

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY COLLEGES’ IMPACT ON ECONOMIC MOBILITY KEY FINDINGS

Postsecondary education is one of the most powerful indicators of upward economic mobility the Economic Mobility Project has identified. A college degree *quadruples* the chances that an individual born into the bottom income quintile will reach the top quintile in adulthood. However, while community colleges enroll half of all undergraduates in the United States each year, the impact these two-year institutions have on the mobility prospects of millions of Americans goes largely unnoticed. Using a database tracking the education and post-college earnings of more than 84,000 Florida students, this report highlights the role community colleges play in boosting economic mobility, as well as the impact of course concentration on post-college earnings.

Community colleges are an important pathway to upward economic mobility for millions of Americans, including students with a range of academic backgrounds as well as those who are low-income.

- Community colleges in Florida prepare roughly 40 percent of all students who ultimately attain bachelor’s and graduate degrees.
- About 68 percent of Florida community college students had high school grade point averages (GPAs) below B, compared to 30 percent of four-year college students.
- About 26 percent of community college students come from low-income families, compared to 15 percent of four-year college students.

While community college boosts earnings for all students, the increase can be much higher in certain fields of study.

- Seven years after leaving college, community college students who concentrate in a high-return field, such as computer science or engineering, earn an average of \$12,000 more annually than those who concentrate in a low-return field, such as humanities or fine arts.ⁱ
- Those in the very-high return field of health care earn over \$18,000 more than those in low-return fields each year.

Average Annual Earnings Seven Years After Leaving College, By Field of Study

LEVEL OF RETURN	FIELD OF STUDY	SAMPLE PROFESSIONS	AVERAGE EARNINGS
Very high	Health care	Nurses, medical technicians	\$60,557
High	Agriculture, business, computer science, education, engineering, environmental science, marketing, math	Computer programmers, engineers	\$53,998
Medium	Building trades, English, legal services, machinery repair, protective services, technical support for business and industry	Paralegals, security guards	\$49,036
Low	Communications, consumer services, fine arts, humanities, human services, performing arts, personal services, public services, social studies	Artists, customer service representatives	\$41,766

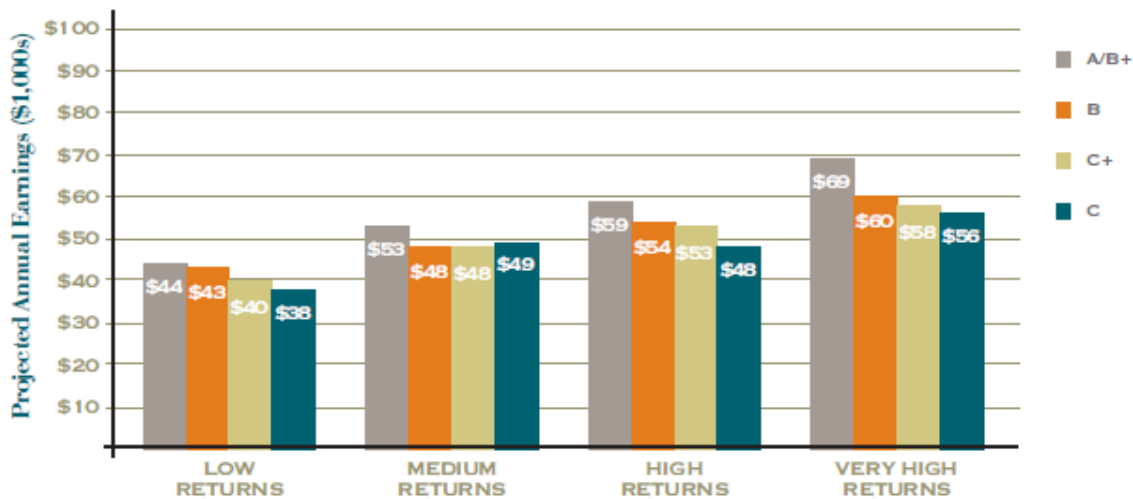
Community colleges provide an important stepping stone to transfer to four-year colleges and attainment of bachelor’s degrees, especially for low-income, high-performing students.

- About 81 percent of low-income students with A/B+ high school GPAs attend college, and more than half of these enrollees attend community colleges.
- Roughly 52 percent of low-income community college students with A/B+ high school GPAs transfer to four-year colleges, and 75 percent of those who transfer attain bachelor’s degrees.

Academic performance in high school influences post-college earnings, but lower-performing high school students who attend community college can also significantly increase their earnings by pursuing high-return fields of study.

- Among students who begin in community college, those who had A/B+ high school GPAs earn an average of \$9,600 more per year than those with lower high school GPAs.
- However, lower-performing high school students who concentrate in high-return fields in community college earn \$48,000 annually, slightly *more* than the \$44,000 earned by A/B+ high school students who concentrate in low-return fields.
- Unfortunately, only 25 percent of C students in the Florida cohort completed concentrations in the high-return category, compared to 40 percent of A/B+ students—a gap of 15 percentage points.

Projected Annual Earnings Seven Years After College, By High School GPA and Fields of Study for Florida Community College Students



Note: Earnings data reflect the highest degree completed among Florida students in the ninth grade 1996 cohort who begin at public community colleges in Florida and attain a credential.

Community colleges could be more effective in boosting economic mobility by helping students complete high-return courses and transfer to four-year colleges. The report presents a number of recommendations to increase the number of students enrolling in and completing community college, and to help students from all academic backgrounds learn about, enter, and succeed in high-return fields.

By forging a broad and nonpartisan agreement on the facts, figures and trends in mobility, the Economic Mobility Project is generating an active policy debate about how best to improve economic opportunity in the United States and to ensure that the American Dream is kept alive for generations that follow.

ⁱ Earnings figures throughout the report reflect the highest degree completed among students who begin at public community colleges in Florida and attain a credential, and therefore includes students who proceed on from community colleges to receive their bachelor’s degree or beyond.