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15 Worst College Majors for a Lucrative Career

Whether the high cost of college is worthwhile often depends on what you study.



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BY STACY RAPACON

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Whether the high cost of college is worthwhile often depends on what you study. It's true a full-time worker with a bachelor's typically earns about 80% more than someone with only a high school diploma, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But certain fields are far more likely to lead toward a lucrative career than others. So you need to know what kind of future you can expect from your degree before you borrow the tuition money to get it.

To that end, we analyzed data for 102 popular college majors, focusing on prospects for pay, hiring demand and job satisfaction for each. **Workers with the following majors frequently report low starting and mid-career salaries, as well as a low sense of meaning in their post-bachelor work.** These majors also are not commonly sought after in recent online job postings and often lead to occupations with lackluster growth expectations.

If you find your favorite subject on this list, don't fret. We suggest a career path that might work best for each of these fields. After all, seeing the numbers shouldn't necessarily deter you from studying a subject you're passionate about, but you're better off following your dreams with eyes wide open.

■ **20 Worst Jobs for the Future**

Disclaimer

Find details on data sources and our ranking methodology at the end of this story.



(Image credit: Getty Images)

15. Advertising

- **Starting salary:** \$43,700 (Median for all majors: \$45,400)
- **Mid-career salary:** \$86,400 (Median for all majors: \$78,300)
- **Annual online job postings:** 9,188 (Median for all majors: 103,151)

Employers don't seem sold on the value of an advertising degree. Just look at the small number of online job postings seeking graduates who have focused on this field. And the degree holders don't seem to hold much stock in it either. **Only 32% of those surveyed by PayScale say their work helps make the world a better place, making it one of the four least meaningful majors in our rankings.**

What Works

Majoring in public relations is an easier sell. The median pay for

graduates of this field is lower, at \$42,000 for early career and \$75,400 for mid-career. But more degree holders (42%) report that their work offers high meaning. And **the number of job postings seeking people with degrees in public relations is much higher at 477,708.** What's the difference between advertising and public relations? It's subtle, but the former focuses on selling a carefully crafted image while the latter works on creating one out of news and events.

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Lucrative Career**

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

14. Animal Science

- **Starting salary:** \$38,300
- **Mid-career salary:** \$63,000
- **Annual online job postings:** 9,959

Love animals? Then this may not be the major for you. In this field, you do study animals, but with a focus on their role in food production. That means working closely with chickens, cows, pigs and other food animals to learn how to use them in the most efficient and healthiest ways possible to feed our nation. The good news is that, with increasing public awareness of nutrition, health and food safety needs, the demand for animal scientists is ticking up with a projected job growth rate of 11.1% over the next decade. Unfortunately, that follows a decade of job losses at a rate of -40.9%.

What Works

Broadening your palate to study other food sources as well as animals may leave a better taste in your mouth. **Food science majors report a median pay of \$50,200 a year early in their careers and \$85,600 by mid-career.** And 103,151 online job postings over the past year were seeking applicants with this degree.

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13. Athletic Training

- Starting salary: \$39,500
- Mid-career salary: \$52,700
- Annual online job postings: 4,827

The broader field of fitness is actually a smart choice with the aging population and a focus on wellness at all ages pushing demand for many related jobs, including physical therapists and physical therapist assistants (both among our best jobs for the future). Even athletic trainers, specifically, can expect a big jump in demand with a job growth rate of 23.2% over the next decade. But it remains a small field with just 27,540 positions today. Plus, **potential employers do not frequently seek out workers who major in athletic training.**

What Works

If your love of sports is undeniable, this major may be right for you

despite its spot in our rankings. Just be prepared to head into education overtime for the most promising related careers. For example, **to become a physical therapist, you'll need to study for another three years after college** to get your Doctor of Physical Therapy degree. Athletic trainers also need additional licensing and certification and commonly have master's degrees.

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12. Fashion Merchandising

- **Starting salary:** \$42,900
- **Mid-career salary:** \$72,500
- **Annual online job postings:** 68,443

This major may have worked for Elle Woods (a la “Legally Blonde”), but she’s a fictional character. (Also, she had a 4.0 GPA at UCLA and an admissions video essay directed by a Coppola.) As with fashion design majors (another field noted on this list), fashion merchandising majors can expect high levels of competition in the industry’s job market and even more limited opportunities to apply your knowledge and skills in another field.

What Works

You can broaden your knowledge base -- and job qualifications -- and seek a degree in a more general business-related field, including

operations or supply management, finance or business administration. Marketing is another major that could help prepare you for the business side of the fashion world, as well as other industries. Specifically, **marketing management majors can expect to see plenty of opportunities, with 754,994 online job postings seeking applicants with expertise in this field.** Their median income is \$48,400 a year early in their careers and \$85,900 a year by mid-career.

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

11. Religious Studies

- **Starting salary:** \$41,700
- **Mid-career salary:** \$63,800
- **Annual online job postings:** 11,617

A true spiritual calling may come with significant rewards—just don't expect them to arrive in monetary form. Directors of religious education earn a median salary of about \$38,979 a year, clergy members make \$44,013 a year, and other religious workers earn just \$29,141 annually.

- **More surprising than the small paychecks: Only 50% of religion majors report feeling that their work leaves a positive impact on the world.** The same share of culinary arts majors, humanities majors and French language majors say the same.

What Works

Training to become a religious leader does not require a pricey college degree—and presumably you’re not in it for the money anyway. So if you’re interested in this subject for other reasons, **you might consider majoring in philosophy instead.** This field still gives you the opportunity to delve into religious studies and also provides you with a degree that is in much higher demand. A hefty 2.1 million online job postings over the past year sought out candidates who had studied philosophy. And that demand results in higher pay potential: Philosophy majors report a median starting salary of \$48,200 a year and mid-career salary of \$86,000 a year. Plus, the critical thinking and extensive writing skills demanded by this major can be applied in many career fields.

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- **10 Best College Values With the Lowest Average Graduating Debt**
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(Image credit: Getty Images)

10. Hospitality & Tourism

- Starting salary: \$40,500
- Mid-career salary: \$66,000
- Annual online job postings: 398,528

The travel industry is fickle and highly dependent on consumers' discretionary funds. That helps explain the uncertain future for its workers. The projected growth rate for hotel, motel and resort desk clerks is just 6.6% over the next decade, and their median income is a measly \$22,859 a year. **Lodging managers earn a higher salary with a median income of \$44,204 a year, but also greater competition with the number of their positions expected to grow just 3.0% by 2027.** Travel agents face even worse prospects, with their numbers expected to fall 1.4% over the next 10 years. And their median income is just \$33,915 a year.

What Works

Adding one key word to your major can brighten your prospects in the travel industry some: **Hotel *management* majors tend to earn much higher salaries throughout their careers with median pay at \$44,100 a year early on and \$87,800 a year by mid-career.** That's the degree most full-service hotel chains are looking for in applicants for management positions. Plus, it can help prepare you for managerial positions in other fields, too.

Otherwise, you don't typically need a bachelor's degree to get into the travel industry. Travel agents and hotel clerks can start out with just a high-school education. **Even lodging managers can get started with a high-school diploma and several years of related work experience, or with an associate's degree or certificate in hotel management.**

■ **34 Best Travel Websites to Save You Money.**



(Image credit: Getty Images)

9. Fashion Design

- **Starting salary:** \$43,800
- **Mid-career salary:** \$80,500
- **Annual online job postings:** 5,526

The fashion industry is as competitive as it is stylish. There are currently less than 25,000 total positions for fashion designers in the U.S., and their projected job growth rate is just 6.1% over the next decade, compared with 9.7% for all jobs. Also, those relatively few opportunities are concentrated mainly in the New York and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, further limiting prospects for these degree holders.

What Works

If you truly believe you can make the cut in fashion, you do need a bachelor's in this subject or a related one to become a designer.

You'll also need a stellar portfolio and experience either through an internship or other work with a pro designer. **You might also consider preparing yourself for the business side of fashion and earning a degree in business, finance or supply management, all of which could help lead you toward a job as a purchasing agent.**

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

8. Paralegal Studies

- **Starting salary:** \$40,400
- **Mid-career salary:** \$54,100
- **Annual online job postings:** 58,517

If you're hoping to become a lawyer one day, this major isn't likely to be the best starting point. **Law schools admit applicants with a variety of degree types and do not tend to favor people who have focused solely on the pre-law track academically.** On the bright side, future paralegals and legal assistants should have plenty of job opportunities to choose from: Their projected growth rate is 13.3% for the next decade. But that demand is due to law firms and their clients looking to cut costs and trying to pile more work onto these lower-paid professionals rather than higher-paid lawyers. Their median income is \$51,085 a year, about half the median pay for lawyers.

What Works

If it's your dream to become a paralegal, you don't need a bachelor's degree in this specific field to achieve it. In fact, **you can become a paralegal with an associate's degree in paralegal studies** or a bachelor's degree in another subject and a certificate in paralegal studies. And if you hope to go to law school, you can do so with a wide range of majors that won't pigeonhole you and limit your career opportunities. For example, you might study something like finance, one of the [best college majors for your career](#), and still pursue a career in law.

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

7. Art History

- Starting salary: \$42,900
- Mid-career salary: \$66,300
- Annual online job postings: 2,839

A bachelor's degree in art history is no sure path to future employment. Among these degree holders, 4% are unemployed and 20.2% have dropped out of the workforce, according to the Hamilton Project. Those who have found work aren't earning much. **Museum technicians and conservators, for example, pull in a lean median salary of just \$42,182 a year** (less than the median \$43,992 a year for all jobs). The latter occupation typically requires even more education, a master's in conservation or a related field.

What Works

The employment picture might soon improve for art buffs. Despite the low number of current online job postings for art history majors, the projected growth rate for related jobs is actually above average. For example, museum techs and conservators are expected to grow their ranks by 16.4% over the next decade—versus 9.7% growth for all occupations—which might help bump up their pay. **You might also improve your prospects by investing in more education and getting a master's, often needed in order to become an archivist or curator.** The former earns a median salary of \$54,288 a year and has a projected growth rate of 17.7%; the latter typically earns more than \$56,389 a year and the field is expected to expand 18.2% by 2027. Archivists specialized with electronic records may do particularly well as more institutions are switching over to digital bookkeeping.

■ **8 Jobs That Will Be Replaced by Robots Soon**





(Image credit: Getty Images)

6. Art

- **Starting salary:** \$39,400
- **Mid-career salary:** \$60,500
- **Annual online job postings:** 15,280

Andy Warhol said, "Making money is art...and good business is the best art." Too bad the reverse is frequently untrue. **Fine artists, including painters, sculptors and illustrators, typically collect precious little pay, earning a median income of less than \$18,950 a year.** Demand for their work, after all, is dependent largely on people's discretionary income (and fleeting tastes); when times are tough, purchasing art is often left out of most household budgets. Indeed, 4.9% of fine arts majors are unemployed and 19.3% have dropped out of the workforce, according to the Hamilton Project.

What Works

Despite the high likelihood of low pay for art majors, **students committed to studying art can make their degrees pay off better if they pick the right school to attend.** Based on 20-year net “return on investment” calculations from [PayScale](#), Stanford University, Georgia Institute of Technology and the Fashion Institute of Technology are the top-ranking schools for arts majors (including fine arts, drama, music, industrial design and more) living on campus and receiving financial aid. FIT has a relatively low four-year cost of \$89,000, helping bump up its 20-year ROI to \$443,000. That means that over the two decades following college graduation, an art major from FIT can expect to earn \$443,000 more than a high school grad, even accounting for the latter’s additional four years in the workforce and the cost of college.

■ **15 Best Jobs With the Biggest Paychecks**



(Image credit: Getty Images)

5. Theater

- **Starting salary:** \$37,300
- **Mid-career salary:** \$60,200
- **Annual online job postings:** 23,521

Lin-Manuel Miranda has achieved immense success after earning his bachelor's degree in theater studies at Wesleyan University. But the payoff for the more typical theater student (even those who are indeed young, scrappy and hungry) isn't quite so rewarding: **Actors earn a median income of about \$32,011 a year**, with nary a Tony nomination in sight. And while demand for players is high—positions for actors is expected to grow by 14.7% over the next decade—competition for every bit part can be fierce.

What Works

It may be hard to sate the acting bug with anything but drama or

theater. But you might consider also majoring in **speech communication**, which allows you to study public speaking, voice and articulation and effective presentation skills. This degree results in a median pay of \$42,600 for entry-level workers and \$74,300 for mid-career employees. And it can prepare you for jobs in public relations, politics and a host of other fields—and still does not mean throwing away your shot at a future in performing.

■ **30 of the Best Jobs for the Future**

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

4. Graphic Design

- Starting salary: \$41,700
- Mid-career salary: \$63,500
- Annual online job postings: 33,333

You might think graphic design would offer a promising future, since it's tangentially related to the burgeoning tech field, but overall, it doesn't look good. Only 64.7% of commercial art and graphic design majors have gone on to work full time while 5% are unemployed and 15.3% are no longer seeking work, according to the Hamilton Project, an economic research group within the Brookings Institution. Also, **the projected rate of job growth for graphic designers is just 6.4%.**

What Works

It's true that graphic designers specializing in print—working at newspapers, magazines and other publishers, for example—are facing major cutbacks along with the rest of the industry. But **workers focused on creating designs and images for mobile devices, websites and the like are in higher demand** as all sorts of businesses look to develop and improve their digital presence. So if your heart is set on graphic design, skew your studies toward a technology-centric career path and add some computer-related classes to your course load.

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

3. Culinary Arts

- **Starting salary:** \$39,200
- **Mid-career salary:** \$58,800
- **Annual online job postings:** 5,474

Low pay plus a highly competitive job market are the recipe for a challenging career. Chefs and head cooks can expect a median income of less than \$42,917 a year, and you need five or more years of experience, making less money, to become one. On the bright side, the number of positions for these culinary professionals is expected to grow by 13.4% over the next decade. However, prospects are tied tight with the state of the economy, as the success and failure of dining establishments depends on whether consumers can make room in their budgets for eating out.

What Works

■ **If food is your passion, you might jump right into the field after high school and save your tuition money;** most jobs as a cook do not require a college degree. Instead, you can learn the trade by working as a line cook or in other restaurant positions. You could also look for mentorship and apprenticeship programs to learn directly from experienced chefs.

In college, consider focusing your education on the business side of the kitchen, which might prove particularly helpful if you're an aspiring restaurateur. Graduates who study **business administration** typically see a starting salary of \$48,700 a year and \$79,100 by mid-career. The degree also qualifies you for many more opportunities; nearly 3.7 million job postings were seeking candidates with a bachelor's in business administration.

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

2. Radio & Television

- **Starting salary:** \$39,600
- **Mid-career salary:** \$64,400
- **Annual online job postings:** 8,094

The obvious job you might associate with this major doesn't promise to be a worthwhile investment: Radio and television announcers rank among our [worst jobs for the future](#), facing a 12.9% decline in positions over the next decade. And even those dwindling jobs actually tend to go to grads with degrees in other fields.

What Works

Who does score the few jobs available as radio and TV announcers? **Employers typically prefer to hire people who have bachelor's degrees in communications, journalism or broadcasting.** Indeed,

going with one of these broader fields does tend to offer more lucrative prospects. For example, communications majors have median early career pay of \$44,300 a year and \$77,500 by mid-career. And you can still work toward a career in radio and television. Interning in those fields or gaining some other related experiencing, like working with your campus radio or television station, should give you a push in the right direction, too.

■ **10 Things That Will Soon Disappear Forever**

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(Image credit: Getty Images)

1. Photography

- **Starting salary:** \$41,200
- **Mid-career salary:** \$61,700
- **Annual online job postings:** 9,806

Aspiring photographers may want to adjust their focus. The number of positions for these professionals is expected to grow just 1.2% over the next decade, compared with 9.7% for all jobs. And yet, an increasing number of people are picking up photography as amateurs or hobbyists. Those two facts help drive the pay in this field down, with the median income for photographers at just \$30,619 a year. And that light paycheck may not even be a steady one. Many businesses are filling their photographic needs with freelancers. Indeed, a whopping 67% of photographers are currently self-employed (compared with just 6.4% of all workers).

What Works

Though formal training can certainly help hone your eye and skills, you can actually dive into photography [without a college degree](#)—and save yourself the pricey tuition. **Landing a gig assisting a professional photographer can be a great opportunity to learn on the job and work on building up your own portfolio**, which will be key to advancing your career. If you opt to go to college with this career in mind, consider taking business- and computer-related classes, as well as photography. The former can help prepare you for being self-employed as a photographer. The latter can sharpen your photo processing and editing skills.

- **15 Best Jobs You Can Get Without a College Degree**
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(Image credit: Thinkstock)

2018 Worst College Majors Rankings

- Photography
- Art
- Radio & Television
- Anthropology
- Graphic Design
- Paralegal Studies
- Art History
- Music
- Exercise Science
- Religious Studies

Kiplinger updates its rankings of college majors annually. **Above is our list of the worst college majors for a lucrative career from the 2017-2018 academic year.** Keep in mind that ranking methodologies can change from year to year based on the data available at the time, changes to how the data was gathered, switches to new data providers and tweaks to the formulas used to narrow the pool of candidates.

■ **25 Best College Majors for a Lucrative Career**

Our 2019 Ranking Methodology

For each of the 102 college majors, compensation research firm PayScale provided median annual salaries for entry-level workers (with five years or less of work experience) and mid-career employees (with at least 10 years of experience). PayScale also provided “high job meaning” scores, which indicate the percentage of workers with each college major who say their work makes the world a better place. Workforce research firm Burning Glass Technologies supplied the number of online job postings listed between the third quarter of 2017 and the second quarter of 2018 that were seeking applicants with each of the 102 college majors. Projected 10-year growth rates from 2017 to 2027 for related occupations came from Emsi, a labor-market research firm owned by Strada Education. Emsi collects data from dozens of federal, state and private sources, including the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In finalizing our rankings, we combined some similar majors to avoid redundancy.

■ **30 of the Best Jobs for the**

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