

2003 College Graduates in the U.S. Workforce: A Profile

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The total number of college graduates in the United States rose to 40,621,000 in 2003, an increase of 40 percent in the decade between 1993 and 2003. A slightly greater percentage (12 percent) of all college graduates held science and engineering (S&E) jobs than did their counterparts in 1993 (11 percent). The number of college graduates who have completed degrees in more than one broad field (S&E, S&E-related, and non-S&E) has also increased to 5.57 million in 2003, up from 3.37 million in 1993.

Employment Profile

While a single college degree is often cited as a major milestone in education, a large proportion of college graduates in the United States proceed further. Over one-third (38 percent) of all employed college graduates in the United States have attained degrees higher than a bachelor's degree. Of individuals whose highest level of degree attainment is the doctorate, approximately 50 percent work in S&E occupations, reflecting the high proportion of individuals with a doctorate whose degrees are in science and engineering. Similarly, approximately 44 percent of individuals whose highest degree is at the professional level report working in an S&E-related occupation. Physicians with their highest degree in a medical field drive this result.

The business/industry sector employs the largest proportion of working college graduates (67 percent), followed by educational institutions (22 percent), and the government (11 percent). Within the business/industry sector, some 27 percent of college graduates are self-employed, and another 12 percent work in nonprofit organizations. Within educational institutions, a large proportion (68 percent) works in precollege institutions. Within the government sector, roughly equal proportions of college graduates work at the local, state, and federal levels.

Salaries tend to differ both by employment sector and type of occupation. Median salaries tend to be lowest for college graduates working in educational institutions in every occupation group. Salaries for state and local government employment are similar to educational institutions, but federal salaries are higher for all three occupation groups. Individuals working in S&E occupations command the highest median salaries at \$69,000.

Individuals with higher levels of degree attainment also command higher salaries. Those with professional degrees (including law and medical degrees) earned the highest median salaries (\$95,000), followed by those with doctorates (\$70,000), then master's degrees (\$54,000) and bachelor's degrees (\$47,000). The median salary differences by degree level are less pronounced for those working in S&E occupations than for those working in S&E-related or non-S&E occupations. The difference in the median salary between bachelor's degree and doctorate for those working in S&E occupations is only \$4,000, while the difference in S&E-related occupations is \$29,000 and for those working in non-S&E occupations is \$22,000. The small difference within S&E occupations is driven by the relatively high salaries commanded by the large number of bachelor's degree holders working as computer scientists and engineers.

Demographic Profile

Nearly half (49 percent) of all college graduates in the United States are women. Women represent more than half of all college graduates whose level of educational attainment is at the bachelor's level (51 percent) or at the master's level (53 percent). Men are a greater proportion of college graduates whose highest degrees are doctorates or professional degrees (67 percent each, respectively).

Young people and minorities are a significant portion of all college graduates in the United States. Some 33 percent of college graduates in the United States are younger than 40 years of age. The age distribution of male and female graduates also differs; 8 percent of women and 5 percent of men are younger than 40 years of age. Among college graduates, some 12 percent are underrepresented minorities, another 7 percent are Asian (non-Hispanic only), and approximately 1 percent reported that they are multiracial. Immigrants continue to be an important component of the ranks of the college educated in the United States, making up 12 percent of this population. Two-thirds of these immigrants have become U.S. citizens through the naturalization process.

While most college graduates report being married, there are some differences between female and male college graduates. Men, more often than women, report being married or in a marriage-like relationship (81 percent versus 73 percent). Similar proportions of women and men report having children in the home (51 percent and 49 percent, respectively).

Data Notes

Data presented in this report are from the 1993 and 2003 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG), sample surveys that included all those who had earned a bachelor's degree or higher prior to April 1, 1990 for the 1993 NSCG and prior to April 1, 2000 for the 2003 NSCG—whether in science or engineering or not. The surveys represented almost 30 million college graduates in the 1993 NSCG and over 40 million college graduates in the 2003 NSCG. The sample for these surveys was drawn from 1990 and 2000 Census Long Form respondents, respectively. The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Elizabeth Malone, U.S. Department of Energy, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, in the early development of this Info-Brief. For further information, contact Nirmala Kannankutty, Human Resources Statistics Program, Division of Science Resource Statistics, National Science Foundation, 4201 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 965, Arlington, VA 22230, 703-292-7797. <nkannank@nsf.gov>.