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News

It's All What You Study

October 21, 2009

At community colleges, an underperforming high school graduate studying computer science is much more likely to see an earnings increase than a well-prepared high school graduate studying literature. That is the conclusion of a new analysis designed to explore the factors that predict which community college students will gain the most from their education.

Tuesday, the Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts released the results of a [study](#) examining the educational attainment and post-college earnings of more than 84,000 Florida students who graduated from high school in 2000 and attended a public institution in the state. Looking at the outcomes of these students, the report then attempts "to identify the most promising educational pathways to increase community college students' economic mobility" and "the personal and institutional impediments that prevent too many community college students from getting the most from educational opportunities."

Nearly 40 percent of all students who eventually earn bachelor's and graduate degrees in Florida start their postsecondary education at a community college. The study finds that a majority of those community college students had lower high school grades and were more likely to be from low-income families as compared to those who attended four-year institutions. Still, among low-income students, those with better high school grades are more likely to attend community colleges than four-year institutions.

Though a community college education boosts post-college earnings for all students, the study notes that those concentrating in certain fields of study can garner greater earnings. Seven years after exiting college, community college students who studied so-called "high-demand" fields like business, computer science and engineering earned about \$12,000 more a year than those who studied the humanities or fine arts, concentrations the report calls "low-return."

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

Chief among the study's findings, high school graduates with lower grades who attended community colleges can earn more than their classmates who had higher high school grades simply by pursuing "high-return" fields of study like those previously described. In general, the study notes A and B+ high school graduates earn an average of \$9,600 more per year than graduates with lower grades. But it further discovers that "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" there. Still, only a quarter of high school graduates with a C average earned credentials in "high-return" fields, while nearly 40 percent of A and B+ average high school graduates did so.

The study's authors, a fellow at the [Hudson Institute](#) and two researchers from [CNA](#), present a series of policy recommendations based on their findings. They primarily argue that states and the federal government should provide more funding to increase capacity in "high-cost, high-return" fields, while changing funding streams "to remove perverse incentives to enroll students in low-return courses or other courses they are unlikely to complete."

Though the authors suggest "information impediments" are the main reason why many community college students do not complete

programs in "medium-return" fields, they note that "lack of capacity" is the likely reason why more do not complete programs "high-return" fields like health care.

"The value of increasing the supply of well-training health-care and other professionals almost certainly would justify shifting resources from low-return courses to courses in health care and other fields where costs are soaring, in part, because employers cannot find enough well-qualified workers," the authors argue, expounding upon one example. "Thus, the key underlying problem is that community colleges' funding mechanisms do not equate students' and society's benefits of completing courses with the schools' costs. Rather, there are incentives to enroll students in low-cost, low-return courses and little attention is given to ensuring that students complete courses that will have greater benefit."

To correct what the authors see as an imbalance in state funding, they argue that states could adjust payments for colleges to support "high-cost" programs based on how well they perform, relative to their peers, in preparing students to enter these "high-demand" fields.

Current reform movements at community colleges, they argue, are misguided.

"The benefits of improving course selection to build skills of value in the workplace and keep students in school long enough to build career-enhancing skills is much less widely recognized and embraced than improving academic performance," the authors write. "As a result, community colleges generally have given little attention to improving student outcomes by such actions as making high-quality, career-oriented counseling and assessment programs more widely available."

Some academics, however — especially those who teach the humanities at community colleges — worry about the conclusions drawn by the Pew report.

"What is troubling about the report is the assumption that everyone who goes to college -- two-year or four year -- is there only to increase potential earnings, and the student's best bet is to find a major that will have the highest payoff," wrote Sandie McGill Barnhouse, chair of the [Two-Year College English Association](#) and English professor at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, in an e-mail. "Should fields of study with 'medium and low levels of return,' such as English, protective services, and communications be discouraged because a student could make more money as a nurse? In the 21st century, a graduate with multiple literacies, written, oral, and digital, has the best opportunities for long-term professional achievement across professional lines."

Barnhouse also argued that it might be detrimental to community colleges to divert students from their career ambitions.

"Furthermore, not everyone is drawn toward a profession in the 'high or very high' level of return careers," she wrote. "Teachers, law enforcement officers, day care providers, and public service workers are vital contributors to society, and if community colleges counsel students to concentrate on fields with higher economic mobility potential, then community colleges stray from their mission of offering students a chance to be able to pursue their personal goals."

— David Moltz

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