

DEFINING COLLEGE

Most workforce developers and education leaders use the word “college” to include any type of postsecondary education or training beyond high school. When American College Application Campaign uses the word “college,” we mean any postsecondary path that results in a degree or credential beyond high school, including professional/technical certificates and academic degrees.

During ACAC events, we encourage host sites to support students in pursuing whatever postsecondary pathway aligns with their goals: college, military, and/or workforce. Students who pursue education beyond high school are going to college. ACAC host site events highlight and promote the following:

- **Certificate Programs:** Certificate programs are specialized plans of study that are usually intended for students planning to pursue a skilled trade. Typically, these programs do not involve taking general education courses and usually can be completed in days, weeks or months, rather than years; they often serve to enhance a student’s field of study. Some employers and/or trade groups offer certificate programs. Additionally, some military training meets the qualifications for a certificate program.
- **Associate Degrees:** Associate degrees are typically awarded to students who complete a two-year period of study at a college. These degrees are often required for technical fields, but students can also pursue two-year degrees in business or other professional careers. An associate degree is typically awarded through community and technical or junior colleges
- **Bachelor’s Degrees:** Bachelor’s degrees are typically awarded to students who complete a four-year period of study at a college or university. Students pursuing a bachelor’s degree take classes in their career field and in general education subject areas. Some students pursue an associate transfer degree at a community college and transfer their credits to a four-year institution in order to complete a bachelor’s degree.

Research shows that college is a necessity in today's workforce and economy. Often, income inequalities are driven by a lack of access to college. The economic health and social viability of a democratic society is determined by the education of its citizens. We must remove the barriers to postsecondary education access. It is important to keep the value of a college degree as a focus for events and discussions with students to help them understand the value of a degree or certificate:

- **Greater Wealth:** Individuals with a college degree earn more. The median salary for people older than 25 with a bachelor's degree is 76.2% higher than for people older than 25 with a high school diploma. The median salary for people older than 25 with an advanced degree is 52% higher than for people older than 25 with a bachelor's degree, and 117% more than those with an associate degree.
- **More Security:** Those with a college degree are less likely to be affected by economic downturn. Americans with a high school diploma or less accounted for four out of every five jobs lost in the Great recession. These low-skill jobs are gone for good, replaced by jobs that require specialized training and skills. Additionally, when COVID-19 struck and unemployment rose, those with some college education were more likely to retain their jobs.
- **Strong Communities:** College graduates are twice as likely to volunteer and contribute nearly 3.5 times more money to charity.
- **Better Health and Access to Benefits:** Those with a degree are more likely to work for companies that offer health insurance benefits than high school grads. Additionally, 54% of individuals ages 25-34 with at least a bachelor's degree reported exercising vigorously at least once a week, more than their peers with lower education levels. Those with degrees are also more likely to have access to other benefits such as paid vacation days, sick days, retirement plans and student loan assistance.

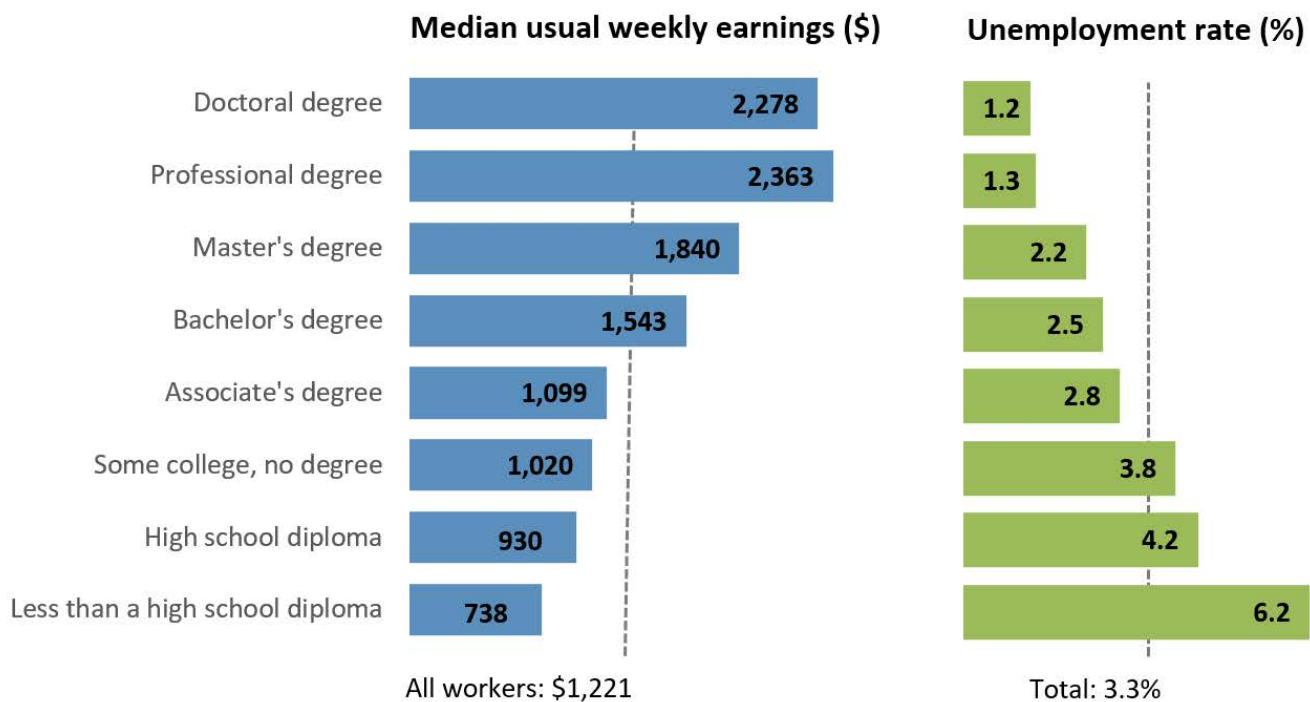
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Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment, 2024



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.