Alexander Payne grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, where he was educated by Jesuits. He later studied history and Spanish literature at Stanford University before earning a master's degree in film directing at UCLA.

His first two feature films were the comedies *Citizen Ruth* (1996) and *Election* (1999). *About Schmidt* premiered in competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002. Both *Sideways* (2004) and *The Descendants* (2011) won Oscars® for Best Adapted Screenplay and were nominated for four others, including Best Picture and Best Director. Four of his six feature films were filmed in Nebraska.