

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Describe educational trends in early adulthood
- Explain the relationship between education and work in early adulthood

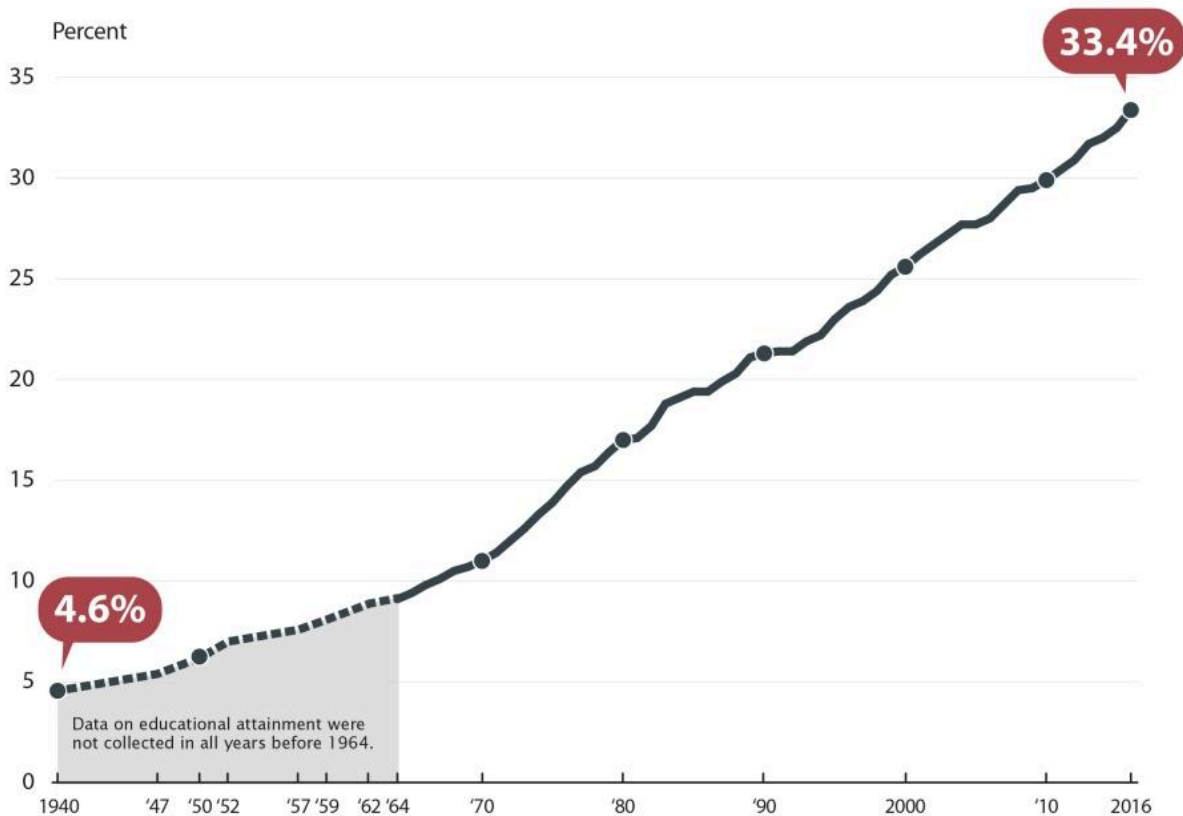
Education in Early Adulthood

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), 90 percent of the American population 25 and older have completed high school or higher level of education—compare this to just 24 percent in 1940!^[4] Each generation tends to earn (and perhaps need) increased levels of formal education. As we can see in the graph, approximately one-third of the American adult population has a bachelor's degree or higher, as compared with less than 5 percent in 1940. Educational attainment rates vary by gender and race. All races combined, women are slightly more likely to have graduated from college than men; that gap widens with graduate and professional degrees. However, wide racial disparities still exist. For example, 23 percent of African-Americans have a college degree and only 16.4 percent of Hispanic Americans have a college degree, compared to 37 percent of non-Hispanic white Americans. The college graduation rates of African-Americans and Hispanic Americans have been growing in recent years, however (the rate has doubled since 1991 for African-Americans and it has increased 60 percent in the last two decades for Hispanic-Americans).



Highest Educational Attainment Levels Since 1940

Adults 25 Years and Older With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher



United States™
Census
Bureau

U.S. Department of Commerce
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
census.gov

Source: 1940-2010 Censuses and
Current Population Survey
www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html
www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html

Figure 1. Since 1940, there has been a significant rise in educational attainment for adults over age 25.

What about those young or emerging adults graduating high school today—is the majority of that group going to college? According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), 66.7 percent of youth ages 16-24 who graduated high school between January and October 2017

were enrolled in colleges or universities in October 2017. There were gender differences (71.7 percent of females vs. 61.1 percent of males) and racial differences (83 percent of Asians, 67.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 61 percent Hispanics, and 59.4 percent Blacks). Not all of these students will persist and earn college degrees, however.^[2]

Try It

Recent data on educational attainment in early adulthood show that:

there are no racial differences in percentages of American youth attending or graduating college today

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Education and the Workplace

With the rising costs of higher education, various news headlines have asked if a college education is worth the cost. One way to address this question is in terms of the earning potential associated with various levels of educational achievement. In 2016, the average earnings for Americans 25 and older with only a high school education was \$35,615, compared with \$65,482 for those with a bachelor's degree, compared with \$92,525 for those with more advanced degrees. Average earnings vary by gender, race, and geographical location in the United States.^[3]

Of concern in recent years is the relationship between higher education and the workplace. In 2005, American educator and then Harvard University President, Derek Bok, called for a closer alignment between the goals of educators and the demands of the economy. Companies outsource much of their work, not only to save costs but to find workers with the skills they need. What is required to do well in today's economy? Colleges and universities, he argued, need to promote global awareness, critical thinking skills, the ability to communicate, moral reasoning, and responsibility in their students. Regional accrediting agencies and state organizations provide similar guidelines for educators. Workers need skills in listening, reading, writing, speaking, global awareness, critical thinking, civility, and computer literacy—all skills that enhance success in the workplace.

More than a decade later, the question remains: does formal education prepare young adults for the workplace? It depends on whom you ask. In an article referring to information from the National Association of Colleges and Employers' 2018 Job Outlook Survey, Bauer-Wolf (2018) explains that employers perceive gaps in students' competencies but many graduating college seniors are overly confident. The biggest difference was in perceived professionalism and work ethic (only 43 percent of employers thought that students are competent in this area compared to 90 percent of the students).⁴⁴ Similar differences were also found in terms of oral communication, written communication, and critical thinking skills. Only in terms of digital technology skills were more employers confident about students' competencies than were the students (66 percent compared to 60 percent).



Figure 2. A college education helps students learn job skills and develop soft skills to prepare them for the workplace, but there are still many career paths that do not necessitate a college degree.

It appears that students need to learn what some call “soft skills,” as well as the particular knowledge and skills within their college major. As education researcher Loni Bordoloi Pazich (2018) noted, most American college students today are enrolling in business or other pre-professional programs and to be effective and successful workers and leaders, they would

benefit from the communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills, as well as the content knowledge, gained from liberal arts education.^[5] In fact, two-thirds of children starting primary school now will be employed in jobs in the future that currently do not exist. Therefore, students cannot learn every single skill or fact that they may need to know, but they can learn how to learn, think, research, and communicate well so that they are prepared to continually learn new things and adapt effectively in their careers and lives since the economy, technology, and global markets will continue to evolve.^[6]

Career Choices in Early Adulthood

Hopefully, we are each becoming lifelong learners, particularly since we are living longer and will most likely change jobs multiple times during our lives. However, for many, our job changes will be within the same general occupational field, so our initial career choice is still significant. We've seen with Erikson that identity largely involves occupation and, as we will learn in the next section, Levinson found that young adults typically form a dream about work (though females may have to choose to focus relatively more on work or family initially with "split" dreams). The American School Counselor Association recommends that school counselors aid students in their career development beginning as early as kindergarten and continue this development throughout their education. ^[7]

One of the most well-known theories about career choice is from John Holland (1985), who proposed that there are six personality types (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional), as well as varying types of work environments.^[8] The better matched one's personality is to the workplace characteristics, the more satisfied and successful one is predicted to be with that career or vocational choice. Research support has been mixed and we should note that there is more to satisfaction and success in a career than one's personality traits or likes and dislikes. For instance, education, training, and abilities need to match the expectations and demands of the job, plus the state of the economy, availability of positions, and salary rates may play practical roles in choices about work.

Link to Learning: What's Your Right Career?

To complete a free online career questionnaire and identify potential careers based on your preferences, go to:

[Career One Stop Questionnaire](#)

Did you find out anything interesting? Think of this activity as a starting point to your career

exploration. Other great ways for young adults to research careers include informational interviewing, job shadowing, volunteering, practicums, and internships. Once you have a few careers in mind that you want to find out more about, go to the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to learn about job tasks, required education, average pay, and projected outlook for the future.

Try It

Based on what we have learned from research on the relationship between education and work, which one of the following statements is true?

On average, Americans 25 and older who have bachelor's degrees or higher level degrees earn more money than their peers who do not have the same level of education.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

1. US Census Bureau (2017, March). Highest Educational Levels Reached by Adults in the U.S. Since 1940. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-51.html> ↵
2. US Census Bureau. (2017, March). Highest Educational Levels Reached by Adults in the U.S. Since 1940. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-51.html> ↵
3. US Census Bureau. (2017, March). Highest Educational Levels Reached by Adults in the U.S. Since 1940. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-51.html> ↵
4. Bauer-Wolf, J. (2018, February 23). Study: students believe they are prepared for the workplace; employers disagree. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/print/news/2018/02/23/study-student> ↵
5. Bordoloi Pazich, L. (2018, September 26). The power of academic friendship. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/09/26/need-combine-business> ↵
6. Henseler, C. (2017, September 6). Liberal arts is the foundation for professional success in the 21st century. Huffington Post. ↵
7. The School Counselor and Career Development (2017). American School Counselor Association. Retrieved from

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8. Holland, J.L. (1985). Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. ↵

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