

DEFINING COLLEGE

The importance of accessing formal education or training after high school continues to rise. After the Great Recession, more than 95% of jobs created required some postsecondary education ([Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#)). When COVID-19 struck and unemployment rose, those with some college education were more likely to retain their jobs ([Pew Research Center](#) and [Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#)). 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.

It is also 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. In 2021, the median average earnings of young adults with a bachelor's degree were \$61,600. In the same year, the median earnings of young adults with a high school diploma were \$39,700. ([National Center for Education Statistics](#))
- **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 (Georgetown University CEW, [6 Million Missing Jobs](#)). Additionally, when COVID-19 struck and unemployment rose, those with some college education were more likely to retain their jobs ([Pew Research Center](#) and [Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#)).
- **Strong Communities:** College graduates are twice as likely to volunteer and contribute nearly 3.5 times more money to charity (Trostel, Lumina Foundation, [It's Not Just the Money](#), 2015).
- **Better Health:** 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. (College Board, [Education Pays](#), 2023).

*Modified with permission from the Michigan College Access Network.

