



PSEO Coalition

**Postsecondary Employment Outcomes Data Shines Light on
Which College Majors Pay the Most**

Chapter 6

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Postsecondary Employment Outcomes Data Shines Light on Which College Majors Pay the Most

The number one reason why students choose to pursue a postsecondary degree is for greater employability and to obtain a financially secure future. However, enrolling in an institution is only half the battle. The field of study you choose also plays a major role in determining whether you will be more financially well-off.

In our latest brief, we use data from the [Postsecondary Employment Outcomes](#) project to explore the earnings outcomes of over two million graduates across 27 states. We look at the 10 college majors where graduates earn the highest salaries, along with the outcomes of some of the most popular fields of study that students pursue.¹

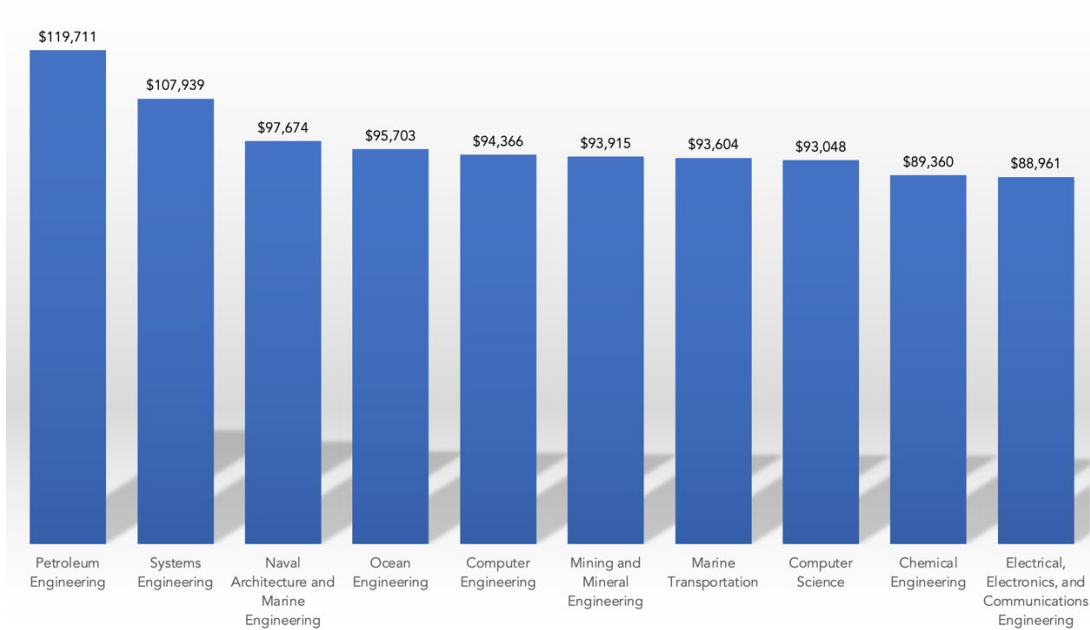
Methodology

This analysis uses data from the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes project hosted by the U.S. Census. The data cover the earnings outcomes at *public colleges* in 27 states and captures students who have graduated five years after graduating from a program of study. Unique to the Census, these data include, both, students who have received federal student aid and those who did not. In contrast, [U.S. Department of Education employment data](#) only cover those students who have received a federal grant or loan.

Bachelor's Degrees

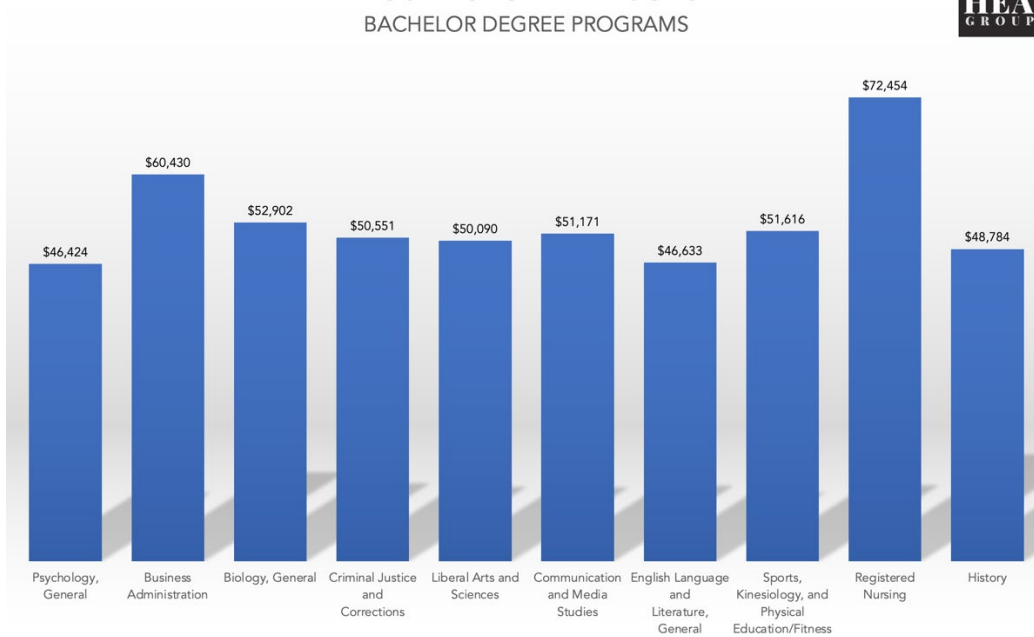
On average, those who obtain a bachelor's degree earn about 31% more than those with an associate's degree and 84% more than those who have completed high schools, but never attended college.² Unsurprisingly, the bachelor's degree programs that lead to the highest salaries are heavily concentrated in engineering and science. In fact, eight of the top 10 earning majors have an engineering focus. Petroleum Engineering graduates—totaling only 629 students across these 27 states—earn the highest salaries, averaging around \$120,000 just five years after graduation. Computer Engineering, the most popular field of study in this group, show its grads earning around \$94,000 per year.

TOP EARNING COLLEGE MAJORS BACHELOR DEGREE PROGRAMS



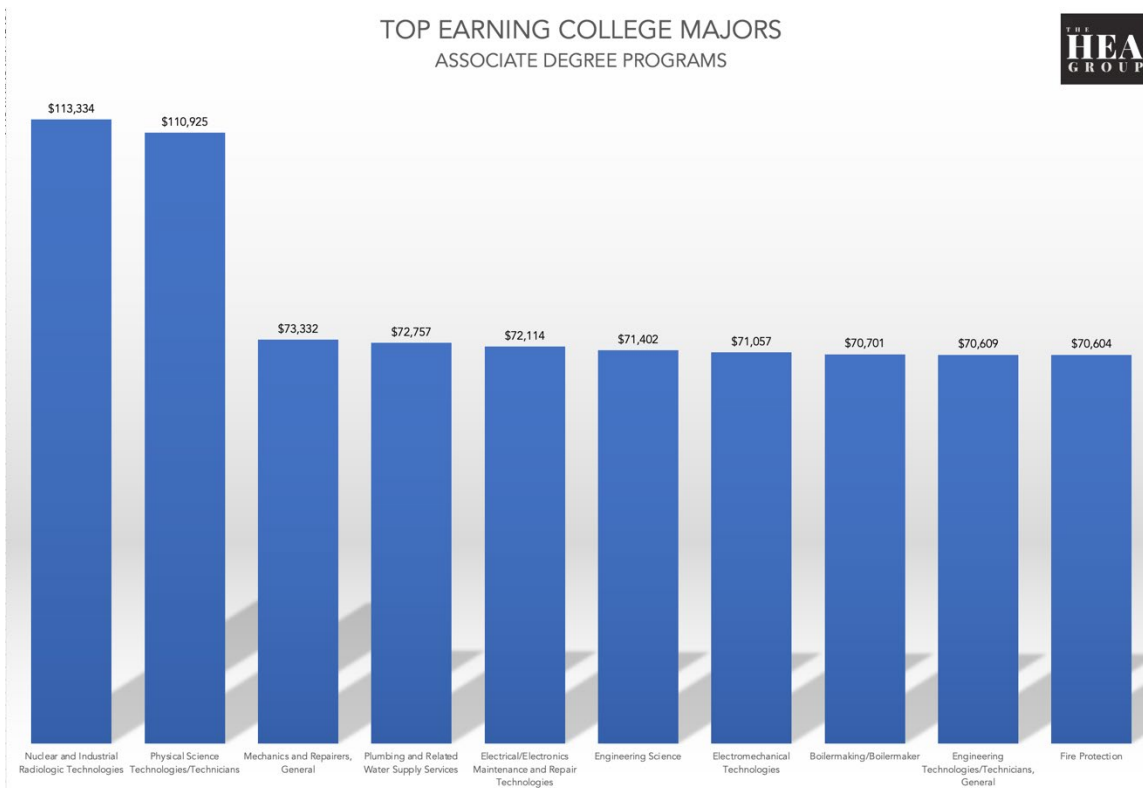
The most popular college degrees don't always lead to the highest salaries. Out of the top 10 most popular majors, only two—business administration and registered nursing—leave their graduates earning more than \$60,000 within five years of graduating. The most popular major, psychology, leaves its graduates earning just above \$46,000 per year.

MOST POPULAR MAJORS BACHELOR DEGREE PROGRAMS



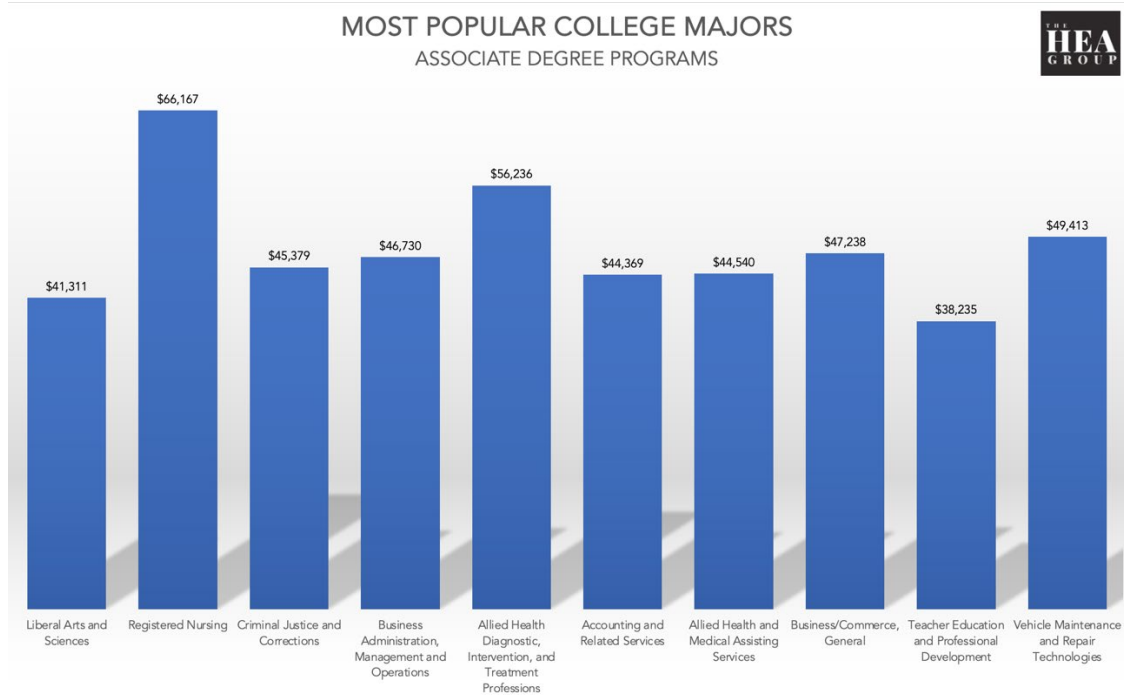
Associate’s Degrees

Associate’s degrees require less education and time spent than a bachelor’s degree and, therefore, their coinciding earnings are also less, on average.³ Similar to bachelor’s degrees, many associate’s degrees that lead to the highest salaries are also concentrated in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Two associate’s degrees—nuclear and industrial radiologic technologies and physical science technologies—show substantially higher earnings than their counterparts. Each leave their graduates earning more than \$110,000 per year, even just five years after graduation. Other non-STEM two-year degrees also leave their graduates earning more than \$70,000 per year, such as mechanics and repairers, plumbing, and fire protection.



The most popular associate’s degree programs offer a wide range of earnings outcomes. Out of the 10 most popular majors, eight leave their graduates earning less than \$50,000 per year. Registered nursing offers the highest salary for its graduates at just over \$66,000 per year. Yet, an associate’s degree in teacher education offers the lowest salary at ~\$38,000.

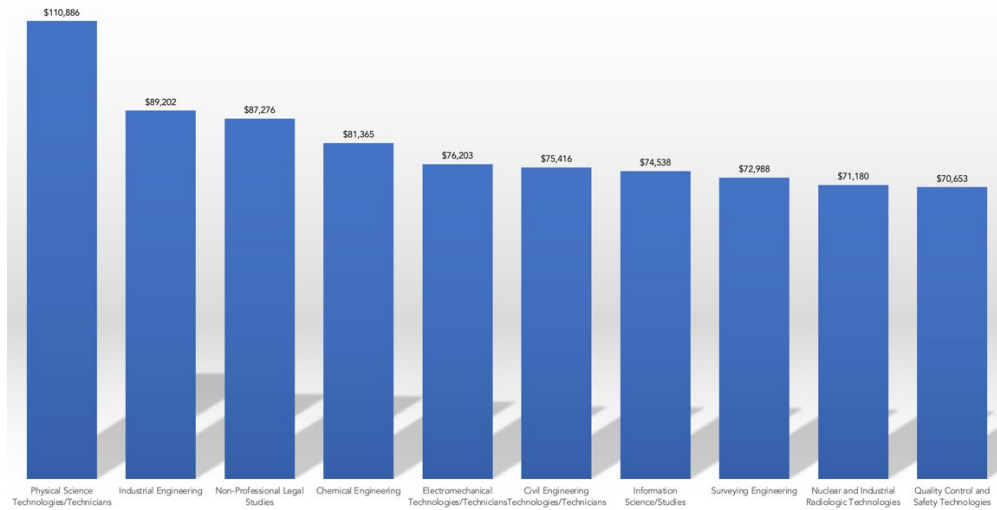




Certificates

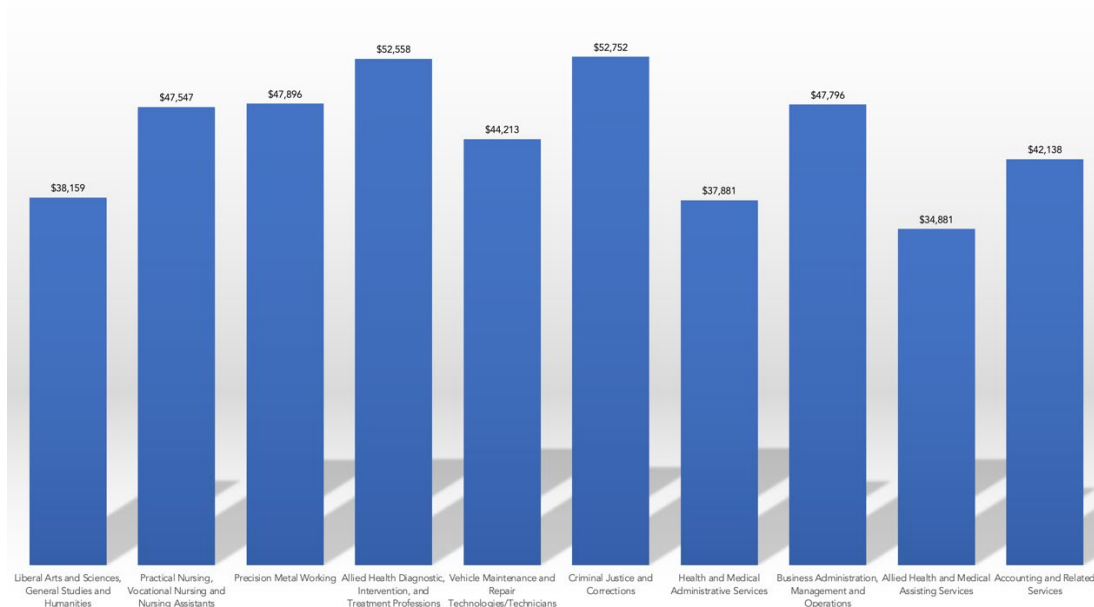
While certificates generally take less time to complete, typically between six and 18 months, some leave their graduates earning high salaries shortly after they earn their credential. Similar to bachelor degrees, the highest earning majors are heavily concentrated in the STEM fields. The top earning certificate—physical science technologies—show a similar job market salary to their associate’s degree holders at ~\$110,000 per year. People who graduate from these programs typically leave with an understanding of technical skills in support of scientific research and development.

TOP EARNING COLLEGE MAJORS
CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS



Some of the most popular certificates don't necessarily lead to the highest salaries. In fact, only two—allied health diagnostic, intervention, and treatment and criminal justice—lead to an early career salary of over \$50,000. Three of the most popular certificates—liberal arts, health and medical administrative services, and allied health and medical assisting—result in much lower salaries, with each averaging less than \$40,000 per year for their graduates.

MOST POPULAR COLLEGE MAJORS
CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS



Final Thoughts



There are many other tangible and intangible benefits to earning a college degree beyond employment outcomes. These include a higher likelihood to be happy, healthy, and civically engaged. However, whether we like it or not, most students attend with the primary purpose of job advancement and a financially secure future. State leaders can use Postsecondary Employment Outcomes data to understand and inform program offerings, better ensuring that all students leave knowing their postsecondary credential was worth it. When doing so, students win, taxpayers benefit, and we remain globally competitive for decades to come.

¹ All data come from the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes data through the US Census. Most popular majors are reflective of fields of study that show the most graduates available within the earnings (cohort) data provided within the PSEO.

² See: "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, and Lifetime Earnings." Georgetown Center on Education and The Workforce, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>.

³ See: "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, and Lifetime Earnings." Georgetown Center on Education and The Workforce, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>.