



Chapter 6

# PSEO Data Shines Light on Which College Majors Pay the Most

Michael Itzkowitz  
The HEA Group

Photo courtesy of Minnesota State

January 2024



**PSEO**  
COALITION





# 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 (PSEO) 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.<sup>1</sup>

## Methodology

This analysis uses data from the PSEO project hosted by the U.S. Census Bureau. 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 U.S. Census Bureau, 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.

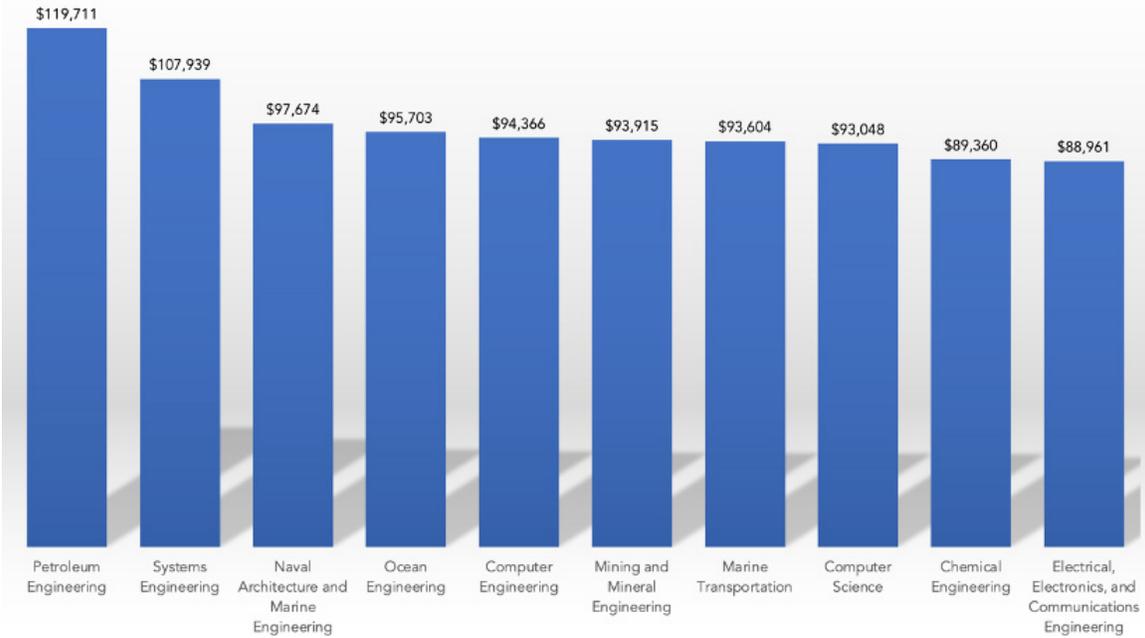
## Bachelor's Degrees

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 school but never attended college.<sup>2</sup> 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 programs of study 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, shows its graduates earning around \$94,000 per year.

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

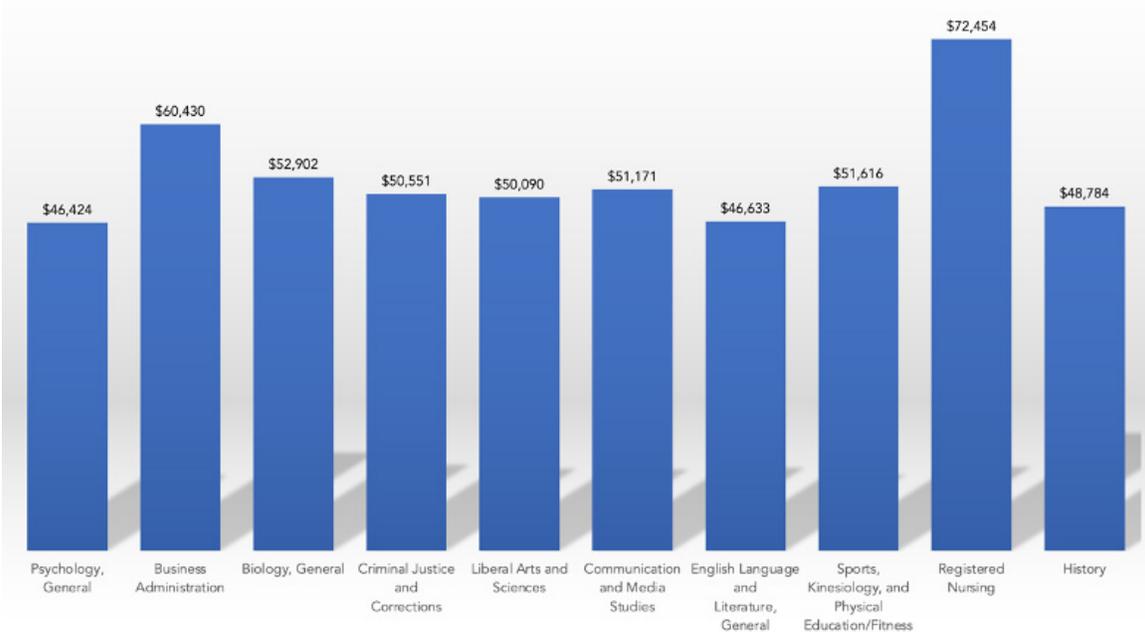
2 See: "The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, and Lifetime Earnings." Georgetown Center on Education and The Workforce, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>.

## TOP EARNING COLLEGE MAJORS BACHELOR DEGREE PROGRAMS



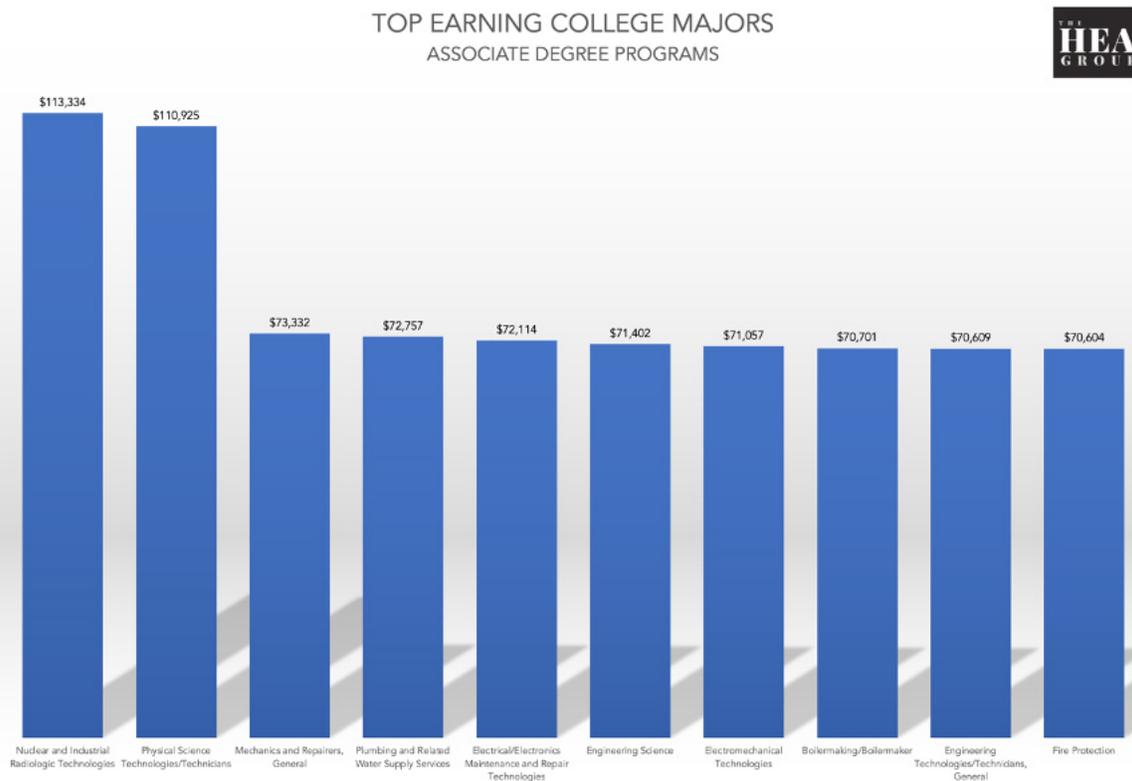
The most popular college degrees don't always lead to the highest salaries. Out of the top 10 most popular programs of study, only two – business administration and registered nursing – leave their graduates earning more than \$60,000 within five years of graduating. The most popular program of study,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

## MOST POPULAR MAJORS BACHELOR DEGREE PROGRAMS



## Associate's Degrees

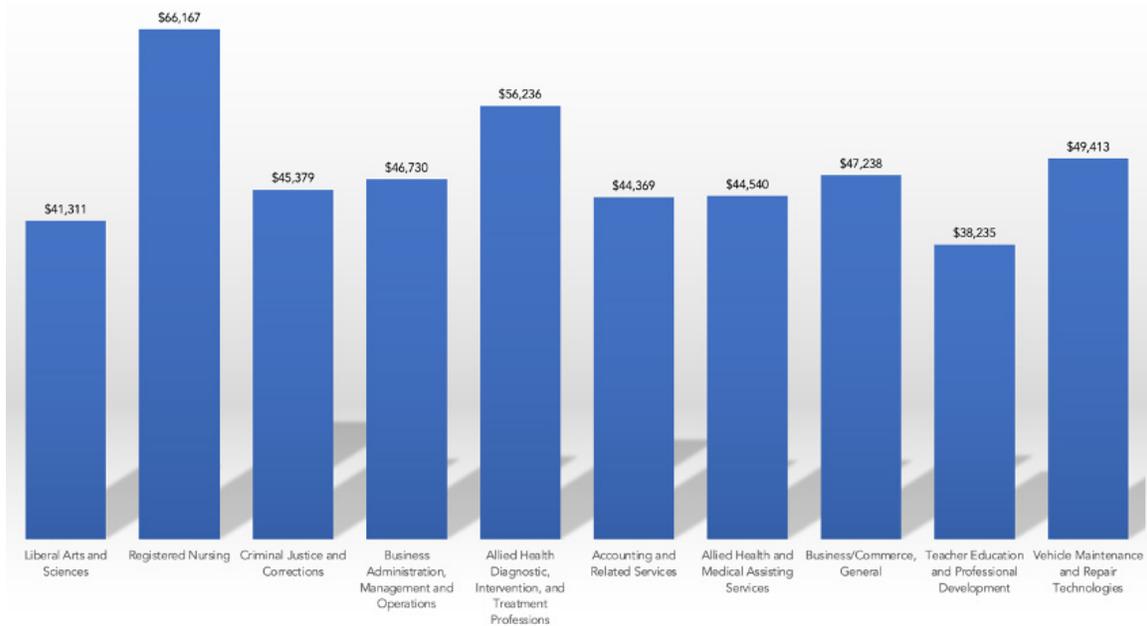
Associate's degrees require less education and time spent than a bachelor's degree and, therefore, their coinciding earnings are also lower, on average.<sup>3</sup> Similar to bachelor's degrees, many associate's degrees that lead to the highest salaries are also concentrated in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Two associate's degrees – nuclear and industrial radiologic technologies and physical science technologies – show substantially higher earnings than their counterparts. Both see their graduates earning more than \$110,000 per year, even just five years after graduation. Other non-STEM two-year degrees also see 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. However, an associate's degree in teacher education offers the lowest salary at approximately \$38,000.

<sup>3</sup> 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/>.

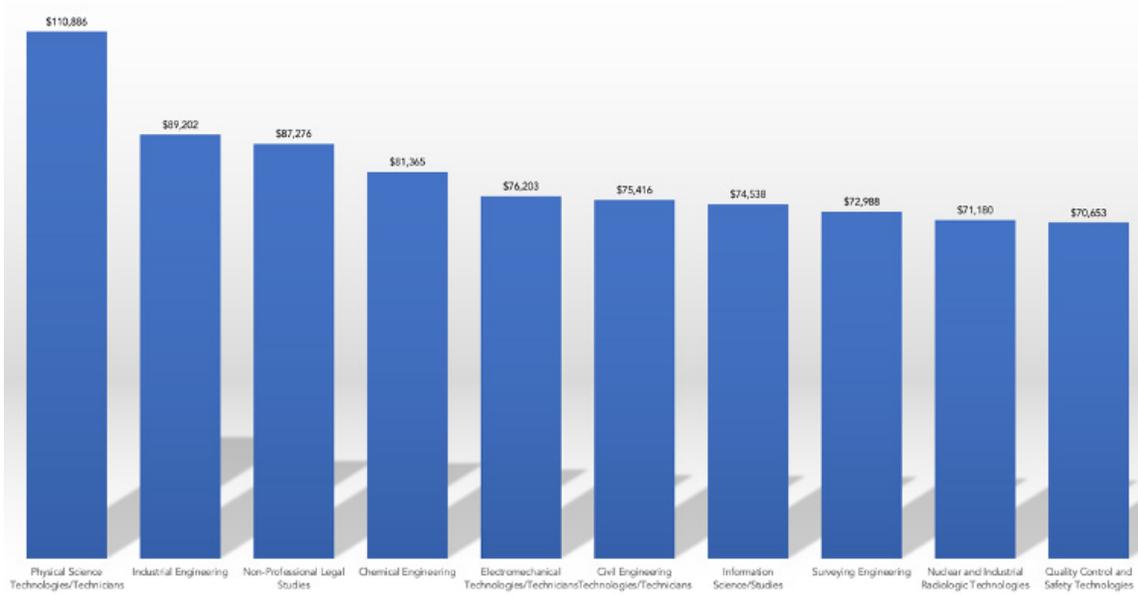
## MOST POPULAR COLLEGE MAJORS ASSOCIATE DEGREE PROGRAMS



## Certificates

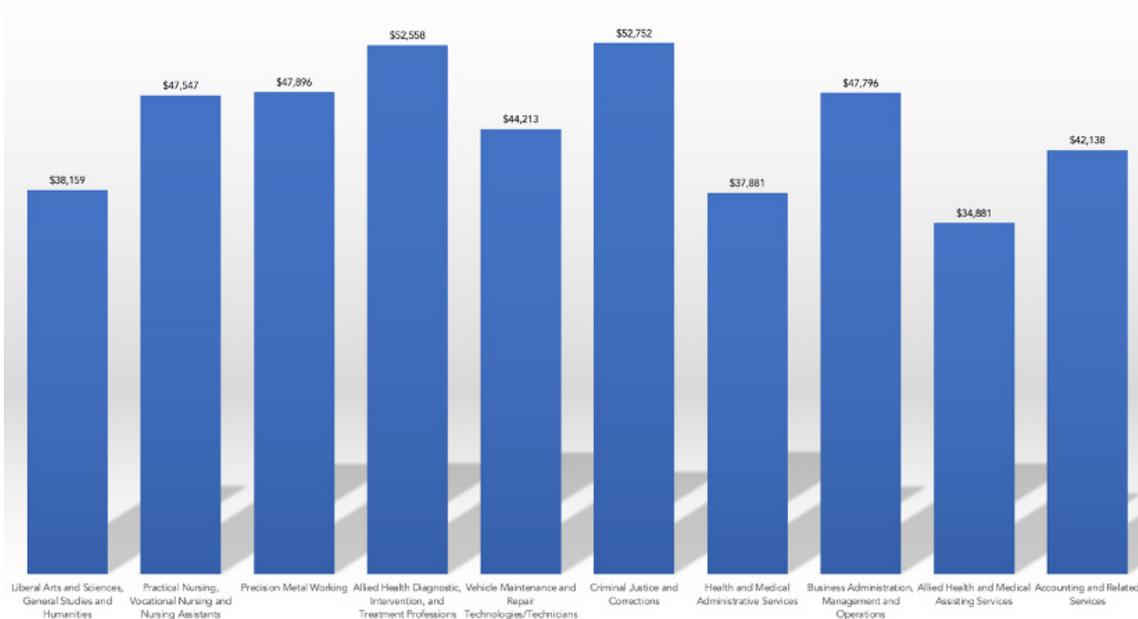
While certificates generally take less time to complete – typically between six and 18 months – some leave their graduates earning high salaries shortly after they earn their credentials. Similar to bachelor's degrees, the highest-earning programs of study are heavily concentrated in the STEM fields. The top-earning certificate – physical science technologies – shows a similar job market salary to associate's degree holders of the same program of study 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





# Conclusion

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