

Which Community College Awards Are Likely to Prepare Students for Post-Completion Success?

By Davis Jenkins, John Fink, and Tatiana Velasco

If community colleges are to build back enrollment after more than a decade of declines and address concerns about the value of a college education, they must ensure that their workforce and transfer programs are worth completing in that they prepare students to secure good jobs or transfer successfully.

This report and the accompanying [online data tool](#) are designed to encourage community colleges individually and by state to examine data on what degrees and certificates they are awarding, which of those credentials are more likely to enable students to secure good jobs directly or transfer efficiently to a bachelor's degree program in students' major fields of interest, and whether certain demographic groups are underrepresented among graduates of programs that have strong post-completion value for employment and transfer or are overrepresented among lower value program graduates.

We use Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data to classify the more than 1.425 million degrees and certificates that community colleges awarded in academic year 2022-23 by intent, level (associate degree, bachelor's degree, long certificate, or short certificate), and field. By "intent," we mean whether the program is designed to enable students to enter the workforce, transfer to a bachelor's degree program, or explore general education coursework.

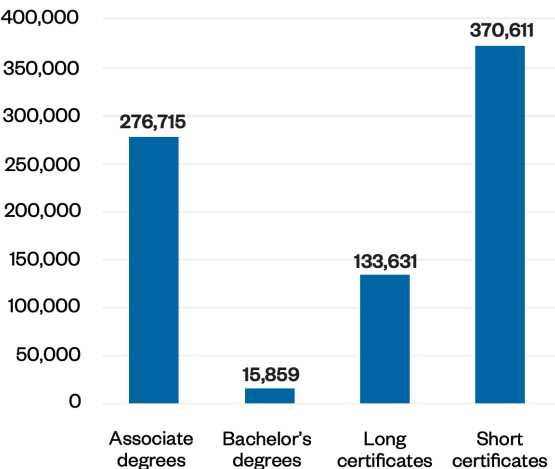
We use two-year post-completion median earnings data from the College Scorecard (collegescorecard.ed.gov) and other evidence to provide a rough assessment of which credentials by intent, level, and field are and are not likely to enable students to secure a living-wage job or transfer efficiently in a major. We also examine the gender and racial/ethnic characteristics of program completers to assess whether graduates of programs with stronger potential post-completion value are representative of graduates overall.

Workforce Credentials

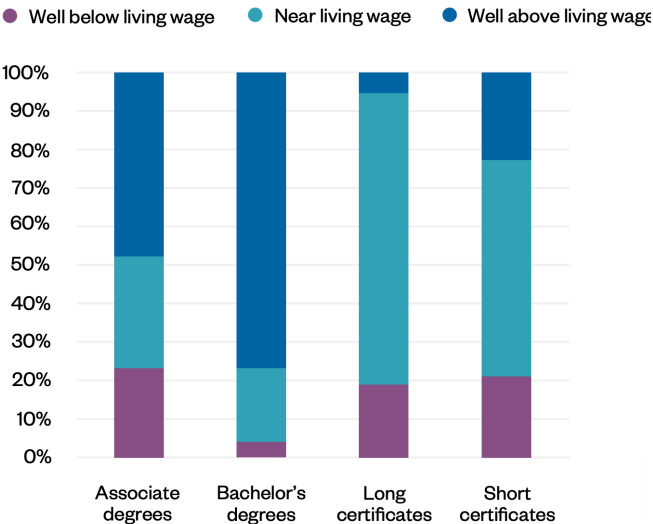
Over half (56%) of community college credentials awarded in 2022-23—including 35% of associate degrees, nearly all bachelor’s degrees, 59% of long certificates (at least one year long), and 93% of short certificates (less than one year)—are workforce or career-technical credentials designed to prepare students to secure jobs or develop job skills. Panel A of Figure ES1 shows the number of these workforce credentials awarded by level. Panel B shows the share of these credentials that are associated with median annual earnings two years after graduation that are well above a living wage (greater than \$40,000 per year), near a living wage (in the \$30,000–\$40,000 range), or well below a living wage (less than \$30,000).

Figure ES1. Community College Workforce Credentials (2022-23)

A. Number of Workforce Awards by Level



B. Share of Awards by Associated Earnings Category



Workforce Associate Degrees

- Over three-quarters of the more than 275,000 workforce associate degrees awarded by community colleges are associated with median earnings near or well above a living wage two years after completion.
- Still, over 63,000 (23%) of workforce associate degrees are associated with median earnings well below a living wage. The largest numbers of these are in the fields of business, communications and design, early childhood education, health administrative services, and culinary services.
- Outside of nursing and allied healthcare, women are underrepresented among workforce associate degree graduates in well-paying, high-demand fields, including computer and information technology, industrial and construction technology and trades, and engineering technology.
- Black and Hispanic students are equitably represented among workforce associate degree graduates in nursing and allied health technology but underrepresented in industrial and construction technology and trades and engineering technology.
- To meet the strong projected demand for middle-skill workers to fill well-paying technician jobs in technology fields, community colleges will need to greatly expand and diversify the number of graduates of workforce associate degree programs in computer and information technology, engineering technology, and industrial and construction technology and trades especially.

Community College Bachelor's Degrees

- Over three-quarters of community college bachelor's degrees—virtually all of them in career-technical fields—are associated with median earnings well above a living wage two years after completion.
- While such programs are growing, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded by community colleges is still small: less than 16,000 compared to more than 1.3 million awarded by public universities in 2022-23.
- The largest number of bachelor's degrees awarded is in business (5,952), followed by allied health and nursing (3,934) and computer and information technology (1,803).
- Community colleges awarded few bachelor's degrees in other fields where demand in many parts of the country is high, including education (565), engineering and science technology (422), and industrial and construction technology and trades (378).
- Women and students of color are underrepresented among bachelor's graduates in some higher earning fields.

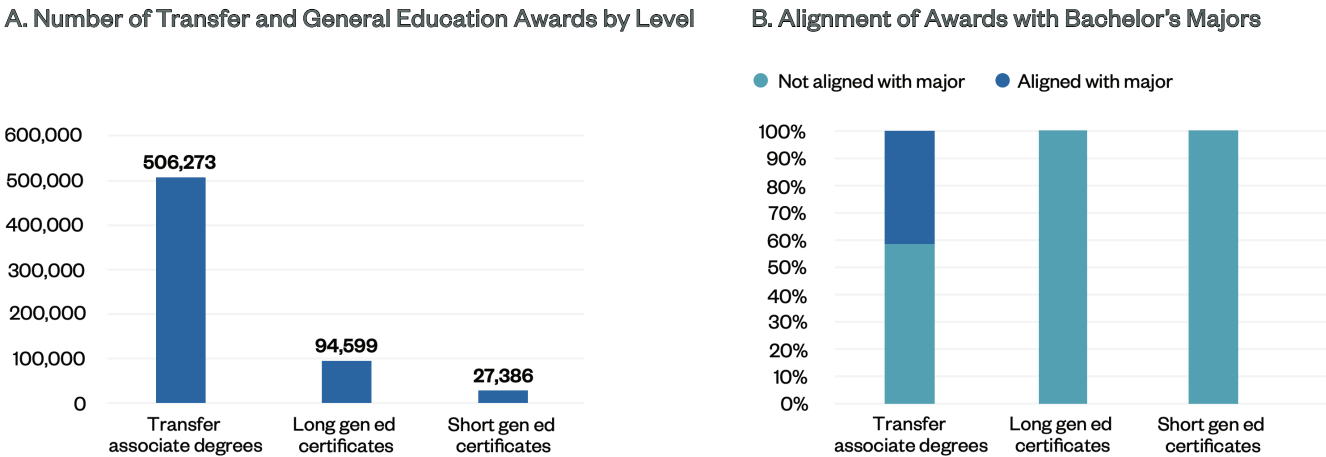
Workforce Certificates

- Three-quarters of the more than 130,000 community college workforce long certificates are associated with median earnings near a living wage two years after completion.
- Research indicates that long certificates in fields such as nursing and allied health, public safety and corrections, computer and information technology, and industrial and construction technology and trades can provide stepping stones to jobs that pay near or above a living wage. However, studies also indicate that workers with certificates in these fields generally need to pursue degrees to advance to jobs that pay well above a living wage and have strong career advancement opportunities.
- Most (78%) certificates from short-term programs are also associated with median earnings near or well above a living wage. However, research suggests that short workforce programs are generally not sufficient to enable graduates to secure living-wage jobs. Many short—and some long—certificates associated with higher earnings are likely earned by workers who already have well-paying jobs and are seeking to increase their skills.
- One in five long and short certificates (over 100,000 awards) are associated with earnings well below a living wage. These include certificates in early childhood education, cosmetology, healthcare administrative services, culinary services, and mental health counseling.
- Community college workforce short and long certificate programs are often designed to be stackable (meaning they give credit toward degrees while also enabling students to advance to better jobs in the field). In reality, however, relatively few students stack certificates in this way.

Transfer and General Education Credentials

About two thirds (over 500,000) of the associate degrees awarded by community colleges in 2022-23 are designed to enable students to transfer to a bachelor's degree program. In addition, more than 94,000 community college long certificates and over 27,000 short certificates are in general or liberal studies, humanities, or social sciences, which we refer to as general education certificates (see Panel A of Figure ES2). Panel B of Figure ES2 shows the shares of these awards that are and are not aligned with specific bachelor's degree majors.

Figure ES2. Community College Transfer and General Education Credentials (2022-23)



Transfer Associate Degrees

- Nearly 60% of community college transfer associate of arts degrees are in liberal or general studies, which research suggests are poorly aligned with specific bachelor’s degree majors and thus may lead students who transfer to take more credits than needed for specific degrees or may shut them out of degrees in STEM, business, and healthcare.
- Of the nearly 40% of transfer associate degrees aligned with majors, the most common are in business, social and behavioral sciences, bioscience, and arts and humanities. Only 10% of transfer associate degrees are in STEM fields, compared to 23% of bachelor’s degrees awarded by public four-year institutions.
- It is sometimes assumed that students who earn a community college transfer associate degree but do not transfer to a bachelor’s program can nevertheless secure a good job with their associate degree. We find that only 24% of transfer associate degrees—in engineering, computer and information sciences, business, and agriculture and natural resources—are associated with median earnings near a living wage. Most of the others are associated with earnings well below a living wage. For example, the median wage two years post-completion for an associate of arts in liberal or general studies is around \$24,000 per year (in 2019 dollars), which is equivalent to about \$12 per hour for full-time work.

General Education Certificates

- In some cases, students awarded general education certificates may be taking courses in liberal arts and social sciences for their own edification. In other cases, students may be taking college courses to explore interests in pursuing a degree. However, because universities generally do not recognize these credentials and their curriculum is not aligned with a particular major, general education certificates are unlikely to prepare students to transfer efficiently in a major.

The earnings and major-alignment measures used in this analysis are admittedly rough proxies. In the conclusion of the report, we refer to a [guide and data tool](#) developed by CCRC and the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program to help colleges conduct an in-depth analysis of the post-completion value of their workforce and transfer program credentials and of their current program enrollments using local labor market and transfer outcome data.

Funding for this report was provided by Ascendium Education Group.