



# APPENDIX: Some Information on Bachelor's Degrees

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## The value of bachelor's degrees in the labor market is growing.

**By 2031, two-thirds of good jobs (and a plurality of all jobs) in the U.S. will require bachelor's degrees, while only 19% will require sub-baccalaureate credentials, just slightly more than the 15% that will require a high school diploma. As of 2021, 36% of jobs required a bachelor's degree or more, just ahead of the 31% requiring sub-baccalaureate credentials and the 32% obtainable with a high school diploma or less.**

- Source: Jeff Strohl, Artem Gulish, and Catherine Morris, *The Future of Good Jobs: Projections Through 2031* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/> and Anthony P. Carnevale et al., *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements Through 2031* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>.

**The U.S. will need 5.3 million additional workers with postsecondary education by 2032, with 4.5 million of that shortfall representing jobs that require at least a bachelor's degree. The gap is driven primarily by 18.4 million retirements of educated workers outpacing the 13.8 million similarly credentialed workers entering the labor force, plus nearly 700,000 new jobs requiring postsecondary education.**

- Source: Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, Madeleine Adelson, and Jeff Strohl, *Falling Behind: How Skills Shortages Threaten Future Jobs* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2025), [https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-falling\\_behind-fr.pdf](https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-falling_behind-fr.pdf).

**Nearly 80% of employers expect no change in bachelor's degree requirements for entry-level positions in the short term, and an average of 70% of their entry-level jobs currently require one. Among the quarter of employers that had discussed dropping degree requirements, none cited lack of confidence in the degree's value as a reason.**

- Source: Kevin Gray, "The Degree Continues to Be an Important Factor in College Recruiting," National Association of Colleges and Employers, May 17, 2024, <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/trends-and-predictions/the-degree-continues-to-be-an-important-factor-in-college-recruiting>.

**Young people with college degrees still have lower unemployment rates than those without: 4.8% for recent graduates vs. 7.4% for all workers ages 22–27 in June 2025. A broader economic slowdown is affecting all workers, not just degree holders, and declining job growth, economic uncertainty, and inflation are hitting jobs that do not require degrees as well as those that do.**

- Source: Jeff Strohl, "Where There Is Smoke, There Is Likely Fire," CEW Blog, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, September 2025, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/resource/cew-blog-smoke-likely-fire/>.

**The unemployment gap between young college graduates (ages 22–27) and high school graduates has narrowed to its lowest level since the late 1970s, driven primarily by a decades-long decline in job-finding rates among college graduates rather than improvements for high school graduates. The trend predates both the pandemic and AI.**

- Source: Alexander Cline and Barış Kaymak, "Are Young College Graduates Losing Their Edge in the Job Market?" Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, Economic Commentary 2025-14, November 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.26509/frbc-ec-202514>.

**Young adults with a college degree consistently have lower unemployment rates than same-age peers without a degree, and the employment advantage for degree holders of all ages has remained persistent over three decades. Financial benefits of a degree generally increase with time as wages rise and debt decreases, though six-year graduation rates remain stuck around 60% and those who leave with debt but no degree face the worst outcomes.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, "Don't Believe the Doubters: Young Workers Still Benefit from a College Degree," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, December 19, 2023, <https://medium.com/georgetown-cew/dont-believe-the-doubters-young-workers-still-benefit-from-a-college-degree-b89e524fcc86>.

**As of November 2025, 19.3% of U.S. job postings on Indeed required a bachelor's degree or higher—up from 16.6% in November 2023 and only slightly below pre-pandemic levels. After adjusting for changes in occupational mix, the share of postings requiring at least a bachelor's degree has been rising since early 2024, indicating genuine increases in education requirements within occupations rather than just shifts in the types of jobs being posted.**

- Source: Sneha Puri, "Where Do College Degrees Still Matter in a 'Skills-First' Job Market?" Indeed Hiring Lab, January 28, 2026, <https://www.hiringlab.org/2026/01/28/where-do-college-degrees-still-matter-in-a-skills-first-job-market/>.

**Current projections regarding the demand for bachelor's degrees mark a significant shift in the data from the estimates available when the pathways movement launched over a decade ago. In 2013, researchers projected that by 2020, 35% of all jobs would require a bachelor's degree or more.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Recovery: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2020* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>.

**Among jobs projected through 2030 that pay at least \$50,000 a year in Wisconsin, more than half will require a college degree; among those paying \$75,000 or more, 91% will require one. The fastest-growing non-degree occupations—home health aides, food service, warehouse workers—average less than \$31,000 a year, and salaries in non-degree fields see limited growth over a career: a truck driver earning \$36,000 in their 20s can expect roughly \$50,000 by their 50s, while a business professional's salary may double from \$50,000 to \$100,000 over the same period.**

- Source: Alan Ehrenhalt, "No College Degree? There Are Jobs for You," *Governing*, February 21, 2024, <https://www.governing.com/workforce/no-college-degree-there-are-jobs-for-you>.

**Despite at least 26 states and major employers like IBM and Accenture dropping degree requirements from job listings, a Burning Glass Institute/Harvard Business School analysis found that fewer than one in 700 hires in 2023 actually benefited from the shift to skills-based hiring.**

- Source: Lawrence Lanahan, "No college degree, no problem? Not so fast," *The Hechinger Report*, December 15, 2025, <https://hechingerreport.org/no-college-degree-no-problem-not-so-fast/>.

**Despite much-publicized announcements from tech companies about dropping degree requirements, the number of new hires with bachelor's degrees remains extremely high: Apple (90%), Microsoft (87%), Google (84%), Amazon (80%), and Facebook (66%). Meanwhile, 40% of Google Career Certificate program**

**completers already had college degrees, suggesting that much of the growth in short-term credentials comes from people supplementing existing degrees rather than replacing them.**

- Source: Ben Wildavsky, "No, Google isn't making college degrees obsolete," *Work Shift*, February 10, 2022, <https://workshift.org/no-google-isnt-making-college-degrees-obsolete/>; See also: "Measuring the 'Great (Degree) Reset,'" *Work Shift*, February 10, 2022, <https://workshift.org/measuring-the-great-degree-reset/>.

**Workers without bachelor's degrees who are "Skilled Through Alternative Routes" (STARs) experience similar friction as degree holders when moving laterally between jobs requiring comparable skills, but face significantly greater barriers to upward mobility into higher-wage occupations—a gap that persists even in tight labor markets. STARs needed an average of 30 years of work experience to earn what a bachelor's degree holder earned at the start of their career.**

- Source: Peter Q. Blair, Papia Debroy, and Justin Heck, "Skills, Degrees, and Labor Market Inequality," *Economics of Education Review* 106 (2025), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775725000846>.

## **Bachelor's degrees are associated with significant and durable earnings premiums.**

**Young workers ages 25–34 with bachelor's degrees earn 35% more than workers with associate's degrees—a premium almost double the 18% increase from a high school diploma to an associate's. These differences have proven durable, with similar disparities appearing in the data every year since 2012.**

- Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment," *Condition of Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba>.

**Median household income for householders with at least a bachelor's degree reached \$132,700 in 2024—more than double the \$58,410 earned by those with a high school diploma. The income gap has widened over the past two decades: in 2004, bachelor's holders had about twice the median household income of high school graduates; by 2024, the ratio was 2.3 to 1.**

- Source: Zach Scherer and Michael D. King, "How Education Impacted Income and Earnings From 2004 to 2024," *America Counts*, U.S. Census Bureau, September 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2025/09/education-and-income.html>.

**The earnings difference between bachelor's degree holders and their peers approximately doubles by age 60. Wages grow faster for bachelor's degree holders because those degrees are more likely than sub-baccalaureate degrees and credentials to open the door to professional and managerial roles that offer opportunities for pay increases and promotions.**

- Source: David J. Deming, "Why Do Wages Grow Faster for Educated Workers?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 31373, June 2023, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31373>.

**The average person with a bachelor's degree earns about 70% more than a high school graduate with a similar amount of work experience, and estimates indicate that the college wage premium will stand at**

**76% in 2042. The college wage premium surged in the 1980s and '90s and has remained close to those historic highs for the past two decades.**

- Source: Rose Horowitz, "The College Backlash Is a Mirage," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/01/college-degree-value-enrollment/685384/>.

**The return to college is estimated at 12.5%, well above the threshold for a sound investment, though for at least a quarter of graduates—particularly those who pay higher costs, take longer to finish, or have below-average earnings—the economic payoff may not justify the investment. Majors providing quantitative and analytical training earn the highest returns.**

- Source: Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz, "Is College Still Worth It?" Federal Reserve Bank of New York Liberty Street Economics, April 16, 2025, <https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2025/04/is-college-still-worth-it/>.

**Graduates earn about \$10,400 more annually than peers who started college but didn't finish. Even accounting for student loan debt, an \$8,000 annual earnings advantage for bachelor's degree holders remains.**

- Source: Guangli Zhang, Jason Jabbari, Mathieu Despard, Xueying Mei, Yung Chun, and Stephen Roll, *Beyond Earnings Premia: Debt-Adjusted Returns to Postsecondary Education*, SSRN Working Paper, August 2025, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=5375794](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5375794).

**The college income premium—the extra income a degree-holding family earns over an otherwise similar family without one—remains positive across all birth cohorts, but has declined for recent graduates. The college wealth premium has declined far more sharply: among white families headed by someone born in the 1980s, the wealth premium for a bachelor's degree is at a historic low, and among families of any other race or ethnicity in the same cohort, it is statistically indistinguishable from zero.**

- Source: William R. Emmons, Ana Hernández Kent, and Lowell R. Ricketts, "Is College Still Worth It? The New Calculus of Falling Returns," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 101, no. 4, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.101.297-329>.

**After more than doubling during the late 20th century, the college wage premium has declined by approximately 10% since 2000. Job-finding rates among young college graduates (ages 22–27) have been falling steadily since the 1990s, and the unemployment rate gap between young college and high school graduates had narrowed to just 2.5 percentage points as of July 2025.**

- Source: Alexander Cline and Barış Kaymak, "Demand for College Labor in the 21st Century," Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, Economic Commentary 2025-04, March 31, 2025, <https://www.clevelandfed.org/publications/economic-commentary/2025/ec-202504-college-labor-demand-21st-century>.

**Rising long-term unemployment among college graduates reflects cyclical economic contraction and AI-driven disruption of entry-level white-collar work, not a structural collapse in the value of the degree. The U.S. has seen a recurring pattern dating to the 1970s in which economic downturns produce headlines declaring degrees worthless, only for the wage premium to reassert itself—as it did for the class of 2010, who entered the workforce amid the Great Recession and saw their premium climb back to near-record levels within a decade. Misreading cyclical pain as permanent decline has real consequences, including declining public confidence in higher education and young people absorbing**

**the message that college isn't worth it and choosing to forgo it—fueling a cycle that benefits no one in an economy projected to face severe shortages of degree-holding workers.**

- Source: Nate Weisberg, "No, College Degrees Aren't Losing Their Value," *Washington Monthly*, November 2, 2025, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2025/11/02/no-college-degrees-arent-losing-their-value/>.

**Among more than 340,000 Illinois high school seniors from the classes of 2008–2012 followed into their early 30s, pathways to higher-earning careers were concentrated in bachelor's degree programs and above. Educational attainment remained a strong predictor of future earnings, but so did family income: students from higher-income backgrounds earned more than lower-income peers even when holding the same degree level, in part because they were more likely to attend institutions with stronger internship opportunities, advising, and professional networks.**

- Source: Sarah Cashdollar, Meg Bates, Jenny Nagaoka, Erin Mitchell, and Caitlin Clinton, *Precarious Prospects: Education Pays, Yet Socioeconomic Disparities Persist in Illinois Students' Later Earnings*, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative, Discovery Partners Institute, University of Illinois and UChicago Consortium on School Research, July 2025, [https://dpi.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Precarious-Prospects\\_final\\_2025.07.09.pdf](https://dpi.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Precarious-Prospects_final_2025.07.09.pdf).

**Students at the margin of admission to public universities see substantial returns. The typical marginally admitted student is 12 percentage points more likely to earn a bachelor's degree and eventually earns roughly 8% more than barely rejected counterparts, with rates of return of 26% for students and 16% for society. Effects are largest for students who would fall out of the four-year sector entirely if rejected.**

- Source: Jack Mountjoy, "Marginal Returns to Public Universities," BFI Working Paper 2024-35 / National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 32296, March 2024 (revised December 2025), [https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/BFI\\_WP\\_2024-35-1.pdf](https://bfi.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/BFI_WP_2024-35-1.pdf).

**The correlation between a state's educational attainment and its economic output is striking: the eight states with the highest per capita income all rank in the top 20 in the share of working-age adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, and the nine states with the lowest per capita income all rank in the bottom 20. Per capita income in Massachusetts is nearly double that of Mississippi, mirroring the gap in bachelor's degree attainment rates (49.6% vs. 25.7%).**

- Source: Patrick Cooney, "Yes, College Matters," States Forum, 2025, <https://www.statesforum.org/yes-college-matters/>.

In Utah—the state with the third-highest postsecondary attainment rate—the public higher education system contributes an estimated \$12.1 billion in GDP to the state economy and supports roughly 132,000 jobs, or 5.5% of jobs statewide. Every \$1 the state invests in public higher education returns an estimated \$3 in tax revenues from increased wages of graduates. Within the state, median earnings for bachelor's degree holders (\$63,000) are 54% higher than for high school graduates (\$41,000), while bachelor's degree holders experience less than half the unemployment rate (1.7% vs. 3.5%) and less than half the poverty rate (3.9% vs. 9.8%). Utah ranks first among states on the innovation index, first in social capital, second in the share of households in the middle class, and has the lowest income inequality of any state.

- Source: Andrea Thomas Brandley, *The Benefits of Higher Education to Utah* (Salt Lake City: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, University of Utah, February 2025, <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HigherEd-PB-Feb2025-Final.pdf>).

**Of 10 simulated pathway changes that could increase the share of young adults in good jobs by age 30, the most effective focus on supporting progress toward a bachelor's degree. Enrolling 4.8 million academically prepared but non-college-bound young adults in bachelor's programs could put 765,000 more youth in good jobs; layering enrollment with completion could put 1.2 million more in good jobs—a nearly 60% increase. Among the 3.6 million who start but don't finish a bachelor's degree, ensuring completion could add 573,000 to good jobs, and among the 3.4 million who enter certificate or associate's degree programs, transferring to complete a bachelor's degree could help put an additional 479,000 young people in good jobs. The effectiveness of all 10 pathway changes varies by race, gender, and class, and making interventions equally available without intentionally supporting the young people who are furthest from opportunity would likely widen rather than narrow equity gaps.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, Zack Mabel, Kathryn Peltier Campbell, and Heidi Booth, *What Works: Ten Education, Training, and Work-Based Pathway Changes That Lead to Good Jobs*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/pathway-changes/>.

## **Educational attainment does not close racial wealth gaps.**

**Household wealth increases with educational attainment across all races and ethnicities, but racial wealth gaps persist at every level of education. Black and Latine households with bachelor's degrees have less wealth than white households in which the highest level of education is a high school diploma.**

- Source: Ana Hernández Kent and Lowell R. Ricketts, "Wealth Gaps between White, Black and Hispanic Families in 2019," *On the Economy Blog*, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, January 5, 2021, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2021/january/wealth-gaps-white-black-hispanic-families-2019>.

**The college wealth premium has eroded by generation and race. Among white families headed by someone born in the 1980s, the wealth premium for a bachelor's degree is at a historic low; among families of any other race or ethnicity in the same cohort, and among postgraduates of any race, the wealth premium is statistically indistinguishable from zero.**

- Source: William R. Emmons, Ana Hernández Kent, and Lowell R. Ricketts, "Is College Still Worth It? The New Calculus of Falling Returns," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 101:4, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.20955/r.101.297-329>.

## **Bachelor's degrees are associated with better health, longer life expectancy, and greater well-being.**

**Young college graduates are healthier than their peers, even after controlling for economic and social factors that influence college attendance.**

- Source: Elizabeth M. Lawrence, "Why Do College Graduates Behave More Healthfully than Those Who Are Less Educated?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 58:3, 291–306, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5570614/>.

**By 2021, bachelor's degree holders had a life expectancy of approximately 83 years, compared to roughly 75 for those without a degree—a gap of 8.5 years that has more than tripled from 2.5 years in**

**1992. Deaths of despair—suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholic liver disease—were the leading driver of the widening gap, but the divide also grew for most other major causes of death.**

- Source: Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Accounting for the widening mortality gap between American adults with and without a BA*, Brookings Institution, September 27, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/accounting-for-the-widening-mortality-gap-between-american-adults-with-and-without-a-ba/>. See also: Anne Case and Angus Deaton, "Without a College Degree, Life in America Is Staggeringly Shorter," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/03/opinion/life-expectancy-college-degree.html>.

**The life expectancy gap between the most and least educated Americans grew from 8 years in 2000 to nearly 11 years by 2019; college graduates reached the age of 84 (equivalent to 4th globally), while those without a high school diploma remained at 74 years (137th globally). A degree also serves as a partial buffer against geographic disadvantage, with life expectancy varying far less across counties for college graduates than for those with lower levels of educational attainment.**

- Source: Laura Dwyer-Lindgren et al., "Life expectancy by county and educational attainment in the USA, 2000–19: an observational analysis" *The Lancet Public Health* 10(2) (February 2025), [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(24\)00303-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(24)00303-7/fulltext).

**The more educated workers are, the more job satisfaction they experience.**

- Source: Cristina Pita and Ramón J. Torregrosa, "The Education-Job Satisfaction Paradox in the Public Sector," *Public Organization Review* 23 (2023): 1717–1735, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-023-00726-0>.

**Workers with bachelor's degrees are more likely to struggle with job demands such as long hours and intensity, but they also enjoy more varied tasks and greater autonomy. Both align closely with young people's desire for flexibility and meaning in their careers.**

- Source: Brittany C. Solomon, Boris N. Nikolaev, and Dean A. Shepherd, "Does Educational Attainment Promote Job Satisfaction? The Bittersweet Trade-Offs Between Job Resources, Demands, and Stress," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 107:7 (2022), 1227–1241, <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000904>.

**College completion reduced the likelihood of depressive symptoms, binge drinking, prescription drug misuse, and hard drug use among a longitudinal sample of over 6,000 adults tracked from adolescence into their late 30s. The protective effects were strongest for individuals who were least likely to have completed college based on childhood disadvantage—consistent with a "resource substitution" model in which a degree compensates for the absence of family wealth, social connections, and other buffers against despair.**

- Source: Grzegorz Bulczak, Alexi Gugushvili, and Jonathan Koltai, "The Heterogeneous Effects of College Education on Outcomes Related to Deaths of Despair," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 66, no. 3 (2025): 357–378, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00221465241291845>.

**College graduates are concentrated in occupations ranked highest for "intrinsic quality"—jobs involving less physical labor, more autonomy, and more abstract tasks—while workers without degrees cluster in lower-ranked occupations. Even college graduates who earn roughly the same as workers with only some college are far more likely to hold jobs with better nonmonetary amenities, suggesting that degrees yield quality-of-work benefits that earnings data alone do not capture.**

- Source: Oksana Leukhina and Amy Smaldone, "How Nonmonetary Job Amenities Improve with Higher Education," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, *On the Economy Blog*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2024/may/how-nonmonetary-job-amenities-improve-higher-education>.

**Beyond economic security, bachelor's degrees are associated with improved health, longer life expectancy, greater job satisfaction, and more happiness.**

- Source: Philip Oreopoulos and Kjell G. Salvanes, "Priceless: The Nonpecuniary Benefits of Schooling," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25:1, Winter 2011, 159–184, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.25.1.159>.

**Some data suggests that more educational attainment leads to greater happiness. This holds true across racial groups, though Black college graduates do not benefit as much as their white peers do.**

- Source: Shervin Assari, "Race, Education Attainment, and Happiness in the United States," *International Journal of Epidemiologic Research* 6:2 (2019), 76–82, <https://ehsj.skums.ac.ir/Article/IJER-1812-1255>.

**Eighty-seven percent of adults with at least a bachelor's degree report doing okay or living comfortably financially, compared with 64% of high school diploma holders and 47% of those with less than a high school diploma. Bachelor's degree holders also reported substantially greater financial resilience: 74% had at least three months' emergency savings, compared with 41% for high school diploma holders.**

- Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2024* (Washington, DC: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, May 2025), <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2024-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202505.pdf>.

**Educational attainment strengthens democracy, civic engagement, and state and local economies.**

**Adults' involvement in political life and in their communities increases with educational attainment; the correlation encompasses higher rates of voter participation, engagement with public officials, volunteerism, donations to charity, and participation in community and civic associations. Gen Z has an especially positive view of the power of education to strengthen society, with just over two-thirds of those between ages 18 and 29 saying education results in increased compassion for and tolerance of others, and over three-quarters seeing a correlation between more education and greater concern about the environment.**

- Source: Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, *Education for What?*, Gallup, 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Education.for.What.pdf>.

**Adults in Utah who completed a degree or certificate vote in state elections at more than double the rate of non-completers (53% vs. 25%) and volunteer in their communities at nearly double the rate (78% vs. 46%). Utah, which has the country's third-highest degree attainment rate, ranks first among all states in both formal volunteering and informal helping (exchanging favors with neighbors), and first in social capital. Degree completers also report being happier (79% vs. 63%), healthier (75% vs. 57%), and more confident in future career success (84% vs. 63%) than non-completers.**

- Source: Andrea Thomas Brandley, *The Benefits of Higher Education to Utah*, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, University of Utah, February 2025, <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HigherEd-PB-Feb2025-Final.pdf>; See also: "Report Suggests Higher Education Fuels Utah's Economy, Workforce and Civic Engagement," *Cache Valley Daily*, March 10, 2025, [https://www.cachevalleydaily.com/news/report-suggests-higher-education-fuels-utah-s-economy-workforce-and-civic-engagement/article\\_c4e06ba2-fe93-11ef-9bef-874b45038131.html](https://www.cachevalleydaily.com/news/report-suggests-higher-education-fuels-utah-s-economy-workforce-and-civic-engagement/article_c4e06ba2-fe93-11ef-9bef-874b45038131.html).

**College graduates are dramatically overrepresented among consistent voters and underrepresented among nonvoters. In 2024, adults with a college degree made up 41% of all voters but only 22% of nonvoters; adults with a high school education or less made up 28% of voters but 48% of nonvoters. Over the three most recent national elections (2020, 2022, and 2024), 54% of college graduates voted in all three, compared with 35% of those without a degree. Just 41% of all eligible adults voted in all three elections, while 26% sat out all of them—underscoring how much of the electorate's composition is shaped by educational attainment.**

- Source: Hannah Hartig, Scott Keeter, Andrew Daniller, and Ted Van Green, "Behind Trump's 2024 Victory, a More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition," Pew Research Center, June 26, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/06/26/voter-turnout-2020-2024/>. See also: American Council on Education, "The Economic Impact of Higher Education in America," <https://www.acenet.edu/Policy-Advocacy/Pages/National-Engagement/Economic-Impact-Higher-Ed.aspx>.

**There is an inverse relationship between educational attainment and preferences for authoritarianism, with each successive level of postsecondary education—from some college to associate's degrees to bachelor's degrees—leading to a decrease in the inclination to voice support for political authoritarianism or a lack of support for democracy.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale et al., *The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2020, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/authoritarianism/>.

**Standard metrics for evaluating community colleges—completion rates, earnings, selectivity—systematically undervalue open-access institutions because they ignore the broader community contributions these colleges make. A Lumina-funded Urban Institute pilot with seven community colleges identified three dimensions of value that go unmeasured: economic development (creating local talent pipelines, reducing community reliance on public assistance), health and well-being (combating social isolation, addressing community health crises like diabetes prevalence in tribal communities), and civic life and resilience (reducing crime through justice-reentry programs, building shared infrastructure like transit). By highlighting community-based rather than individual-return measures, the project aims to help open-access colleges—which serve disproportionately students of color and Pell-eligible populations—secure sustained public investment on a fairer playing field.**

- Source: Ryan Kelsey, Shayne Spaulding, and Jincy Wilson, *Colleges Contributing Value to Communities: Piloting a Framework for Action*, Urban Institute, July 2025, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/colleges-contributing-value-communities>; See also: Full report: <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/Colleges%20Contributing%20Value%20to%20Communities.pdf>.

## The implications of AI for bachelor's degree value remain uncertain, with rigorous research pointing in multiple directions.

High-frequency payroll data covering millions of U.S. workers shows a 13% relative decline in employment for early-career workers (ages 22–25) in the most AI-exposed occupations since late 2022; employment for software developers aged 22–25 declined by nearly 20%. A January 2026 update found the relationship strengthened to approximately 16% by October 2025, though not all of the decline can be attributed to AI. Under the most stringent controls, the AI-related employment decline becomes statistically significant only starting in 2024, suggesting earlier declines were partly driven by other factors—but once the decline begins, it is growing and has shown no reversal.

- Source: Erik Brynjolfsson, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen, *Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence*, Stanford Digital Economy Lab Working Paper, August 2025 (revised November 2025), <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publications/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/> and Erik Brynjolfsson, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen, "Canaries, Interest Rates, and Timing: More on the Recent Drivers of Employment Changes for Young Workers," Stanford Digital Economy Lab, February 9, 2026, <https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/news/canaries-interest-rates-and-timing-a-more-on-recent-drivers-of-employment-changes-for-young-workers/>.

Layoff rates for young college graduates have nearly doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels, and entry-level postings in high-AI-exposure occupations fell sharply from 2022 to 2025. Over 52% of the Class of 2023 worked in a job that did not require a bachelor's degree one year after graduation, and the unemployment gap between young degree holders and their less-credentialed peers has narrowed to its smallest in 30 years.

- Source: Gad Levanon, Matt Sigelman, Mariano Mamertino, Mitchel de Zeeuw, and Gwynn Guilford, *No Country for Young Grads: The Structural Forces That Are Reshaping Entry-Level Work*, Burning Glass Institute, July 2025, <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/no-country-for-young-grads>.

AI may produce only a modest increase in U.S. GDP of 1.1–1.6% over the next decade, with a roughly 0.05% annual gain in productivity—far below predictions that AI will double growth. About 20% of U.S. job tasks may be exposed to AI capabilities, but AI most directly affects only about 5% of the economy.

- Source: Peter Dizikes, "Daron Acemoglu: What Do We Know About the Economics of AI?" *MIT News*, December 6, 2024, <https://economics.mit.edu/news/daron-acemoglu-what-do-we-know-about-economics-ai>.

In the 33 months since ChatGPT's launch, the percentage of workers in occupations with high, medium, and low AI "exposure" has remained remarkably steady, and changes in the occupational mix are only slightly faster than in previous tech shifts (PCs in the 1980s, the internet in the late 1990s). There is no pattern of increasing AI exposure among the unemployed, though a recent divergence in the job mix of recent versus older college graduates could reflect early AI effects.

- Source: Martha Gimbel, Molly Kinder, Joshua Kendall, and Maddie Lee, *Evaluating the Impact of AI on the Labor Market: Current State of Affairs*, The Budget Lab at Yale and Brookings Institution, October 1, 2025, <https://budgetlab.yale.edu/research/evaluating-impact-ai-labor-market-current-state-affairs>; See also: Molly Kinder, Martha Gimbel, Joshua Kendall, and Maddie Lee, "New Data Show No AI Jobs Apocalypse—For Now," Brookings Institution, October 1, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-data-show-no-ai-jobs-apocalypse-for-now/>.

**The unemployment rate for recent college graduates (ages 22–27) reached 5.8% in March 2025—the highest since October 2013 excluding pandemic months—and the underemployment rate rose to 42.5%, its highest since 2020. The gap between recent graduates' unemployment and the rate for all young workers has narrowed from 3.4 percentage points (10-year average) to just 1.1 points, and outcomes vary dramatically by major: computer science (6.1%) and computer engineering (7.5%) now rival fine arts (7.0%) and anthropology (9.4%).**

- Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, "The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates: Unemployment," <https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market#--:explore:unemployment>.

**As white-collar hiring has slowed, 26% of companies now recruit exclusively from a shortlist of schools (up from 17% in 2022), and diversity as a priority in school selection dropped from nearly 60% to 31% over the same period. AI-generated resumes have flooded the market, making traditional signals like institutional prestige and GPAs more valuable as screening mechanisms.**

- Source: "Elite Colleges Are Back at the Top of the List for Company Recruiters," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/lifestyle/careers/elite-colleges-are-back-at-the-top-of-the-list-for-company-recruiters-ad9526ac>.

**AI is simultaneously automating and augmenting the same roles rather than sorting jobs neatly into "replaced" or "enhanced" categories. Skills exposed to automation were 16% more likely to see demand decline than baseline skills, while augmentation-exposed skills were 7% more likely to see demand increase, a divergence that is statistically significant but represents gradual adjustment, not collapse. The jobs experiencing the most automation are simultaneously experiencing the most augmentation: AI is not eliminating roles like project management, but instead transforming the day-to-day skill mix within them. These effects are detectable just a few years into widespread AI adoption, but it is far too early to draw conclusions about AI's long-term impact on employment. The most urgent question is not whether AI will take jobs but how quickly the jobs it touches will change—and whether workers and institutions can adapt.**

- Source: Matt Sigelman, Benjamin Francis, Shrinidhi Rao and Gwynn Guilford, *Beyond the Binary: How Automation and Augmentation Are Combining to Reshape Work*, Burning Glass Institute, January 2026, <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/beyondthebinary>.

**As AI automates routine cognitive tasks, uniquely human capabilities become increasingly valuable: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, empathy, ethical reasoning, and the ability to navigate ambiguity. These competencies are central to higher education, particularly liberal arts curricula.**

- Source: Daniela Dumitru and Diane F. Halpern, "Critical Thinking: Creating Job-Proof Skills for the Future of Work," *Journal of Intelligence* 11:10 (2023), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10607682>.

**Anthropic co-founder Daniela Amodei has said that the number of jobs AI can do entirely without humans is "vanishingly small," and that Anthropic looks for "great communicators, who have excellent EQ and people skills, who are kind and compassionate and curious." She argued that studying the humanities will be "more important than ever" in the AI era.**

- Source: Jason Ma, "Anthropic Cofounder Says Studying the Humanities Will Be 'More Important Than Ever' and Reveals What the AI Company Looks for When Hiring," *Fortune*, February 7, 2026, <https://fortune.com/2026/02/07/anthropic-cofounder-daniela-amodei-humanities-majors-soft-skills-hiring-ai-stem/>.

**When automation risk is estimated based only on an occupation's main task, 38% of U.S. jobs appear at risk, but when the full scope of tasks within each occupation is accounted for, only 9% face elimination. AI literacy—the judgment to determine when and how to use AI tools effectively—will be the critical skill graduates need.**

- Source: Jeff Strohl, "Crossing the Great AI Divide," *CEW Blog*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, December 11, 2025, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/resource/cew-blog-crossing-great-divide/>.

**Affordability is a real challenge, but bachelor's degrees still pay off for those who complete them.**

**The cost of attending a 4-year institution has nearly tripled over the last three decades, creating a major affordability issue that could shut out many young people from lower- and middle-income families. However, the net price that students actually pay, factoring in financial aid, has been declining in recent years.**

- Source: Phillip Levine, "College Prices Aren't Skyrocketing—But They're Still Too High for Some," Brookings Institution, April 24, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/college-prices-arent-skyrocketing-but-theyre-still-too-high-for-some/>.

**Average annual out-of-pocket costs for bachelor's degree programs are lower than those for certificate programs for students from families earning less than \$75,000 a year. The average cost of a bachelor's degree from a public university is less than the average cost of an associate's degree or certificate from a private or for-profit institution.**

- Source: Michael Itzkowitz, *Understanding College Affordability*, The HEA Group, 2024, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23d052553e6f98a10b1e/1722622928927/CarnegieFoundation\\_ResearchPaper\\_CollegeAffordability\\_71924\\_1.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23d052553e6f98a10b1e/1722622928927/CarnegieFoundation_ResearchPaper_CollegeAffordability_71924_1.pdf).

**After adjusting for inflation, average published tuition and fees peaked in 2019–20 and have since increased at a rate less than inflation. Over the last decade, published tuition declined at public institutions of higher education. Net tuition at public four-year institutions peaked at \$4,450 (in 2025 dollars) in 2012–13 and declined to an estimated \$2,300 by 2025–26; community college students have generally received enough grant aid to cover tuition and fees since 2009–10. Undergraduate annual borrowing declined for 13 consecutive years before a small 1.2% increase in 2024–25.**

- Source: Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meghan Oster, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2024*, College Board, October 2024, <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing/highlights>.

**While the sticker price of college rose \$13,717 in real terms between 1989–90 and 2019–20, the net tuition students actually pay rose just \$4,526. For low-income students at public four-year colleges, net tuition has hovered around \$0 for three decades. However, this stability is largely because institutions captured increases in external financial aid—such as Pell Grants—rather than holding their own prices down.**

- Source: Preston Cooper, "Trends in Net College Tuition and Financial Aid, 1990–2020," American Enterprise Institute, March 2025, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/trends-in-net-college-tuition-and-financial-aid-1990-2020/>.

**Inflation-adjusted net tuition and fees at private nonprofit colleges fell approximately 12% over the past decade, while at public institutions the decline was roughly 40%. Only about a quarter of students at private nonprofits and two-fifths at public universities pay full sticker price. High sticker prices function primarily as a marketing signal and disproportionately deter low-income, first-generation, Black, and Latine students from applying.**

- Source: Rose Horowitz, "The Secret that Colleges Should Stop Keeping," *The Atlantic*, February 20, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/02/college-cheaper-sticker-price/681742/>.

**Ninety percent of Pell Grant recipients face unmet need (the gap between total college costs and available financial resources), with an average shortfall of \$9,800; students from the lowest-income families would need to contribute 148% of their household income to cover full-time four-year costs even after grant and scholarship aid. Black students face the highest average unmet need at approximately \$9,000, while white students on average have about \$300 of resources left over.**

- Source: Marián Vargas and Kim Dancy, "College Affordability Still Out of Reach for Students with Lowest Incomes, Students of Color," Institute for Higher Education Policy, August 16, 2023, <https://www.ihep.org/college-affordability-still-out-of-reach-for-students-with-lowest-incomes-students-of-color/>.

**Net tuition at public four-year institutions has been declining for a decade. Yet fewer than 10% of respondents to a Federal Reserve Bank of New York survey expected public-college tuition to fall, while nearly 48% expected increases—a sharp disconnect between actual and perceived costs.**

- Source: Dan Bauman, "The Cost of College Tuition Is Shrinking," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-cost-of-college-tuition-is-shrinking>. See also: Lexi Lonas Cochran, "The Cost of College Is Quietly Going Down," *The Hill*, October 29, 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/education/4957713-college-costs-tuition-student-debt-relief/>.

**Rising sticker prices and lack of knowledge about financial aid obscure the true net cost of college, discouraging potential students. Providing better information to potential students makes them more likely to attend college and more likely to attend stronger programs.**

- Source: Lisa Barrow, "Is College a Worthwhile Investment? Examining the Benefits and Challenges," *Chicago Fed Insights*, Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, February 2024, <https://www.chicagofed.org/publications/chicago-fed-insights/2024/policy-brief-is-college-a-worthwhile-investment>.

**Three-quarters of current undergraduate students do not take out any student loans.**

- Source: David Hummels, "Five Myths About the Economics of Higher Education," *Finding Equilibrium* (Substack), September 2025, <https://findingequilibriumfuturehighered.substack.com/p/five-myths-about-the-economics-of>.

**Since 2010, student borrowing has decreased for undergraduates at both two- and four-year institutions. Across all institution types, the average annual loan amount for a bachelor's degree student is \$8,320, compared to \$5,845 for a two-year college student—an annual difference of about \$2,500 that is substantially less than the annual earnings premium for a bachelor's degree.**

- Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Loans for Undergraduate Students and Debt for Bachelor's Degree Recipients," *Condition of Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, May 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cub>.

**Even after subtracting student loan payments from earnings, postsecondary degree completers earn substantially more than comparable non-completers. Loan payments account for roughly 23% of the gross earnings premium in the years following degree completion, but this burden declines over time and will eventually disappear entirely when loans are paid off. The debt burden varies significantly by degree level: student loans consume only 9% of the earnings premium for associate's degree holders and 19% for bachelor's degree holders, but 57% for master's degree holders. Returns also vary by race, with Latine students facing both the lowest gross earnings premium and the highest relative loan burden (34%), while the loan share for white (28%) and Black (21%) completers was lower.**

- Source: Guangli Zhang, Jason Jabbari, Mathieu Despard, Xueying Mei, Yung Chun, and Stephen Roll, *Beyond Earnings Premia: Debt-Adjusted Returns to Postsecondary Education*, SSRN Working Paper, August 2025, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=5375794](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5375794).

**The typical bachelor's degree holder breaks even on their investment by age 26–27 and gains more than \$1 million in additional lifetime earnings. The median worker with a bachelor's degree earns two to three times more than a worker with only a high school diploma, and this ratio has risen since 2000. Inflation-adjusted net college costs have been largely flat since the Great Recession and falling in recent years, though costs remain too high for many low-income students.**

- Source: Dick Startz, "What College Affordability Debates Get Wrong on the Returns to College," Brookings Institution, December 16, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-college-affordability-debates-get-wrong-on-the-returns-to-college/>.

**43 million Americans owe a total of \$1.75 trillion on their student loans, and more than one in 10 borrowers is delinquent in repaying that debt. However, debt has grown 358% more than tuition costs since 1980, suggesting other factors are in play, including decreased state funding for higher education.**

- Source: Melanie Hanson, "Student Loan Debt Crisis," EducationData.org, July 14, 2024, <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-crisis>.

**Almost half of undergraduates at public universities graduate without student loan debt, and for students who do borrow, the average debt at graduation is equivalent to \$6,850 per year of college, or a total of \$27,400.**

- Source: "What is the typical debt load for graduates of four-year public universities," Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, n.d., <https://www.aplu.org/our-work/4-policy-and-advocacy/publicvalues/student-debt/>.

**Nearly half of federal student loan funds go to borrowers in graduate school, not undergraduates. The debt loads in the hundreds of thousands of dollars that make headlines are often incurred by students attending expensive professional schools such as law or business school.**

- Source: Tomás Monarrez and Jordan Matsudaira, *Trends in Federal Student Loans for Graduate School*, U.S. Department of Education Office of the Chief Economist, 2023, [https://sites.ed.gov/ous/files/2023/08/OCE\\_GraduateDebtReport202308.pdf](https://sites.ed.gov/ous/files/2023/08/OCE_GraduateDebtReport202308.pdf).

**After controlling for school attended, the return on investment for the typical student increased by 3% between the 1996–97 and 2007–08 entering cohorts, even after adjusting for tuition increases. However, roughly 30% of students attend schools where ROI prospects diminished, and for-profit institutions cluster near a 1.4:1 earnings ratio with roughly 15% of students showing a negative return.**

- *Source:* Douglas Webber, "Decomposing Changes in Higher Education Return on Investment Over Time," *FEDS Notes*, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, July 13, 2022, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/decomposing-changes-in-higher-education-return-on-investment-over-time-20220713.html>.

**More than half of high school students say recent economic uncertainty has changed how they view higher education, prompting them to prioritize affordability and career readiness. Students and parents both anticipate that young people will graduate with roughly \$16,000–\$17,000 in loan debt, but with average annual costs at in-state public universities exceeding \$24,000, families financing half the cost with loans could actually graduate with nearly \$50,000 in debt.**

- *Source:* Fidelity Investments, *2025 College Savings & Student Debt Study*, August 2025; reported in Robert Farrington, "Fidelity Study Reveals Changing Views on Student Debt," *The College Investor*, August 14, 2025, <https://thecollegeinvestor.com/62665/fidelity-study-reveals-changing-views-on-student-debt/>.

**Between 2001 and 2017, public universities spent nearly \$32 billion of their own financial aid dollars on students who lacked financial need—roughly \$2 of every \$5 in institutional aid. Schools that directed 90% or more of their institutional aid to merit scholarships for affluent students met, on average, only 58% of the financial need of their aid recipients, compared with 70% at schools that prioritized need-based aid.**

- *Source:* Stephen Burd, "Crisis Point: How Enrollment Management and the Merit-Aid Arms Race Are Derailing Public Higher Education," *New America*, February 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/crisis-point-how-enrollment-management-and-merit-aid-arms-race-are-destroying-public-higher-education/>.

**Families reported spending an average of \$30,837 on college during the 2024–25 academic year—a 9% increase from the prior year and a return to pre-pandemic spending levels. Family income and savings covered nearly half of costs (48%), followed by scholarships and grants (27%) and borrowing (23%); 79% of families reported eliminating at least one school based on cost, yet 89% said college remains a worthwhile investment.**

- *Source:* Sallie Mae and Ipsos, *How America Pays for College 2025*, August 2025, [https://www.salliemae.com/content/dam/slm/writtencontent/Research/HAP\\_2025.pdf](https://www.salliemae.com/content/dam/slm/writtencontent/Research/HAP_2025.pdf).

**The federal Parent PLUS loan program allows parents to borrow the entire cost of attendance minus other aid with virtually no underwriting of their ability to repay; approximately 3.6 million parents carry \$107 billion in outstanding PLUS debt. The racial disparities are stark: about one-third of Black PLUS borrowers earn less than \$30,000 annually (compared to one in ten white borrowers). Forty-one universities steer low-income families into PLUS debt they cannot afford while simultaneously providing larger tuition discounts to wealthier students.**

- *Source:* Rachel Fishman, "How Universities Use Subprime Loans to Steer Low-Income Families into Debt," *New America*, 2018, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/parent-plus-subprime-loans-universities-debt/>.

## The consequences of starting, but not completing, a bachelor's degree can be severe.

The national six-year completion rate has held steady for four consecutive cohorts at 61.1%, with 29.8% having stopped out entirely; racial disparities persist, with 77% of Asian and 73% of white students graduating within six years compared to 52% of Hispanic and 45% of Black students. At every income level, students from more affluent neighborhoods had sharply higher completion rates. Students with prior dual enrollment completed at 71.1% within six years, compared to 57.2% without.

- Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Yearly Progress and Completion*, December 4, 2025, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>.

Only 51% of Pell Grant recipients at four-year institutions graduated within six years, compared to 65% of non-Pell students—an 18-percentage-point gap that widened to 21 points using eight-year data. Income remains a highly stable predictor of completion rates, with students from higher-income families completing at markedly higher rates in every cohort tracked.

- Source: Tariq Habash and Robert Shireman, "The Pell Divide: How Four-Year Institutions Are Failing to Graduate Low- and Moderate-Income Students," *Third Way*, May 2018, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/the-pell-divide-how-four-year-institutions-are-failing-to-graduate-low-and-moderate-income-students>.

In 2024, 30% of borrowers who completed some college, but not a bachelor's degree, reported being behind on student loan payments, compared with just 11% of borrowers who completed bachelor's degrees. The intergenerational education gap remains wide: 66% of adults with at least one parent holding a bachelor's degree obtained one themselves, compared with just 25% of adults whose parents did not.

- Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2024* (Washington, DC: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, May 2025), <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2024-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202505.pdf>.

Those who take out loans for a bachelor's degree and fail to complete it are 97% less likely than borrowers who completed their degrees to experience general financial well-being, 94% less likely to be homeowners, and 84% less likely to have \$400 in cash available in an emergency.

- Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2023* (Washington, DC: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, May 2024), <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2023-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202405.pdf>.

## Underemployment is a significant risk, and field of study matters.

According to the Burning Glass Institute and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, just over half of bachelor's degree holders are underemployed (i.e., in jobs not requiring their degree) a year after graduation, and three-quarters of them remain so 10 years later. Underemployed graduates earn 33% less than those in jobs that require degrees. Outcomes vary sharply by major: arts, humanities, psychology, and education majors see wage premiums of only 25–30% over high school graduates, while

accounting and engineering majors see premiums above 100%. Even underemployed bachelor's degree holders still earn more than those with lower levels of educational attainment, but the gap is modest: underemployed graduates earn only 25% more than high school graduates, compared to 88% for graduates in jobs that require degrees.

- Source: Andrew Hanson, Carlo Salerno, Matt Sigelman, Mels de Zeeuw, and Stephen Moret, *Talent Disrupted: College Graduates, Underemployment, and the Way Forward*, Burning Glass Institute and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, 2024, <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/research/underemployment>.

A lack of consensus about how to measure underemployment is a significant challenge that runs the risk of overstating the scope of the problem. Published estimates of underemployment among bachelor's degree holders range from 25% to 52% depending on methodology. Using BLS entry-level education assignments alone—the basis for many widely cited figures—yields an underemployment rate of 37% for prime-age (25–54) full-time, full-year workers and 43% for recent graduates (ages 22–23). However, two adjustments lower these estimates substantially: a "realized matches" approach that classifies occupations by the actual educational attainment of their workers produces rates of 24–32%, and layering a bachelor's degree earnings premium onto the BLS assignments—reflecting the 38% median earnings premium that bachelor's degree holders receive over high school graduates even in occupations classified as "high school level"—reduces the rate to 22% for prime-age workers and 25% for recent graduates.

- Source: Jeff Strohl, Catherine Morris, Artem Gulish, and Matthew Martinez, *Rethinking Underemployment: Are College Graduates Using Their Degrees?* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, February 2026, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/measuring-underemployment/>.

Prime-age workers (ages 25–54) with a bachelor's degree earn \$81,000 at the median—70% more than workers with only a high school diploma—but earnings vary sharply by major, from \$58,000 in education and public service fields to \$98,000 in STEM. Recent graduates with degrees in computers, statistics, and mathematics face the highest unemployment rate within STEM, despite earning \$79,000 at the median, while graduates with degrees in fields like petroleum engineering earn \$146,000. Workers with a graduate degree earn 29% more than those with a bachelor's alone, though the graduate premium varies widely.

- Source: Catherine Morris, Ban Cheah, and Jeff Strohl, *The Major Payoff: Evaluating Earnings and Employment Outcomes Across Bachelor's Degrees*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, October 2025, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/major-payoff>.

About 44% of postsecondary institutions had graduates earning at least a \$10,000 premium over workers with only a high school education—and those were disproportionately institutions awarding bachelor's degrees. Institutions offering only certificates were the least likely to provide an earnings premium over high school.

- Source: Elyse Ashburn, "New Research Adds to the Complex Story on College ROI," *Work Shift*, February 22, 2024, <https://workshift.org/new-research-adds-to-the-complex-story-on-college-roi/>.

Under a proposed federal earnings test, only 804 out of 32,578 associate and bachelor's degree programs (~2%) fail to demonstrate that a majority of their graduates earn more than a typical high school graduate within four years of completing their credential—affecting 40,693 out of 2,537,760 total students. By contrast, 1,659 out of 5,723 undergraduate certificate programs (29%) fail the same benchmark, meaning the majority of their completers earn less than someone with no college

**experience. An additional 4,441 associate and bachelor's degree programs (~14%) perform exceptionally well, with graduates earning at least \$50,000 more than typical high school graduates.**

- Source: Michael Itzkowitz, "New Earnings Test Data: Only 2% of College Degree Programs at Risk," The HEA Group, January 9, 2026, <https://www.theheagroup.com/blog/earnings-test-data>.

**In 2025, the U.S. Department of Education tagged 1,365 postsecondary institutions—roughly one-quarter of all colleges—with "lower earnings" warnings during the FAFSA process because their graduates earn less than high school graduates four years after completing their programs. For-profit institutions were heavily overrepresented among those flagged.**

- Source: Eric Kelderman, "Nearly One-Fourth of Colleges Will Come With a Warning When Students Apply for Financial Aid," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 8, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/the-trump-agenda/nearly-one-fourth-of-colleges-will-come-with-a-warning-when-students-apply-for-financial-aid>.

**A bachelor's degree yields a median internal rate of return of roughly 10% for women and 9% for men—comparable to long-run stock market returns. But the spread across fields is significant: engineering and computer science majors exceed 13% (and approach 19% for women in engineering), while education and humanities/arts majors fall below 8%—and as low as roughly 5% for men in those fields. Even within the same major, graduates who land in lower-paying jobs see markedly worse returns on their investment, with returns substantially higher at the top of the earnings distribution than at the bottom.**

- Source: Liang Zhang, Xiangmin Liu, and Yitong Hu, "Degrees of Return: Estimating Internal Rates of Return for College Majors Using Quantile Regression," *American Educational Research Journal* 61(3) (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312241231512>.

**Among 127 college graduates in the United States and Spain facing employment precarity or economic instability, most described themselves as "stalled" or "stuck"—a state of "expectational liminality" arising from the gap between what graduates expected a degree to deliver and what they actually experienced. Three culturally powerful narratives—promising professional and financial success, rapid life-course progression, and internal transformation—shape graduates' high expectations and intensify their sense of liminality when those expectations go unmet.**

- Source: Elena Ayala-Hurtado, "The Expectational Liminality of Insecure College Graduates," *Sociology of Education* 98, no. 1, 2025, 27–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380407241296851>. See also: Elena Ayala-Hurtado, "After College for All: The Expectations of Struggling College Graduates," *Contexts*, April 1, 2025, <https://contexts.org/blog/after-cfa/>.

**Public confidence in higher education has been declining, but the picture is more nuanced than the headlines suggest.**

**Confidence in higher education dropped from 57% to 36% between 2015 and 2023. Yet in 2019, 88% of respondents still considered a college education very or fairly important, and substantial majorities favored using public dollars to reduce costs—though nearly three-quarters did not think higher education was affordable.**

- Source: "Education," Gallup, n.d., <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx>.

**Americans split into roughly equal thirds regarding confidence in higher education: 36% have high confidence, 32% have some, and 32% have very little or none—a historic low, down from 57% in 2015. Among those lacking confidence, the top reasons cited are that colleges push political agendas, don't teach relevant skills, and are overly expensive.**

- Source: "Confidence in Higher Education Closely Divided," Gallup and Lumina Foundation, July 8, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx>.

**Confidence in higher education rose for the first time in a decade in 2025, with 42% expressing high confidence—up six points from the historic lows of 2023 and 2024. The increase was broad-based: Democrats rose to 66%, independents to 40%, and Republicans to 26%, with confidence in two-year colleges (56%) outpacing four-year institutions (44%). Despite this rebound, confidence remains far below the 57% measured when Gallup first tracked the question in 2015.**

- Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low," Gallup and Lumina Foundation, July 16, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>.

**A September 2025 Vanderbilt University poll found 47% of Americans express high confidence in higher education—a 13-point rebound from 2023 and higher than confidence in the police (44%), the medical system (38%), or large tech companies (25%). 78% say college is "very" or "somewhat" important for success, including 87% of Democrats and 68% of Republicans. However, 65% of MAGA-identified Republicans say colleges are having a negative effect on the country, and the public views different institution types very differently: 70% approve of community colleges versus 48% for Ivy League schools.**

- Source: Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy, "Vanderbilt Unity Poll: Confidence in Higher Education Rebounds," September 24, 2025, <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2025/09/24/vanderbilt-unity-poll-confidence-in-higher-education-rebounds-though-affordability-and-political-bias-are-still-concerns/>; See also: "Confidence in College Grew Among GOP and Democrats, Less So with MAGA Hardliners," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2025/09/24/college-confidence-poll-politics-higher-education/>.

**Among nearly 14,000 U.S. adults aged 18–59 without college degrees, 70% rated a bachelor's degree as "extremely" or "very" valuable—compared with 55% who said the same about an associate degree. Only 18% believed four-year colleges charge a fair price, yet 58% of respondents expected college to pay off financially within five years of graduation, and nearly 90% within ten.**

- Source: Lumina Foundation and Gallup, *State of Higher Education 2025*, based on a survey of 13,933 U.S. adults conducted October 2–31, 2024, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>; See also: Elissa Nadworny, "Americans Without a Degree Still Believe in the Value of College, a New Poll Says," NPR, April 9, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/09/nx-s1-5342479/survey-college-degree-associate-bachelors>.

**56% of respondents in a 2023 WSJ-NORC poll agreed that college is "not worth the cost because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off." About half of adults in the U.S. report that money affected their ability to pursue higher education.**

- Source: Douglas Belkin, "Americans Are Losing Faith in College Education, WSJ-NORC Poll Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a8336ce1>.

**Confidence in higher education has dropped by 37 percentage points among Republicans, compared to 16 points for independents and nine points for Democrats. The partisan divide suggests that concerns about ideological bias are responsible for some of the decline.**

- *Source:* Brent Orrell and David Veldran, "The Value of a Bachelor's Degree," American Enterprise Institute, January 29, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-value-of-a-bachelors-degree/>.

**Nearly four in five Americans—representing large majorities of both those with and those without degrees—agree that completing additional education after high school enhances an individual's well-being. They identified reducing the cost of college as the most important step policymakers could take to increase the value of higher education.**

- *Source:* Morning Consult and Lumina Foundation, "Infographic: Americans See the Value of College," Lumina Foundation, July 14, 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/infographic-americans-see-the-value-of-college/>.

**The public's concerns about the value of higher education have been fueled by factors such as rising college costs, perceptions of ideological bias, and the growing availability of faster, cheaper credentialing options.**

- *Source:* Scott Carlson, "What's Really Behind the View That Higher Education Isn't Worth It?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 6, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/whats-really-behind-the-view-that-higher-ed-isnt-worth-it>.

**70% of Americans say higher education is headed in the wrong direction—up from 56% in 2020—and 79% say colleges do a fair or poor job keeping tuition affordable. 55% give fair or poor marks on preparing students for well-paying jobs. The partisan gap has narrowed as negativity has grown in both parties: 77% of Republicans and 65% of Democrats now say the system is on the wrong track, both up at least 10 points since 2020.**

- *Source:* Kim Parker, "Growing Share of Americans Say the U.S. Higher Education System Is Headed in the Wrong Direction," Pew Research Center, October 15, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/15/growing-share-of-americans-say-the-us-higher-education-system-is-headed-in-the-wrong-direction/>.

**As the share of Americans expressing high confidence in higher education dropped from a majority to roughly a third, the U.S. has become an international outlier on college attainment. Overall, OECD countries increased college-degree attainment among young adults by more than 20 percentage points since 2000, and 11 now have better-educated labor forces than America. U.S. enrollment has fallen 8% since 2016 while Britain's rose 12% over the same period.**

- *Source:* Paul Tough, "Americans Are Losing Faith in the Value of College. Whose Fault Is That?," *New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html>.

**Public polling parallels the ways that views of—and experience with—higher education are increasingly shaping partisan politics in the U.S. In the 2000 presidential election, Gore and Bush split the 100 most-educated counties evenly; by 2024, Democrats won roughly four out of five. Rural counties with low bachelor's degree attainment have shifted dramatically toward Republicans, though the 2024 election showed Democratic margins in college-town counties plateauing or slightly declining.**

- Source: Scott Smallwood, "Three Counties That Tell the Story of America's Education Divide," *Open Campus*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.opencampus.org/2024/11/08/three-counties-that-tell-the-story-of-americas-education-divide/>.

**Eighty-three percent of Gen Z (ages 12–26) believes a college education is very or fairly important, with Black (87%) and Latine (85%) young people slightly more likely than white (81%) peers to agree. However, only 53% of Gen Z agreed they could afford college, with Black young people substantially less likely to think so.**

- Source: Tara P. Nicola, "Majority of Gen Z Consider College Education Important," Gallup, September 14, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/509906/majority-gen-consider-college-education-important.aspx>.

**A majority of recent community college students agree that college was worth the cost, with just over half of those who now earn \$48,000 or under agreeing, and about three-quarters of those earning more than \$48,000 saying it was worth it.**

- Source: Strada Education Foundation, *The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes* (Indianapolis, IN: Strada Education Foundation, September 2023), <https://www.strada.org/reports/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes/>.

**In a national survey of nearly 5,000 high school juniors and seniors and 18-to-30-year-olds who never enrolled or didn't complete college, both groups viewed higher education primarily through a cost-benefit lens—and both found shorter, cheaper, employment-linked credentials more appealing. Just 51% of non-enrollees and 58% of high schoolers agreed that "a good job requires a college degree," while 65% and 69% agreed that "a good job requires a certification as proof of someone's skills."**

- Source: HCM Strategists and Edge Research, "Student Perceptions of American Higher Education," Gates Foundation, March 2024, <https://usprogram.gatesfoundation.org/news-and-insights/articles/student-perceptions-of-american-higher-education>.

**Polling responses can reflect a lack of information about the economic returns to bachelor's degrees. Seventy-five percent of respondents underestimate the college earnings premium, and 61% report net college costs that exceed actual costs, with biases largest among lower-income and non-college households. When provided with accurate information about college earnings returns, intended college attendance increased by 0.2 standard deviations, and attendance gaps by income and parental education shrank by 20–30%. Accurate cost information, by contrast, had no impact on attendance intentions—suggesting the perception of economic returns, not affordability, is the binding constraint.**

- Source: Zachary Bleemer and Basit Zafar, "Intended College Attendance: Evidence from an Experiment on College Returns and Costs," *Journal of Public Economics* 157 (January 2018): 184–211, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S004727271730186X>.

**Average confidence across 14 major U.S. institutions, including higher education, stood at just 28% in 2025. Confidence in higher education confidence actually rose across all partisan groups even as broader institutional trust remained near historic lows.**

- Source: Megan Brenan, "Democrats' Confidence in U.S. Institutions Sinks to New Low," Gallup, July 17, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692633/democrats-confidence-institutions-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

**The decline in public confidence in higher education is part of a broader collapse in institutional trust: the large majority of major American institutions reached record-low confidence in 2022 or 2023, and colleges ranked fourth overall in 2024. When polling data on parent preferences are fully analyzed—adding those who prefer community college, job training, gap years, military service, and other paths that typically lead to postsecondary education—roughly 90% of parents want their children to pursue some form of education after high school, and more than 70% of adults believe governments should spend more to make it affordable.**

- *Source:* Kevin Carey and Sophie Nguyen, "Americans Have Not Actually Turned Against Higher Education Like the Media Says," *New America*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/briefs/americans-have-not-actually-turned-against-higher-education-like-the-media-says/>.

**Six in ten parents prefer their child pursue a two- or four-year college education immediately after high school, with four-year college (40%) the single most popular option. Sharp partisan divides persist: 73% of Democrats favored a college path compared to 48% of Republicans, and parents who themselves hold bachelor's degrees (66%) were substantially more likely to prefer a four-year path. Just 24% of parents preferred non-college options.**

- *Source:* Stephanie Marken, "Most Parents Prefer College Pathway for Their Child," *Gallup and the Lumina Foundation*, August 7, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/693047/parents-prefer-college-pathway-child.aspx>.

**The share of parents who favor bachelor's degrees for their children dropped from 74% in 2019 to 58% in 2025—a decline, but still a clear majority in favor. At the same time, parents' perceptions of career and technical education (CTE) are shifting: 35% now say CTE is best suited for high-achieving students, up from 13% in 2019.**

- *Source:* Britebound, *All Options on the Table: Parent Views on Postsecondary Education and Career Paths*, Britebound Youth Career Readiness Outlook Series, 2025, [https://cms.britebound.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/MR-5206\\_YouthCareerReadinessOutlookSeries\\_Parents\\_Rebrand\\_Final.pdf](https://cms.britebound.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/MR-5206_YouthCareerReadinessOutlookSeries_Parents_Rebrand_Final.pdf).

**The share of high school students expecting to earn at least a bachelor's degree fell from 72% in 2002 to 44% in 2022—the lowest level in 20 years. First-generation students saw the steepest decline, from 60% to 33%, and the share of all students who said they "don't know" their highest expected degree nearly tripled, from 10% to 27%.**

- *Source:* Sean Simone and Elise Christopher, *Future Education Expectations of High School Students Decline to the Lowest Level in 20 Years*, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, September 2025, [https://www.pellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/PELL\\_Educational-Expectations-of-First-Gen-Students\\_Research-Brief.pdf](https://www.pellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/PELL_Educational-Expectations-of-First-Gen-Students_Research-Brief.pdf).

**Freshman classes nationally have declined by an average of 5%, with institutions serving low-income populations experiencing drops exceeding 10%. If these trends continue, the populations who gained the most from expanded college access—students from low-income families and students of color—will be disproportionately harmed.**

- *Source:* Ben Wildavsky and Richard Whitmire, "Is the 'College for All' Movement Ending?" *Inside Higher Ed*, November 4, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2024/11/04/college-all-movement-ending-opinion>.

**Employer confidence in higher education is dramatically higher than public confidence: 70% of employers have high confidence, 85% say colleges are doing a good job preparing students, and 73% believe a degree is worth the investment. Employers are more likely to hire graduates who completed internships, held leadership roles, or engaged in community-based projects. Ninety-four percent believe colleges should help students become informed citizens—the same share who say institutions should prepare a skilled workforce.**

- Source: Ashley Finley, *The Agility Imperative: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future*, American Association of Colleges and Universities, December 2025, <https://www.aacu.org/research/the-agility-imperative>.

## **Bachelor's degree enrollment has grown even as public confidence in higher education has declined.**

**Enrollment in four-year colleges and universities has been climbing, from 1.6 million bachelor's degrees awarded in 2010 to 2 million in 2023, and the proportion of 25-year-olds with bachelor's degrees has risen steadily for 15 years. The share of Americans saying college is "not worth the cost" rose from 40% to 63% over the same period, yet enrollment keeps growing.**

- Source: Rose Horowitz, "The College Backlash Is a Mirage," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/01/college-degree-value-enrollment/685384/>.

**The post-2010 decline in college enrollment is concentrated almost entirely in community colleges and for-profit institutions; four-year enrollment rates held firm throughout, and bachelor's degrees awarded rose. Associate's degree attainment also held steady because completion rates improved even as enrollment fell.**

- Source: Gad Levanon, "College Numbers Down, Degrees Up: Understanding the Post-2010 Enrollment Shift," Burning Glass Institute, 2025, <https://www.burningglassinstitute.org/bginsights/college-numbers-down-degrees-up-understanding-the-post-2010-enrollment-shift>.

**Enrollment at colleges and universities has increased for the third straight year, reaching 19.4 million—the largest total in a decade. Undergraduate enrollment grew 1.2%, driven primarily by community college and public four-year growth, while private institutions saw declines. In fall 2025, there were over 19.4 million postsecondary enrollments—a 1.0% increase over the prior fall. Enrollment in undergraduate certificate and associate's degree programs continues to outpace bachelor's program growth (+1.9% and +2.2% vs. +0.9%), and community colleges now enroll 752,000 students in certificate programs—a 28.3% increase since fall 2021. Hispanic, Black, and Multiracial students continue to see enrollment growth, while undergraduate White enrollment declined (-3.7%).**

- Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Clearinghouse Enrollment Insights: Final Fall Enrollment Trends*, January 15, 2026, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/final-fall-enrollment-trends/>. See also: Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, "College Enrollment Hits 10-Year High, Fueled by Community College Growth," *Washington Post*, January 15, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2026/01/15/college-enrollment-10-year-high/>.

**Seventy-six percent of undergraduates attend public institutions, 89% attend colleges that admit more than half of applicants, and just 2% attend private institutions that accept fewer than a quarter of applicants. At four-year institutions, more than three in five students attend a school where fewer than**

**two-thirds of students earn a degree there, and less than 1% of undergraduates attend institutions with endowments exceeding \$500,000 per student.**

- Source: James Murphy, "Six Charts Showing Where Most Undergraduates in the United States Go to College," Education Reform Now, May 6, 2025, <https://edreformnow.org/2025/05/06/six-charts-showing-where-most-undergraduates-in-the-united-states-go-to-college/>.

**Those who have actually completed bachelor's degrees generally believe their education was worth the cost, in contrast to the ROI concerns that appear in public confidence polling data.**

**Only 10% of those who pursued postsecondary education at any level say they would have completed less education if making the decision again. 68% of those who completed bachelor's degrees thought they were worth the cost, compared to just 43% of associate's degree completers and 28% of those with some college or a technical degree. 61% of those who completed an associate's degree or less regret not having completed additional education.**

- Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2023*, May 2024, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2023-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202405.pdf>.

**Almost all graduates in the class of 2023—98%—reported that they thought college was worth it. That share was as high as 99.4% among white students, and lower, but still high, at 93.8% among Black students.**

- Source: ZipRecruiter, "The Class of 2023: A Story of Resilience," ZipRecruiter Economic Research, 2023., <https://www.ziprecruiter-research.org/annual-grad-report-2023>.

**Most students in bachelor's degree programs are confident that their educational choices will pay off in the labor market. Seventy-three percent of students in the class of 2025 expected their major to "very useful" in opening job opportunities, while 64% among those who have actually entered the workforce agreed. Only 27% of rising graduates expressed regret about their major choice. Eighty-two percent expected to start working within three months of graduation—a timeline 77% actually met. Roughly 47% of recent graduates believe their field will have fewer jobs due to AI, yet most graduates remain broadly optimistic about their prospects.**

- Source: ZipRecruiter, *The Graduate Divide: Expectations vs. Reality for the Class of 2025*, 2025, <https://www.ziprecruiter-research.org/annual-grad-report>.

**Eighty-four percent of alumni of nine public universities surveyed five and ten years after graduation were satisfied with their degree, and 83% were satisfied with their current careers. Seventy-eight percent expected to outearn the households they grew up in—a figure that rose to 89% among first-generation graduates and 89% among alumni of color, compared to 66% among non-first-generation graduates and 72% among white graduates. Despite this general optimism, career support gaps were notable: only 43% said their institution had invested in their career, and just 49% reported receiving help creating a career plan.**

- *Source:* Leticia Maldonado, "Leveraging Alumni Voices to Drive Value: A Starter Kit for Campus Leaders," American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), September 2025, [https://aascu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Leveraging-Alumni-Voices\\_FINAL.pdf](https://aascu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Leveraging-Alumni-Voices_FINAL.pdf).

**Eighty-eight percent of students in the class of 2025 said college enhanced their personal growth, 85% said it supported their understanding of career goals, and 72% said it improved their ability to secure a meaningful job. A majority also expressed concern about competition for jobs.**

- *Source:* "Big Dreams, Bigger Challenges," Handshake Network Trends, August 2024, <https://joinhandshake.com/network-trends/class-of-2025-career-outlook-report/>.

**Seventy-two percent of recent community college students who completed bachelor's degrees said they had achieved their goals, and 63% said it was worth the cost, similar to associate's degree completers. By contrast, only 54% of certificate completers said they had achieved their goals, with just 49% saying the certificate was worth the cost.**

- *Source:* "The Value of Community Colleges: Recent Students' Motivations and Outcomes," Strada Education Foundation, September 7, 2023, <https://www.strada.org/reports/the-value-of-community-colleges-recent-students-motivations-and-outcomes>.

**Choice of major makes a difference in the perceived value of higher education, with those who earn degrees in fields such as engineering, computer science, and health the least likely to say their education wasn't worth the cost, but across all fields, a majority still say college is worth the cost.**

- *Source:* Phillip Levine and Luke Pardue, "Yes, College Is Worth It," Brookings Institution, June 5, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/yes-college-is-worth-it/>.

**The share of students who say college is worth the cost declined by 14 percentage points between 2022 and 2024, and by 2024 one in four rated the value of a college degree as "bad" or "very bad." Yet perceptions of workforce preparation improved over the same period: the share who felt college had prepared them for the workforce rose 11 points to 62%.**

- *Source:* BestColleges, "Is College Worth the Cost?" BestColleges Research, 2022–2024, <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/is-college-worth-the-cost/>.

**Pathways that do not fully incorporate bachelor's degrees risk reinforcing racial and economic inequities—though educational attainment alone does not fully redress those inequities.**

**Disproportionate educational attainment is a driver of race-based income inequality. The bachelor's degree attainment rate of Black adults is over 10 percentage points lower than for their white peers, the rate for Latine adults is 12 percentage points lower, and the rate for Native American adults is more than 15 percentage points lower. Racial disparities in educational attainment are concentrated at the bachelor's and graduate degree levels and therefore play a significant role in income inequality. While closing all racial and ethnic educational attainment gaps would yield an additional \$11.3 trillion in lifetime earnings for U.S. workers, education alone is not enough to overcome labor-market inequities, including those in pay.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale et al., *Learning and Earning by Degrees: Gains in College Degree Attainment Have Enriched the Nation and Every State, but Racial and Gender Inequality Persists*, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/attainmentgains/>.

**Enrollment rates vary significantly by family income, race, and geography, with students of color and students with low incomes facing compounding barriers to entry. Earnings also differ by demographics, though graduates at every level earn more than peers with no college experience.**

- Source: Michael Itzkowitz, *Understanding College Access*, The HEA Group, July 2024, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23c019a3e24dfb57ad7c/1722622912946/CarnegieFoundation\\_ResearchPaper\\_CollegeAccess\\_71924.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23c019a3e24dfb57ad7c/1722622912946/CarnegieFoundation_ResearchPaper_CollegeAccess_71924.pdf); See also: Michael Itzkowitz, *Understanding College Economic Outcomes*, The HEA Group, July 2024, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23dbaf96156ccd0f9dd8/1722622940167/CarnegieFoundation\\_ResearchPaper\\_EconomicOutcomes\\_071924.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63617bfab00c640904baab4c/t/66ad23dbaf96156ccd0f9dd8/1722622940167/CarnegieFoundation_ResearchPaper_EconomicOutcomes_071924.pdf).

**Even before the Supreme Court decision prohibiting race-conscious admissions policies, Black, Latine, and American Indian/Alaska Native students collectively composed 37% of the college-age population in 2019 but just 21% of selective college enrollment; Black enrollment at selective institutions grew by only 5,000 students over the entire 2009–2019 decade, and AIAN enrollment fell by half. Pell Grant recipients made up less than one in four students at the most selective colleges versus more than half at open-access institutions, and selective institutions spend more than twice as much per student on academic support and graduate students at far higher rates.**

- Source: Jeff Strohl, Emma Nyhof, and Catherine Morris, *Progress Interrupted: Evaluating a Decade of Demographic Change at Selective and Open-Access Institutions*, April 2024, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/progressinterrupted/>. See also: Nicole Narea, "The impact of the Supreme Court's reversal of affirmative action, explained in one chart," *Vox*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/policy/370854/affirmative-action-black-enrollment-universities-diversity-supreme-court>.

**For the class of 2024, 51.4% of graduates from high-poverty high schools enrolled in college immediately after graduation, compared to 74% from low-poverty high schools. The completion gap is even larger: only 24.9% of 2018 graduates from high-poverty high schools completed a degree within six years, compared to 58.7% from low-poverty high schools. With roughly 60% of high school graduates enrolling immediately and roughly 60% of those completing within six years, the national pipeline yields only about 36% of high school graduates with a postsecondary credential.**

- Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *High School Benchmarks*, 2025, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/>.

**The share of high school students expecting to earn at least a bachelor's degree has fallen from 72% in 2002 to 59% in 2009 to 44% in 2022. The decline is even sharper for first-generation students: 60% to 51% to 33%.**

- Source: Sean Simone and Elise Christopher, *Future Education Expectations of High School Students Decline to the Lowest Level in 20 Years*, Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, September 2025, [https://www.pellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/PELL\\_Educational-Expectations-of-First-Gen-Students\\_Research-Brief.pdf](https://www.pellinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/PELL_Educational-Expectations-of-First-Gen-Students_Research-Brief.pdf).

**The high school students most firmly on pathways to bachelor's degrees are disproportionately white, Asian American or Pacific Islander, male, and from the Northeast and higher-income backgrounds. The 13% of students who want a bachelor's degree but question whether it's worth the cost are more likely to be male, from the South and West, and from working-class families. While 88% of cost-insulated students agree a four-year degree is worth the investment, only 57% of cost-constrained students agree.**

- Source: Ben Cecil, *How High School Students Are Thinking About Higher Ed*, Third Way, August 15, 2024, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/how-high-school-students-are-thinking-about-higher-ed>.

**Inequities in college access have grown over the past several years.**

- Source: Sarah Carr, "'I have expensive dreams.' Preparing students for college and career in the face of widening equity gaps," Center on Reinventing Public Education, Arizona State University, April 2024, <https://crpe.org/preparing-students-for-college-and-career-in-the-face-of-widening-equity-gaps/>.

**White students are disproportionately enrolled at selective colleges that yield good economic outcomes, while Black and Latine students are more likely to earn credentials from for-profit providers, which generally offer lower returns. Terms like "alternative" or "noncollege" pathways position degrees as the default and suggest young people must choose between degrees and credentials.**

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, "White Flight to the Bachelor's Degree," Medium, September 2, 2020, <https://medium.com/georgetown-cew/white-flight-to-the-ba-e604ee4e3967>.

**Federal Pell Grant funding declined from \$36 billion to \$26 billion between 2011–12 and 2021–22. Inconsistent federal funding and state budget cuts have contributed to an enrollment decline of nearly half a million Black students over the past decade, with the steepest losses in the South.**

- Source: Southern Education Foundation and University of Alabama Education Policy Center, *The Widening College Access Gap: Pell Grant Disinvestment and Declining Student Enrollment in the South 2011–2022*, Southern Education Foundation, October 2025, <https://southerneducation.org/publications/policybrief-widening-access-gap-south/>.

**The relative wage premium from college for Americans with low incomes has halved since 1960. Three factors explain 80% of this trend: declining funding at the teaching-oriented public universities where lower-income students concentrate, diversion of lower-income students into community colleges and for-profit institutions, and higher-income students' shift toward higher-return majors like computer science. College-going provided equitable returns before 1960, but now mediates 25% of intergenerational income transmission.**

- Source: Zachary Bleemer and Sarah Quincy, "Changes in the College Mobility Pipeline Since 1900," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 33797 (May 2025), [https://zacharybleemer.com/wp-content/uploads/Working-Papers/MobilityPipeline\\_Paper.pdf](https://zacharybleemer.com/wp-content/uploads/Working-Papers/MobilityPipeline_Paper.pdf). See also: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w33797>.

**Children raised in households that are in the bottom quintile for income tend to remain in the 30th to 40th percentile of adult income—unless they earn a bachelor's degree, which lifts expected adult income to around the 60th percentile (or above the 70th percentile for graduates of elite institutions).**

- Source: Patrick Cooney, "Yes, College Matters," States Forum, 2025, <https://www.statesforum.org/yes-college-matters/>.

**As college-educated workers concentrate in urban areas, their departure from rural communities compounds economic disadvantage—between 2012 and 2021, less than 1% of America's nearly 700,000 net new businesses were established in rural counties. Without degree holders creating businesses, increasing demand for services, and attracting investment, communities with low educational attainment face shrinking opportunity and growing labor force detachment.**

- Source: Curran McSwigan, *Moving Apart: How Non-College Workers Fare in Urban and Rural America*, Third Way, July 24, 2023, <https://www.thirdway.org/report/moving-apart-how-non-college-workers-fare-in-urban-and-rural-america>.

**Among Black workers, more than 65% are STARS—workers skilled through alternative routes who lack bachelor's degrees. Because upward mobility into higher-wage occupations is structurally easier for degree holders regardless of comparable skill levels, the degree-based opportunity gap compounds racial labor market inequality.**

- Source: Peter Q. Blair, Papia Debroy, and Justin Heck, "Skills, Degrees, and Labor Market Inequality," *Economics of Education Review* 106, 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775725000846>.

**The 2025 budget reconciliation act eliminates the Grad PLUS loan program, sets new annual borrowing limits for Direct Unsubsidized and Parent PLUS loans, and establishes lifetime borrowing limits, cutting approximately \$44 billion in federal student loans over a decade. With smaller federal loans, students will be pushed toward private lending, which relies on credit scores that reflect historical racial disparities in wealth, homeownership, and employment—disproportionately affecting Black and Latine students and those with low incomes, who have lower average credit scores and less family wealth to serve as collateral.**

- Source: Peter Granville, "The FICO Factor: GOP Megabill Will Limit Who Gets to Access College," The Century Foundation, July 21, 2025, <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-fico-factor-gop-megabill-will-limit-who-gets-to-access-college/>.

**Applications from white students drop by approximately 12% after a university receives Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) designation, a phenomenon driven by student avoidance rather than institutional gatekeeping. Because HSIs typically receive less funding per student, this racial sorting concentrates Latine students in under-resourced institutions.**

- Source: Laura T. Hamilton, Charlie Eaton, and Simon Cheng, "White Flight in Public Higher Education? Racial Avoidance of Hispanic-Serving Institutions," *Sociology of Education* 98, no. 4 (2025): 273–293, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00380407251352786>.

**Fifty-four percent of California State University's 460,000 students are from historically underrepresented groups, and about 30% are first-generation college students. CSU now measures post-graduate employment alongside degree completion, recognizing that degree attainment without career navigation support may not translate to economic mobility.**

- Source: Teresa Watanabe, "CSU to Shift the Endgame for Student Success: A Good Job and a Four-Year Degree," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2024-10-29/csu-shift-to-career-focus-for-student-success>.

**Among 25- to 34-year-olds working full time, earnings differences by gender persist at all attainment levels. Men with bachelor's degrees earned 23% more than their female peers.**

- Source: Gloria Guzman and Melissa Kollar, "Income in the United States: 2023," U.S. Census Bureau, Report Number P60-282, September 10, 2024, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2024/demo/p60-282.html>.

**Among Illinois students followed from high school into their early 30s, students from the lowest-income families earned 48% less than those from the highest-income families three years into their careers (\$31,407 vs. \$46,433 annually). The earnings penalty persists within the same educational attainment level (averaging \$5,815/year), within the same degree program (\$3,753–\$5,028/year), and within the same industry (\$11,274/year). Students from the lowest-income families were 2.8 times more likely to have "some college, no degree" as their highest attainment and 2.9 times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree or above.**

- Source: Sarah Cashdollar, Meg Bates, Jenny Nagaoka, Erin Mitchell, and Caitlin Clinton, *Precarious Prospects: Education Pays, Yet Socioeconomic Disparities Persist in Illinois Students' Later Earnings*, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative, Discovery Partners Institute, University of Illinois and UChicago Consortium on School Research, July 2025, [https://dpi.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Precarious-Prospects\\_final\\_2025.07.09.pdf](https://dpi.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Precarious-Prospects_final_2025.07.09.pdf).

**Among bachelor's degree graduates of a large urban public college system, students from low-income families earned substantially less five years after graduation than peers from high-income families—even after controlling for GPA, college attended, and field of study. Features of graduates' first jobs (quality, timing, stability) strongly predict earnings five years out and mediate almost two-thirds of the otherwise unexplained SES earnings gap, suggesting that how graduates land in the labor market—shaped by networks, financial cushion, and ability to hold out for better opportunities—systematically disadvantages low-income graduates even after degree completion.**

- Source: Judith Scott-Clayton, Veronica Minaya, C.J. Libassi, and Joshua K.R. Thomas, "Who Rides Out the Storm?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 34366, October 2025, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w34366>.

**Students who barely met a GPA cutoff to declare an economics major at a University of California campus earned \$22,000 (46%) more in early-career annual wages than peers diverted to second-choice majors. Roughly half of this premium is explained by economics majors entering higher-paying industries, and the causal return closely matches observational major-earnings gaps nationally.**

- Source: Zachary Bleemer and Aashish Mehta, "Will Studying Economics Make You Rich? A Regression Discontinuity Analysis of the Returns to College Major," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 14:2, April 2022, 1–22, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/app.20200447>.

**Implementing a new GPA-based major restriction reduces underrepresented minority (URM) enrollment in the restricted major by approximately 20%, without improving value-added or degree attainment. At the top 26 public research universities, 75% of the most lucrative majors impose such restrictions. These universities account for half of current racial stratification across majors despite enrolling only 33% of four-year undergraduates.**

- Source: Zachary Bleemer and Aashish Mehta, "College Major Restrictions and Student Stratification," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 33269, December 2024, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w33269>.

**GEAR UP participants—who are disproportionately Black, Hispanic/Latine, rural, and first-generation—outperformed national averages on high school graduation and FAFSA completion by 7 and 8**

percentage points, respectively, and achieved postsecondary enrollment rates similar to those of high-performing schools. Comprehensive mentoring had the largest effect on enrollment, and participants performed as well as more advantaged peers on first-term college GPA.

- *Source:* Katherine Caves and Christian Ponce, "Investing in GEAR UP To Advance College and Career Readiness: Pathways to Success," Center for American Progress, September 3, 2024, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/investing-in-gear-up-to-advance-college-and-career-readiness-pathways-to-success/>.

**Black and Latine students are less likely than their white peers to enroll in STEM and information technology CTE courses, and white students reach advanced CTE levels more often, with gaps particularly acute in manufacturing and STEM. In South Carolina, Black and Latine students made up 43% of the student body but just over a quarter of those in multiple STEM classes.**

- *Source:* Sarah Butrymowicz, Jeff Amy and Larry Fenn, "How Career and Technical Education Shuts Out Black and Latino Students from High-Paying Professions," The Hechinger Report/Associated Press, October 2020, <https://hechingerreport.org/how-career-and-technical-education-shuts-out-black-and-latino-students-from-high-paying-professions/>.

**High-achieving Black and Latine students and students from low-income backgrounds who take and pass Algebra I in eighth grade still enroll in advanced high school math courses at lower rates than equally qualified white and higher-income peers. Among a nationally representative sample of over 23,000 students, high-achieving underrepresented students who did take advanced math had higher high school graduation rates, GPAs, postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates, and STEM credit-earning than their equally high-achieving peers who did not—suggesting that access to advanced coursework, not aptitude, is the binding constraint.**

- *Source:* Melodie Baker, Ivy Morgan, and Gizella Wade, "Opportunities Denied: High-Achieving Black and Latino Students Lack Access to Advanced Math," Education Trust and Just Equations, December 2023, <https://edtrust.org/rti/opportunities-denied-high-achieving-black-and-latino-students-lack-access-to-advanced-math/>.

**Half of Latine students found it "very difficult" or "difficult" to remain in postsecondary programs, and 49% considered stopping out. Cost was the top reason unenrolled Latine adults had not enrolled.**

- *Source:* Gallup and Lumina Foundation, "Half of Hispanic Students Considered Leaving College Last Year," Gallup, September 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/509603/half-hispanic-students-considered-leaving-college-last-year.aspx>.

**College access is shaped not only by financial resources but by cultural capital, family expectations calibrated to class position, and historical oppression that constrains college choice. U.S. financial aid policy has shifted from grants to loans as the primary support for low-income students, further embedding class-based barriers.**

- *Source:* Gabriel R. Serna and Rebecca Woulfe, "Social Reproduction and College Access: Current Evidence, Context, and Potential Alternatives," *Critical Questions in Education* 8:1 (2017), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1129434>.

## Elite institutions serve as conduits for intergenerational wealth transfer and the reproduction of inequality.

Young people from families with earnings in the top 1% of incomes are 77 times more likely to attend elite colleges than those from families in the bottom 20%. The number of students from families in the top 0.1% of earners and from the bottom 20% is about the same at several Ivy League and other highly selective universities. A young person who attends an "Ivy-Plus" college (defined as all Ivy League institutions, Duke University, MIT, Stanford, and the University of Chicago) increases by 60% their chances of earning an income in the top 1%, almost doubles their chances of attending an elite graduate school, and triples their chances of securing a prestigious job.

- Source: Raj Chetty, David J. Deming, and John N. Friedman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 31492, October 2023, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31492>.

Family socioeconomic status determines not just whether students pursue postsecondary education, but what kind. The share of ninth-graders enrolled in postsecondary education seven years later was 50 percentage points larger for the highest SES quintile (78%) than the lowest (28%). Among those who enrolled, 78% of highest-SES students first pursued a bachelor's degree versus only 32% of students from the lowest quintile. Fifty-one percent of students from the lowest quintile first enrolled at community colleges versus 18% of highest-SES peers.

- Source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Young Adult Educational and Employment Outcomes by Family Socioeconomic Status," *Condition of Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/tbe>.

Elite universities function as sorting mechanisms for access to elite employers, reinforcing the connection between institutional prestige and career outcomes.

- Source: Lauren A. Rivera, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

National leaders in government, business, academia, media, and the arts—who wield outsized influence on politics, the economy, society, and culture—are disproportionately likely to have attended elite universities.

- Source: Jonathan Wai et al., "The most successful and influential Americans come from a surprisingly narrow range of 'elite' educational backgrounds," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, September 3, 2024, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-03547-8>.

Beginning in the 1990s, white students increasingly enrolled in the nation's top 500 universities, while Black and Latine students predominantly attended open-access institutions that spend two to five times less per student. Students at selective colleges have an 82% graduation rate compared to 49% at open-access institutions—and students of color who do attend selective colleges graduate at rates comparable to white peers. More than 111,000 Black and Latine students graduate from high school in the top half of their class each year, but do not attain a two- or four-year degree within eight years. If they had attended one of the top 468 colleges, an estimated 73% would have graduated. Black and Hispanic graduates of top universities earn 21% more than those from open-access institutions, yet a persistent racial wage gap remains.

- Source: Anthony P. Carnevale, "Why Our Higher Education System Is Split into Unequal Tracks Divided by Race," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, August 23, 2019, <https://medium.com/georgetown-cew/why-our-higher-education-system-is-split-into-unequal-tracks-divided-by-race-b805c65d4fb0>; See also: Anthony P. Carnevale and Jeff Strohl, *Separate & Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/separate-unequal/>.

**Social reproduction theory identifies schooling as the primary institutional mechanism through which dominant-class power structures are perpetuated. College access is shaped by cultural capital, family expectations calibrated to class position, and historical oppression—meaning higher education does not merely reflect existing inequality but actively reproduces it.**

- Source: Gabriel R. Serna and Rebecca Woulfe, "Social Reproduction and College Access: Current Evidence, Context, and Potential Alternatives," *Critical Questions in Education* 8:1 (2017), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1129434>.

**Even when first-generation students and students from low-income families gain access to elite institutions, those institutions reproduce inequality through hidden identity demands and inadequate support. Rather than helping students adjust to elite institutions, programs designed to propel first-generation students forward exert pressure on students to acquire elite social capital by assimilating into campus culture. This often creates conflict with their families and home communities, leaving students caught between upward mobility and authenticity. The result is a hidden toll: alienation, mental health challenges, and poor academic outcomes.**

- Source: Melissa Osborne, *Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).

**Community colleges offer important on-ramps to bachelor's degrees, but there is additional work to be done to make them equitable and effective.**

**Although roughly 80% of community college students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, only 33% transfer to a four-year institution within six years, and only 48% of those who transfer complete a bachelor's—meaning just 16% of first-time community college students earn a bachelor's degree within six years. Outcomes are worse for the students community colleges disproportionately serve: bachelor's completion rates are 9% for Black students, 11% for low-income students, 13% for Hispanic/Latine students, and 6% for students aged 25 and older—and Black transfer students are twice as likely as their peers to enroll in for-profit or primarily online institutions, where bachelor's completion rates after transfer are lowest. The top-performing 10% of institutions achieved transfer rates of 52% and bachelor's completion rates among transfers of 61%; if all institutions reached that level, the national bachelor's attainment rate for community college students could double.**

- Source: Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya-Guevara, Davis Jenkins, and Tania LaViolet, *Tracking Transfer: Community College Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (revised August 2025) and *Tracking Transfer: Four-Year Institutional Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (February 2024), Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, and National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/tracking-transfer-community-college-and-four-year-institutional-effectiveness-in-broadening-bachelors-degree-attainment.html>.

**Transfer rates have been increasing. Nearly 1.2 million students transferred to a new institution in fall 2024, a 4.4% increase over fall 2023 and 7.9% above fall 2020 levels—but upward transfers from two-year to four-year institutions grew only 2.9% and remain slightly below pre-pandemic levels. Black and Hispanic/Latine students saw the largest year-over-year increases in transfer enrollment (8.3% and 4.4%, respectively), while white students' transfer enrollment declined 1.3%, and community college transfers to the most selective four-year institutions grew 5.5%, with an even higher rate (7%) among students from lower-income backgrounds.**

- Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Transfer Enrollment and Pathways*, March 2025, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/transfer-enrollment-and-pathways/>.

**The effect of community college enrollment on bachelor's degree completion depends on who enrolls. For more advantaged students who would otherwise have attended four-year colleges, community college reduces completion—but for disadvantaged students who would not have attended college at all, it has a modest positive effect.**

- Source: Jennie E. Brand, Fabian T. Pfeffer, and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "The Community College Effect Revisited: The Importance of Attending to Heterogeneity and Complex Counterfactuals," *Sociological Science* 1 (October 2014): 448–465, <https://sociologicalscience.com/articles-vol1-25-448/>.

**Community colleges simultaneously expand and constrain access to bachelor's degrees, depending on which students they draw. Two-thirds of students who enroll in community college would not otherwise have attended college at all—and for them, enrollment produced 1.7 additional years of schooling, a 27-percentage-point increase in bachelor's degree completion, and an 18% earnings premium. But enrolling in a community college has a negative effect on upward mobility when it diverts students from enrolling directly in bachelor's degree programs. For those students, starting a community college reduced the rate of bachelor's degree completion by 20 percentage points and led to lower earnings. These negative effects can be attributed primarily to low transfer and bachelor's completion rates among students who begin their postsecondary education at community colleges. Effects were largest for women and students from low-income families (who gained the most from access to community colleges), suggesting that broad free-community-college policies benefit some students while penalizing others, and that more targeted approaches that avoid pulling students away from four-year options could improve net outcomes.**

- Source: Jack Mountjoy, "Community Colleges and Upward Mobility," *American Economic Review* 112:8, August 2022, 2580–2630, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29254>.

**On average, 43% of community college students' credits do not transfer to their receiving institution, forcing students to retake coursework at additional cost and extending time to degree. While 35 states have some form of statewide guaranteed transfer policy, transfer and articulation agreements remain focused on general education requirements rather than career-aligned program pathways, and only five states collect and publicly report transfer data disaggregated by race and income.**

- Source: Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group, "Expanding the Role of the Four-Year Institution for Seamless Success in Career Pathways," April 2024, <https://careertech.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Four-Year-Institution-for-Seamless-Success-Advance-CTE.pdf>.

**Community colleges serve roughly 5 million noncredit students annually, but those students face a structural trap: noncredit courses are rarely transferable to for-credit degree programs, forcing students who want to continue toward an associate's or bachelor's degree to retake nearly identical coursework, requiring additional cost and time. Only about a quarter of students enrolled in structured**

**noncredit-to-credit pathway programs—which include coaching, articulation agreements, and prior learning assessments—actually transition to credit programs, and the rate is far lower for students without those supports. The divide is also an equity issue: noncredit students are disproportionately female, over 25, Black, and holders of a high school diploma or GED as their highest credential. Systemic drivers perpetuate the gap, including faculty skepticism about noncredit rigor, inconsistent accreditation standards, the ineligibility of most noncredit programs for federal financial aid, and the fact that only a handful of states collect comprehensive data on noncredit credential outcomes.**

- *Source:* Veronica Buckwalter and Taylor Maag, *Closing the Credit-Noncredit Divide: Bridging the Gap in Postsecondary Education to Expand Opportunity for Low-Wage Working Adults* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2019), <https://www.jff.org/idea/closing-credit-noncredit-divide-bridging-gap-postsecondary-education-expand-opportunity-low-wage-working-adults/>.

**Dual enrollment participation increased the number of colleges students applied to and the likelihood of applying to a moderately or highly selective in-state four-year institution, and it increased the number of four-year colleges a student was admitted to and the probability of admission to a highly selective institution. The gains were especially pronounced for Black students.**

- *Source:* Vivian Yuen Ting Liu, Veronica Minaya, and Di Xu, "The Impact of Dual Enrollment on College Application Choice and Admission Success," CCRC Working Paper No. 129 (December 2022); published in *Journal of Higher Education* (July 2025), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/impact-dual-enrollment-application-choice-admission-success.html>.

**The number of community college baccalaureate programs is growing. More than 200 community colleges in 24 states now offer at least 767 bachelor's degrees, with significant cost advantages—at Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona, a bachelor's degree costs \$14,550 compared to about \$47,000 at Arizona State University. However, these programs remain small in scale: in 2021–22, they accounted for just over 15,000 of more than two million bachelor's degrees awarded nationally.**

- *Source:* Sara Weissman, "The Fight Over Community College Bachelor's Degrees," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 9, 2026, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/institutions/community-colleges/2026/02/09/fight-over-community-college-bachelors-degrees>.

**Community college baccalaureate graduates earn \$4,000 to \$9,000 more annually than associate's degree holders one year after graduation, but roughly \$2,000 less than traditional bachelor's degree recipients. Penalties vary by field, with nursing, healthcare, business, and criminal justice showing minimal or no gaps, and CCB programs disproportionately serve students with financial need—in Texas, 79% of CCB students received Pell grants in 2021.**

- *Source:* Riley K. Acton, Camila Morales, Kalena Cortes, Julia A. Turner, and Lois Miller, "Community College Bachelor's Degrees: How CCB Graduates' Earnings Compare to AAs and BAs," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 34684, 2026, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w34684>.