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Seattle: Best Educated City

A high quality of life is the principle objective of economic development. It is also a means to economic growth, especially in an era of intense competition for jobs, since people and businesses prefer to locate in places offering a good environment in which to live and work. In this respect, the Puget Sound region has a leg up on other places.

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Seattle is the best educated big city in the nation, according to rankings published by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2004, 51.3 percent of Seattle's population 25 years of age and over held bachelor's degrees or better. Seattle topped a list of the 70 cities in the nation with populations of 250,000 or more. San Francisco (51.0 percent) came in second and Raleigh (49.7 percent) came in third. Seattle also ranked fifth nationally in the relative number of high school graduates, with 89.9 percent of its adults 25 years and over earning diplomas. Recently released data for 2005 show much the same results.

Top Ten Cities in Educational Attainment, 2004

Percent of Persons 25 Years and Over

	At Least Bachelor's Degree	At Least High School Diploma
Seattle	51.3	89.9
San Francisco	51.0	84.3
Raleigh	49.7	91.4
Washington, D.C.	47.7	84.4
Austin	45.1	84.2
Atlanta	42.9	81.7
Minneapolis	41.1	88.9
Boston	40.9	85.0
Lexington-Fayette	39.2	86.8
San Diego	39.0	84.6

*Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Can we chalk this up to an excellent educational system? Not entirely. As Eric Pryne of *The Seattle Times* (April 11, 2006) wrote, "What's happening in Seattle is part of a national trend...Educated Americans are gravitating to the country's big cities, chasing jobs and culture and driving up home prices." But it would appear that Seattle is doing a better job of attracting highly educated people than most.

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The implication for economic development is obvious. Paraphrasing Richard Florida of George Mason University, Pryne wrote, “Cities that want to increase their pool of skilled labor need to foster an environment that welcomes outsiders, including immigrants and people from elsewhere in the U.S.” What constitutes a good urban environment? The list of Seattle’s attractive attributes is long: mountains, water, parks, zoo, aquarium, opera, symphony, theatre, professional sports, safe streets, good schools, and healthy living conditions, among other things.

Educational Attainment, 2005

Percent of Persons 25 Years and Over

	Seattle	Washington	United States
Doctorate degree	2.9	1.2	1.1
Professional degree	4.4	1.9	2.0
Master’s degree	13.2	7.3	6.9
Bachelor’s degree	32.2	19.6	17.2
Associate’s degree	6.4	9.2	7.4
Some college	18.4	24.5	20.1
High school graduate	14.4	25.1	29.6
Other	8.0	11.2	15.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Seattle’s educational attainment helps explain the general prosperity of its population. According to the 2000 U.S. census, per capita income is approximately 40 percent higher in Seattle than the nation. A back-of-the-envelope calculation reveals that a significant portion of this income gap is due to the differences in education. As shown in the table below, Seattle’s median earnings for persons 25 years and over were about \$37,300 in 2005. If Seattle’s population had the same educational attainment as the U.S.—for example, only 10.0 percent (instead of 20.5 percent) of its persons 25 years and over held graduate or professional degrees and had median earnings of \$52,300—the city’s median earnings would fall to about \$31,400, a drop of 16 percent.

Seattle Median Earnings, 2005

Persons 25 Years and Over

	Dollars
Graduate or professional degree	52,308
Bachelor’s degree	42,962
Some college or associate’s degree	30,912
High school graduate	25,730
Less than high school graduate	17,082
All persons 25 years and over	37,283

*Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census