

A Guide to Earning an Online Associate Degree

Options for graduates with this credential include career advancement and pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

By Jordan Friedman, Contributor | July 10, 2018, at 9:00 a.m.

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Pretty young student sitting at desk and doing her homework, she is connecting to the internet with a laptop

Accredited online programs at reputable schools are generally just as rigorous as the on-campus options. (Getty Images)

Prospective students planning to pursue an undergraduate education have a wide range of options offered online. Among them are online associate degrees.

When Virginia resident Roberto Rodriguez learned that Pennsylvania State University—World Campus offered this type of credential, he decided to apply.

"I never really thought that I would have an opportunity to earn a degree," the 39-year-old says. "Once I was admitted into Penn State and I saw that I would have that chance, I really, really wanted to have something in my hands – I really wanted to have a diploma to be able to look at and say, 'Hey, I achieved this; I completed this.'"

Rodriguez completed the online associate degree program over several years while serving on active duty in the military.

"I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to focus on for my bachelor's, so it kind of bought me time to think about it," Rodriguez says. He earned his online associate degree in letters, arts and sciences in May, and is now working toward an online bachelor's in digital journalism and media at the same university.

Online associate degrees are offered at community colleges and four-year institutions alike. Here's what prospective students should know about this academic credential.

What Is an Associate Degree?

An associate degree can serve as a starting point for somebody considering eventually pursuing a full bachelor's degree, says Caroline Simpson, vice president of student and alumni services at the online, for-profit American Public University System, which offers associate degrees. Experts say the credential can also help advance a career.

"The easiest way to think about it is it's essentially half the bachelor's degree," Simpson says.

[Read: [Finish a Bachelor's Degree Online After Community College.](#)]

In general, associate degree programs require around 60 semester credit hours; by comparison, a traditional bachelor's degree typically takes around 120.

For many full-time on-campus students, associate degrees typically take about two years to complete whereas bachelor's degrees usually take about four, experts say. These numbers vary more among online students; many enroll in fewer classes at once and enter with some college credits already completed.

How Do Online Associate Degrees Work?

At online colleges, most if not all coursework is completed virtually, though some may have face-to-face requirements. While many classes are asynchronous – meaning students complete most schoolwork at their own pace under regular deadlines – some have synchronous components, which students attend by videoconferencing at a specific time.

Online degrees often appeal to adults looking for flexibility to study on their own schedules, as many also work full time or part time.

Experts say accredited online programs at reputable schools are generally just as rigorous as the on-campus options. The difference is mainly the format, with students completing individual and group assignments remotely. Classes and programs may be held either fully online or in a blended format, meaning partially online and partially on campus.

In recent years, online associate degrees have become more widely available in various disciplines at both community colleges – which are traditionally categorized as two-year schools – and institutions that also offer bachelor's and graduate degrees, experts say.

"That's the reality of life these days. People need degrees at different stages of their lives, and this a way to get it," says Antone Aboud, director of online programs and professor of practice in labor and employment relations at Penn State—World Campus, which has an online associate degree in the discipline.

But online courses aren't right for everybody. Without constant in-person guidance from a teacher, students need greater self-discipline and time-management skills. Some students may also prefer a traditional face-to-face classroom environment where they can interact with classmates more frequently.

Experts say online degrees typically have the same tuition as their on-ground counterparts, though this varies depending on the institution.

The academic calendar for an online program may offer flexible course scheduling options. At Mesa Community College in Arizona, many online classes last eight weeks, says Laura Ballard, e-learning director at the school, which offers online associate degrees. Online students may also take courses during a four-week winter intersession and the summer to help speed up the time to graduation.

What Are the Requirements?

As is the case in most associate degree programs, Simpson says the online offerings at the American Public University System consist of a combination of general education requirements – classes students must take to graduate – as well as courses specific to their chosen discipline. Students can also enroll in electives.

Experts say associate degree students can choose a certain field of focus or pursue general studies. The curriculums for on-campus and online degree programs at the same institution are often very similar, if not the same.

Where Can I Earn an Online Associate Degree?

Prospective students should determine whether they want an online associate degree from a community college or a four-year institution, as there are benefits to each.

If a student lives near a community college, for example, he or she can access on-campus resources and meet faculty in person. Prospective students looking to save money may want to consider community colleges, which typically have lower tuition rates than larger four-year universities. Small class sizes at community colleges may result in increased individualized attention for each student, Ballard says.

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One advantage of a traditional four-year school is that if students finish an online associate degree program, they may be able to move on to the bachelor's degree program without having to reapply, Aboud says. The reputation of a well-known four-year school may also carry more weight with employers, experts say.

What Are Different Types of Online Associate Degrees?

Prospective students may encounter different degree tracks.

"An associate in science is going to focus more on the behavioral sciences than the physical sciences," Aboud says. "An associate in arts is more likely to focus on the humanities."

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An associate of applied science will typically focus more on preparing students for specific careers than advancing them into a bachelor's program, experts say.

"An associate of science typically expects students to complete all of the general education requirements for a bachelor's degree – the first two years," says Betty Vandenbosch, chancellor of Purdue University Global, which has online associate degree programs. That usually isn't the case for an associate of applied science, she says.

Other possible tracks include an associate of business and an associate of general studies.

How Else Do Online Associate and Bachelor's Degrees Differ?

Aside from cost and the time required to complete a degree, another difference between an associate and bachelor's at the American Public University System is that online associate degrees usually focus on 100- and 200-level courses, whereas bachelor's degrees also have 300- and 400-level courses, Simpson says.

Prospective students shouldn't assume an associate degree program will be easier than the first half of a bachelor's, Vandenbosch says.

"I don't think that's the case in most instances," she says.

What Can I Do With an Online Associate Degree?

"If what you want to do is to begin a major, begin working toward a major, what you might want to consider is enrolling in an associate degree program first – at least getting that two-year credential – and then moving forward if you want to with a bachelor's degree, maybe later on with a master's degree," Aboud says.

Some four-year schools have articulation agreements with community colleges, meaning students can easily transfer in their credits, Ballard says. Mesa Community College, for example, has agreements with schools including Arizona State University.

[Read: [4 Steps to Transfer Online Associate Credits to a Four-Year Online Program.](#)]

Some online associate degree holders pursue certificates and industry certifications upon graduating, either at the same institution or elsewhere, Simpson says. Certificates – offered either online or on-ground – often focus on a more specific subject area within a certain discipline or provide foundational insight into a field.

"They are quick and recognized across professional communities," Simpson says. "That's certainly a track that our associate students might consider, either after an associate degree or during an associate degree."

What Is the Job Outlook for Graduates With an Online Associate Degree?

An associate degree may open certain doors for graduates, but some jobs require a bachelor's. Associate degree holders may attain roles in various health care professions – such as a nurse or dental hygienist – as well as in tech support and other industries. Other job opportunities include preschool teacher and paralegal.

Experts say that to many employers, the fact that a degree was earned online likely won't hinder a candidate's chances of getting a job, though perceptions vary overall. A hiring manager often won't know that a candidate earned his or her degree online if it's not listed on a resume, but it may come up in conversation.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education show that in 2016 among adults ages 25 to 34, the median annual earnings for full-time workers with an associate degree was \$38,000, compared with the median of \$34,900 for those with some college completed but no degree, and a median of \$31,800 for a high school graduate. Those who had a bachelor's earned a median of \$50,000.

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