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How Much Does Trade School Cost? Here's What You Need to Know

By Publisher | Last Updated December 3, 2021

It's one of the most important questions for any student who is considering vocational training: How much does trade school cost? After all, before you commit to any course of study, you need to know what kind of financial investment it requires.

Here's the short answer: The cost of trade school varies. Average tuition fees range from about \$3,600 to \$14,500 per year, but there are wide variations depending on the type of institution you attend and the program you choose. Trade schools (which are also sometimes known as technical institutes, vocational schools, or career colleges) can be either public or private, and their programs can be as short as a few months or as long as two years or more. (For the purposes of this article, we're defining a trade school as an institution that offers training—lasting two years or less—for hands-on careers.) Some programs cost about \$1,000; others cost more than \$30,000. You'll find more details about these costs below.

Of course, it's always important to gauge the overall value of a program in order to see whether the cost is worth it. That's why this article includes tips to help you research your options and understand what you're getting for your money. It also includes important information on financial aid that can make your trade school training more affordable.

- [The cost of trade school](#)
- [Trade school vs. community college](#)
- [How to assess a program's value](#)
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The Cost of Trade School

The cost of attending trade school can vary enormously depending on where you live, what program you take, and what type of institution you attend. Trade schools can be either private or public, but most are private businesses. Here's a breakdown of average costs.

Tuition

Tuition can range from around \$1,000 to more than \$70,000. According to the U.S. Department of Education's [College Affordability and Transparency Center](#) (CATC), average tuition and fees for different types of institutions during the 2017-2018 school year were as follows:

- Public two-year: \$3,588
- Private not-for-profit, two-year: \$14,182
- Private for-profit, two-year: \$14,547

Keep in mind that there are many ways to reduce those costs through grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid. In fact, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) reports that during the 2018-2019 school year, students at public two-year institutions who received financial aid got an average of \$5,100 in federal grants (i.e., free money to help with educational costs).

Students at private not-for-profit two-year schools got an average of \$5,900. And students at for-profit two-year schools received an average of \$4,600.

Books and Supplies

You may also have expenses like books, tools, or lab fees. According to [College Board](#), students in public two-year colleges budgeted an average of \$1,460 for books and supplies in the 2019-2020 school year. However, some trade school programs include these costs in their tuition rates, so don't assume you need to budget for them separately.

Overall Net Price

It may be more useful to consider the average net price of a particular institution—that is, the amount that students typically pay for tuition, fees, books, supplies, and other expenses after financial aid is applied. Here are the average net prices from the CATC for each type of institution during the 2016-2017 school year:

- Public two-year: \$7,505
- Private for-profit, two year: \$18,711
- Private not-for-profit, two-year: \$20,402

Many schools have net price calculators on their websites that allow you to get an idea of what you might pay.

Trade School vs. Community College

When looking at costs, it's important to think about the kind of training experience you want. Comparing trade schools and community colleges is a bit like comparing apples and oranges—both can get you where you want to go, but they do it in slightly different ways.

[Trade school programs](#) are focused on the skills needed for a specific occupation. They are short and streamlined and designed to get you into the workforce quickly. Many can be completed in a year or less, and some only take up to two years. These types of schools tend to offer hands-on training; many even provide pathways to apprenticeships. They also frequently offer flexible schedules (including evening or [online classes](#)), which can make it easier to fit your training around work or family commitments.

Many community colleges offer vocational programs with a broader scope of training that includes more general education classes. They aim to provide a more well-rounded education. They tend to be more affordable than trade schools, but they often require a greater investment of time. Community college programs generally take two years to complete. However, keep in mind that many students end up taking longer. In fact, fewer than [40 percent of students](#) who began their education at two-year colleges in 2012 had graduated with a credential by 2018.

How to Assess a Program's Value

Always research the programs you're interested in so that you understand the full costs that are involved and what you'll actually receive for your money. Get answers to questions like:

- **Is the program accredited?** This can be an indication of how well the program is regarded. Also, if you attend an accredited school, you may qualify for federal financial aid, which could help cover the cost of your schooling.
- **How long does it typically take to complete the program?** As mentioned above, trade school programs are generally short; many can be completed in six months to a year. Programs at community colleges typically take longer to finish. Shorter programs may sometimes be more expensive, but they could allow you to begin earning an income in your new career sooner.
- **Are there waitlists to get into the program?** Trade schools often feature continuous enrollment and do not commonly have waitlists, so you can often get started on your training shortly after you apply. In contrast, at some traditional colleges, popular programs fill up quickly and potential students must postpone their enrollment for a year or more. Delaying your training can be costly, since it means forgoing the potential earnings you could be making in your new career.
- **Are books and other supplies included, or will you have to purchase those separately?** Paying for necessary materials like tools, uniforms, or certification exam fees can add anywhere from a few hundred to a couple thousand dollars or more to your overall costs. For example, an automotive technology student may need to spend \$1,500 on a professional tool set. However, some programs include these kinds of items in their tuition prices, so be sure to check.
- **Does the program include any opportunities for paid on-the-job training?** Programs that feature a mix of classroom training and paid work experience allow you to earn wages that can offset some of the cost of tuition. Skilled trades programs like carpentry frequently offer such opportunities. Also, at some trade schools, students in programs like cosmetology or massage therapy can get valuable hands-on experience by offering services to the public through on-campus salons or clinics.
- **Does the school offer high-quality, up-to-date equipment?** Sometimes, schools with higher fees have better facilities or more access to the type of equipment that's currently used in the industry. So it's wise to tour the campus and see for yourself.
- **Is employment assistance available?** Many trade schools have close connections to industry employers. Find out if the school you're interested in offers any job placement assistance that could make it easier for you to get started in your new career.



Financial Aid Options for Trade School

Many trade schools offer financial assistance to students in the form of in-house scholarships and grants. Even if the published tuition rates seem to be out of your reach, it's worth your while to talk to the schools you're interested in to see what kind of aid they can provide. The school should be able to direct you to other sources of assistance that can help with your costs.

Be sure to fill out the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#). You can do this yourself or get help from the financial aid office at the trade school you're considering. You need to submit the FAFSA in order to find out how much financial aid you qualify for from the federal and state governments as well as from many other types of organizations.

The three basic forms of financial aid are grants, scholarships, and loans.

Grants

The beauty of grants is that, unlike loans, they are free money that does not have to be paid back. Grants are based on financial need. One of the most popular is the federal [Pell Grant](#), which is available to students who do not already have a degree. The amount you receive depends on your level of need as well as the cost of the school you plan to attend and whether you will be enrolled full- or part-

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time. For the 2021-2022 school year, the maximum amount is \$6,495.

Many state governments also offer grants for vocational students. Here are just a few examples:

- [Oklahoma Tuition Aid Grant \(OTAG\)](#): Students attending career technology centers can receive up to \$1,000 to help with costs. You must be eligible for a Pell Grant and be enrolled in an undergrad degree or certificate program at least part-time.
- [California Cal Grant C](#): This grant is meant for low- to middle-income students who attend eligible technical or vocational programs that are at least four months long. Qualifying students can get up to \$2,462 for tuition and fees and an additional \$547 for books and equipment.
- [Florida Public Postsecondary Career Education Student Assistance Grant Program](#): This grant is available to students enrolled in public community colleges or career centers who demonstrate financial need. Each institution determines the award amount.
- [Washington College Grant Program](#): Student eligibility and grant value vary based on school, family size, income, and program cost. You can use this [financial aid calculator](#) for an estimate of your potential award.

Scholarships

Scholarships are another form of free money for trade school. Thousands of scholarships are available from a variety of sources, including unions, professional associations, trades organizations, and schools themselves. Some scholarships are general in nature, whereas others are aimed at students who are entering specific occupations. Some scholarships are also designed to help women, minorities, veterans, or other special groups. Most scholarships are merit-based, but each organization sets its own eligibility standards, so be sure to look around.

Loans

If you need additional funding, consider getting a student loan. The caveat here is that loan money must be repaid with interest. [Federal loans](#) should be your first choice, since they come with fixed interest rates and do not generally require a good credit history. Students with financial need may qualify for a subsidized Stafford loan, which means the federal government will pay the interest while you complete your training and for six months after you leave school.

Private loans are another option. For example, the [Sallie Mae Career Training Smart Option Student Loan](#) is designed for students who are taking vocational training at a non-degree-granting school. Just be aware that private loans like these tend to come with variable interest rates, and you may need a co-signer to secure one.

Take the Next Step

As you can see, it's wise to weigh the total cost and overall value of any potential training. That's why trade schools, technical institutes, and career colleges are worth checking out. They offer a huge range of streamlined programs that can get you workforce-ready in a short time. Why not explore the options in your area? Discover convenient programs near you by entering your zip code into the school finder at the top of the page!

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