

Our articles, research studies, tools, and reviews maintain strict editorial integrity; however, we may be compensated when you click on or are approved for offers from our partners.

Best States for College Students 2020

Richard Barrington | MoneyRates.com Senior Financial Analyst, CFA

Last updated: February 20, 2020 Personal finance, Research center

8 min read



Looking to get a good bachelor's degree at an affordable price?

Where you live might have a lot to do with the quality of the choices you have.

The 2020 MoneyRates.com study of best states for college students found some stark differences in the collegiate environment from state to state.

Here are some examples of the contrasts:

- The annual cost of a bachelor's degree program in North Dakota is less than half what it is in each of the 11 most-expensive states.
- Only one in four college students in Nevada completes a bachelor's degree within six years, while 22 states have six-year graduation rates of 50% or better.
- College students in Nevada are also more than twice as likely as those in Connecticut and Massachusetts to leave or change schools.
- The ratio of students to teachers - which can determine how much individual attention a student can get - is an average of 14 across all states, but in Arizona it is much worse at an average of 19 students per teacher.

What this means is that, depending on where you live, it may pay to look beyond your home state when considering colleges. A broader range of choices could help you find the best path toward a marketable degree without being overwhelmed by debt when you graduate.

Ranking the Best States for College Students

To help would-be college students and their parents direct their choices, MoneyRates.com ranked each of the 50 states based on five factors relevant to the affordability and effectiveness of college programs:

1. **Average cost**

Since the idea is for students to be open-minded about where they look for the right college, the study looked at total costs for both in-state and out-of-state students living on campus.

2. **Retention rate**

It's a bad sign if a lot of students are dropping out or transferring. Average retention rates show how good a job schools in different states do at holding on to their students.

3. **Student-to-faculty ratio**

Do you hope to have individual interaction with your college teachers, or are you content to be one of dozens of students sitting in a large lecture hall? The student-to-faculty ratio can give you a sense of which type of college experience you'd have in store.

4. **6-year graduation rate**

Many students need more than the traditional four years to get a bachelor's degree; but if the process drags on too long, the costs start mounting up and the chances of completing the degree fade. The higher the 6-year graduation rate, the more students in that state are having a successful college experience.

5. **Breadth of choice**

Even though some states may have generally better college conditions than others, the decision still comes down to choosing a particular school. Students have a range of very different interests, career goals and visions of what kind of college experience they want. The more choices a state offers, the better chance a student has of finding the right fit.

Big picture, the rankings in this study could help point you toward states where you may have a good chance of finding the right college.

The other takeaway from this study should be to suggest what information you should research when considering any particular college.

The Best States for College Students

The goal of this study was to select the ten best states for college students. However, due to a three-way tie for tenth place, the list is expanded to a full dozen.

1. Massachusetts



Let's get the bad news out of the way: At \$54,265, the average cost of attending college in Massachusetts is the second highest of any state.

However, Massachusetts ranks in the top ten for all four other ranking factors, so at least you get value for your money.

The 80% student-retention rate and 65% 6-year graduation rate for bachelor's degree students are both second highest in the nation.

The average student-to-teacher ratio in Massachusetts is third best of any state; and with 95 schools from which to choose, Massachusetts ranks 8th in breadth of choice.

2. Michigan



At an average of \$36,596, annual college costs in Michigan are right around the middle of the pack. That makes schools in the state a good value because they rank better than average on all other factors.

Michigan is seventh-best nationally with a student-retention rate of 77%.

Individual attention might be part of what helps keep so many students in school, because Michigan's student/teacher ratio of 13 is tied for ninth nationally.

3. Pennsylvania



Pennsylvania did well in this study because it ranked third nationally in three out of five categories: student-retention rate, graduation rate and breadth of choice.

Be sure to save diligently if you plan to attend college in the state because the average annual cost of \$46,793 is the seventh most expensive in the nation.

However, if the strong retention and graduation rates increase your chances of completing your degree, this might be money well spent.

4. Illinois



An interesting pattern that emerges from this study is that many of the best states for college students are on the pricey side.

With an average annual cost of \$43,795, Illinois is more expensive than the national average of \$37,520.

What may make the cost worthwhile is that Illinois performed better than average in all four other categories. Most notably, it tied for third best nationally with an average student/teacher ratio of 12.

5. (tie) Nebraska

The number of college choices available in Nebraska is relatively limited at a total of 28 statewide, but those schools seem to deliver good value.

Nebraska ranks above average for retention rate, graduation rate and student/teacher ratio, and the average annual cost of \$32,954 is cheaper than in most states.



5. (tie) New York



Though tied for fifth with Nebraska, New York offers a very different collegiate environment.

With 238 colleges in the state, New York offers the second widest selection of choices of any state. It also ranks in the top ten for retention rate.

You might expect New York prices to be expensive, but while the \$40,468 average annual cost of college in New York is higher than average, it is still cheaper than in 16 other states.

7. Iowa



Iowa is tied for third overall with a student/teacher ratio of 12, and also ranks in the top ten for 6-year graduation rate.

On the down side, the average annual cost of \$43,189 is higher than in most states.

8. (tie) California

California's 269 colleges give it the most choices of any state, and it is tied for fifth for 6-year graduation rate.

Unfortunately, it also has the fifth-highest average cost, at \$48,425.



8. (tie) Missouri



Missouri ranks in the top ten for number of college choices and best student/teacher ratio.

It also offers an average annual cost of \$34,468 that is cheaper than in most states.

10. (tie) Connecticut



Like neighboring Massachusetts, Connecticut's college choices could be described as "pricey, but worth it."

The average annual cost of \$50,982 is third-highest in the nation.

However, Connecticut ranks first in student-retention rate, and in the top ten for student/teacher ratio and 6-year graduation rate.

10. (tie) New Jersey

An average annual cost of \$36,441 puts New Jersey around the middle of the pack for affordability.



That looks like a good value when you consider that New Jersey is better than most states in each of the other four categories, including being tied for the seventh-highest student-retention rate.

10. (tie) Virginia



Average annual college costs of \$44,192 make Virginia the ninth-most expensive state.

In return for that investment, Virginia offers above-average rankings in all four other categories, including top-ten rankings for student/faculty ratio and breadth of choice.

Compare Savings Accounts offers:

Advertiser Disclosure

CIT Bank.
Member FDIC

FDIC Insured
Rates as of 2/20/2020

Advertiser Comments

Marcus:
by Goldman Sachs™

Goldman Sachs Bank USA, Member FDIC.
FDIC Insured
Rates as of 2/20/2020

Advertiser Comments



FDIC Insured
Rates as of 2/20/2020

Advertiser Comments

Rates / Annual Percentage Yield terms above are current as of the date indicated. These quotes are from banks, credit unions and thrifts, some of which have paid for a link to their website. Bank, thrift and credit unions are member FDIC or NCUA. Contact the bank for the terms and conditions that may apply to you. Rates are subject to change without notice and may not be the same at all branches.

How to Afford College: Meeting the Challenge

As you can see by the cost figures mentioned above, even in the less expensive states, paying for college is a big challenge. Here are some tips to help you meet that challenge.

1. Get an early start on a 529 college savings plan

Obviously, it's easier to save if you can spread the saving out over more years by starting early. In addition, starting early helps because the primary tax advantage of a 529 college saving plan is that it allows you to grow your college savings tax-free.

The earlier you start, the more years of tax-free growth potential your savings will have.

>> [Best Accounts for College Savings](#)

2. Learn which degrees employers value

Since college is expensive, it's important not to waste any time pursuing the wrong degree program.

Colleges may advertise programs that sound relevant to a given field, but those degrees are not necessarily the qualifications employers demand. Check out the job market for the career you want before you start college, so you can spend your time and money pursuing the right degree.

3. Compare choices

Costs can vary greatly, so try to identify more than one college that offers the kind of education you want. Being able to compare multiple choices gives you more of a chance at finding a cost-effective solution.

4. Research financial aid

The so called "sticker price" charged by colleges tells only part of the story. Financial aid can go a long way toward making college affordable. Talk to the financial aid office of any college you are considering to see what kind of help they are able to offer.

5. Focus on graduation rates

The investment in college is largely wasted if you don't get a degree. Be wary of college programs with low graduation rates.

Where you decide to attend college makes a big difference. Both the state and the particular school matters, but so does asking the right questions to put yourself on course to earning a worthwhile degree.

Overall Ranking of Best States for College Students

Overall Rank	State	Average On-Campus Price	Price Rank	Retention Rank
1	Massachusetts	\$54,265	49	2
2	Michigan	\$36,596	24	7
3	Pennsylvania	\$46,793	44	3
4	Illinois	\$43,795	40	18
5	Nebraska	\$32,954	15	14
5	New York	\$40,468	34	7
7	Iowa	\$43,189	39	14

8	California	\$48,425	46	11
8	Missouri	\$34,468	18	24
10	Connecticut	\$50,982	48	1

THE EASY WAY TO EARN MORE INTEREST



Learn more about these top high interest accounts*



APY **1.75%**

Min balance: \$100



APY **1.70%**

Min balance: \$0



APY **1.70%**

Min balance: \$0

[See all rates](#)

*Based on results of Americas Best Rates study

0 Comment