10 Highly Profitable 2-Year Degree Jobs
By Michelle Goodman, PayScale.com

Think a bachelor's or master's degree is the only way to advance your career? Think again. There are many associate's degree careers that pay high salaries. In fact, going after the highest paying jobs with a 2-year degree is a great way to handle debt after college graduation and reduce job-search anxieties after college.

Whether you're looking for a fresh start in a new, more lucrative field or enrolling in college for the first time, a 2-year associate's degree from a community college is one of the quickest routes to bringing home more bacon each week. This is especially good news for those high school graduates who are wondering what to do after high school and before college.

"Associate's degrees are much cheaper, and the entry requirements are not as onerous as they are for getting into a bachelor's program," says Dr. Laurence Shatkin, author of more than a dozen books for job hunters, including 150 Best Recession-Proof Jobs.

Not only that, associate's degrees are incredibly convenient. Besides being right in your neighborhood, many 2-year programs offer part-time, evening, weekend and online classes -- good news for those already holding down a job and caring for a family.

So what are the best jobs with 2-year degrees? Which 2-year degrees offer the most job opportunities and will earn you the most green after graduation? If you're interested in how to make money after college, read on.

1. Physical Therapist Assistant.
While every other job sector slashed their workforce in 2008, the health care field added nearly 400,000 jobs. Plus, a salary in this field would likely take care of your debt after graduation. According to Shatkin, job openings for physical therapist assistants are expected to grow by 33 percent in the next decade, especially as Baby Boomers age and "get a bit more creaky." Most physical therapist assistants either work in a hospital or a physical therapist's office. Average salary: $46,111 a year.

2. Web Designer.
As long as there are companies, organizations and creative agencies with something to sell or promote, there will be a need for people to design, code and maintain their web sites. Even in the tough economic times, some would
consider this one of the best jobs you can get with an associate's degree. Though many web designers are self-employed, countless others work in staff positions. Average salary: $48,785 a year.

3. Electrical or Electronic Engineering Technician.
The high demand for engineers in this field makes electrical engineering one of the top 2-year degree jobs. These technicians comprise a third of all engineering technician jobs. They often work in industrial or commercial plants and laboratories, taking calculations, running tests, modifying equipment and otherwise assisting the engineers on their team. Average salary: $47,163 a year

4. Registered Nurse.
If it's a high-growth field you want, you can't beat registered nursing. It's one of the associate's degree careers that pay high salaries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, RNs are the largest occupation in the health care field, with 2.5 million jobs out there, about 587,000 new jobs expected to open up by 2016 and 59 percent of RNs working in hospitals. Average salary: $55,276 a year.

5. Computer Support Specialist.
Finding one of the good careers with a 2-year degree isn't hard if you're interested in fixing computers. Computer support specialists include the tech support and help desk workers who assist customers and users with problems they're having with their computer hardware and software. Often, computer support specialists can enjoy the luxory of working from home or working flexible hours. Average salary: $46,111 a year.

6. Executive or Administrative Assistant.
In the business sector, there's no shortage of administrative jobs. It's one of the surest jobs you can get with an associate's degree. "You're talking a quarter of a million job openings every year," says Shatkin. And though you may start as the low man or woman on the totem pole, once you're in the door you're in a prime position to prove your worth and climb the ranks. Average salary: $37,669 a year.

7. Dental Hygienist.
While would-be dental hygienists must obtain a state license on top of their 2-year degree, it's well worth the investment. It is one of the highest paying jobs with a 2-year degree. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than half of the country's dental hygienists work part-time and many enjoy flexible work schedules. Even better, this is one of today's fastest growing occupations. Average salary: $57,148 a year.

8. Surveying or Mapping Technician.
Although the construction industry took some big employment hits in 2008, if all the infrastructure work President Obama has promised comes through, there will be a huge need for surveying and mapping technicians. It will be among the top 2-year degree jobs. Such technicians do much of their work in the field (a boon for those who don't want to sit in an office all day), collecting data, taking calculations and assisting with computer-aided drafting. Average salary: $42,104 a year.

9. Veterinary Technician.
The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects this field to grow significantly during the next decade. Vet technicians often work in a private veterinary practice (zoo and aquarium work is harder to come by), performing lab tests and clinical procedures. Vet techs must pass a state exam and the salaries aren't as high as the other jobs on this list, but for those who want to help animals, the trade-offs are well worth it. Average salary: $33,363 a year.

While competition to break into TV broadcasting and film can be stiff, the continued rise of web content means more opportunities for camera operators. It's one of the best jobs that you can get with an associate's degree if you want to be in this field. Television and film work often involve long or unusual hours. For that reason, many camera operators gravitate toward commercial advertising or corporate videos. The more computer skills a camera operator has, the better their job prospects. Average salary: $42,558 a year.

Source: All salary data is from PayScale.com. The salaries listed are median, annual salaries for experienced, full-time workers and include any bonuses, commissions or profit sharing.

Michelle Goodman is a Seattle-based freelance writer. Her latest book is My So-Called Freelance Life: How to Survive and Thrive as a Creative Professional for Hire (Seal Press, 2008).

Want to know where your current job ranks with these top 2-year degree jobs? Fill out our free salary survey and get a free salary report. Curious what your next gig may be? Try out GigZig and see where your career path could lead you.

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