When most of us think of post-secondary education, our first thoughts are about four-year degree programs where we can earn a bachelor's degree. We may even be thinking about a master's degree, which involves an even greater time investment.

Many people overlook associate degree programs -- which generally involve two years of classes -- when they consider their options. But there are a surprising number of options for graduates with associate degrees.

**Success stories**

Saideh Browne has explored these options. "I have an associate degree from Hudson County Community College, and I am now a published author and own a speakers bureau," she says.

The New York City-based Browne says her degree serves her well. "I've been self-employed for most of my life, and my business law, corporate finance and accounting courses really helped me. But practical, hands-on experience and trial by fire has taught me the most," Browne asserts.

Ginger Vaughn is also happy with where her career path has led her. "I graduated with an associate degree. While in school I did an internship with the local daily paper," recalls Vaughn, who lives in Bainbridge Island, Wash.

Vaughn happened upon her current employer when she was seeking a job at a theater as the house manager. When Vaughn mentioned her experience and her degree, she was hired by the firm shortly afterwards. "This year, I celebrated my 10-year anniversary," she says.

**Another option**

Marc Scheer is the author of "No Sucker Left Behind: Avoiding the Great College Rip-Off." He believes that pursuing an associate degree can be a very wise choice.
Associate degrees tend to be great investments because they cost less than four-year programs," Scheer notes. "Graduates can transfer to four-year programs afterwards if necessary. Most importantly, with four-year programs at major universities carrying a six-figure price tag, Scheer believes associate degrees are a valuable test run. "Since many college students drop out before graduating, these degrees allow them to try out college at a low cost. If they then drop out, they'll have incurred much lower debt."

Hot jobs for associate degree graduates

If you're interested in a particular job, the Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes an occupational guide that outlines occupations with an associate degree requirement. Here's a sample of six of the most in-demand jobs from the bureau's listing, along with the average salaries for these positions according to CBSalary.com. (Please note that the salaries cited are general in nature and are based on averages; specific salaries may vary depending on a number of factors, including location and experience.)

1. Occupational therapist assistant and physical therapist assistant
   - These assistants will work closely with the main therapist who provides care for the client. These are good examples of jobs where graduates can test their aptitude and enthusiasm for the job before continuing to a four-year degree.
   - Salary: Occupational therapy assistants earn an average of $37,769, while physical therapy assistants earn an average of $36,866.

2. Dental assistants and hygienists
   - There's always a consistent demand for assistants and hygienists. These workers are increasingly responsible (depending on where you live) for patient procedures where a licensed dentist is not required.
   - Salary: Office assistants can make an average of $31,023, while a dental hygienist can make a median salary of $54,413.

3. Desktop publisher
   - This job combines writing, formatting and graphic design. Many schools offer associate degrees in graphics arts and design that translates into transferrable skills for this job.
   - Salary: An graduate working in this position could expect a median salary of around $34,459.

4. Teaching assistants
   - These assistants offer classroom support for licensed, certified teachers.
   - Salary: A teaching assistant who has completed a two-year program and is working in primary or secondary education can anticipate a salary around $24,270.

5. Paralegal and paralegal assistants
   - Paralegals support a staff of lawyers or a legal department at a major corporation. A member of a paralegal staff researches laws and regulations, and coordinates and organizes files.
   - Salary: A paralegal can earn an average salary of $44,934, while a paralegal assistant's median salary is $43,841.

6. Computer support specialist
   - Computer support specialists help computer users troubleshoot any technical issues they might have with their computer system. Since most organizations, in all industries, use computers these days, support specialists can work almost anywhere.

   Salary: A computer support specialist can earn an average salary of $45,719 per year.

Patrick Erwin is a writer and blogger for CareerBuilder.com. He researches and writes about job search strategy, career management, hiring trends and workplace issues.