills and credentials required, along with other relevant information.



Career-connected learning can strengthen student engagement and support persistence through high school and into college.

Where can I earn an associate's degree?

New Mexico has community colleges across the state. There are nine independent community colleges and eight aligned with one of three universities: New Mexico State University, the University of New Mexico, or Eastern New Mexico State.



New Mexico's associate degree holders have the second-highest workforce participation rates (74%) and the second-lowest unemployment rates (5.1%), and have median earnings of \$39,656.

- Branch community college campuses aligned to universities offer many 2+2 programs, in which students can earn an associate's degree and then transfer to the university to earn a bachelor's degree later. Some examples include Aerospace Technology, Automation and Manufacturing Technology, and other programs at Dona Ana Community College that transfer to Applied Science Degrees at New Mexico State University.
- Students who pursue Associate's Degrees at independent community colleges can also transfer to a university and should work with college advisors to determine which universities will accept the most college credits on the way to a higher degree.

To find a full list of public colleges and universities (including community colleges) in New Mexico, [use the New Mexico Higher Education Department's statewide map](#). To learn more about how to qualify for each college, check their individual websites for Application Requirements.

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How much does it cost to earn an associate's degree?

New Mexico is well known for college affordability. Programs like the Lottery Scholarship, Opportunity Scholarship, and Dual Credit courses in high school help keep the cost of earning a degree at a New Mexico community college relatively low for all students in the state, regardless of background or income levels. **Students in Dual Credit courses also graduate high school at higher rates than non-Dual Credit students.**^[1]

FOR FAMILIES: Ask your counselor about dual credit and early college options. In New Mexico, dual credit waives tuition and general fees.



Some students take advantage of lower tuition rates at community colleges to complete general education coursework, like English and History in their first two years on their way to pursuing higher degrees.

College costs vary by institution and by student. Use the [College Scorecard](#) to compare. Be sure to include books, supplies, transportation, and personal expenses.

It's important to factor in all of the costs to attend a specific college when determining the best path forward for you.

Where can I find help to pay for an associate's degree?

To find out what financial aid you may qualify for, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA helps determine eligibility for grants, scholarships, work-study, and federal student loans. You can complete and submit the FAFSA online at studentaid.gov.

To learn more about New Mexico financial aid programs (including state scholarships), visit the [New Mexico Higher Education Department Financial Aid Division](#).



- ✓ Visit the [New Mexico Resource Center for CTE](#) to explore programs and pathways.
- ✓ Talk with your school counselor about dual credit and scholarship options.
- ✓ Complete your FAFSA at [FAFSA.gov](https://fafsa.gov) to explore financial aid opportunities.

References:

- [1] Lightcast Jobs Posting Database, October 22, 2025.
- [2] New Mexico Dual Credit Report 2023-24, New Mexico Departments of Higher Education and Public Education.
- [3] U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 and 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, population 25 to 64 years old.