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Boom or Bust? Exploring Texas Postsecondary Programs with Uneven Earnings

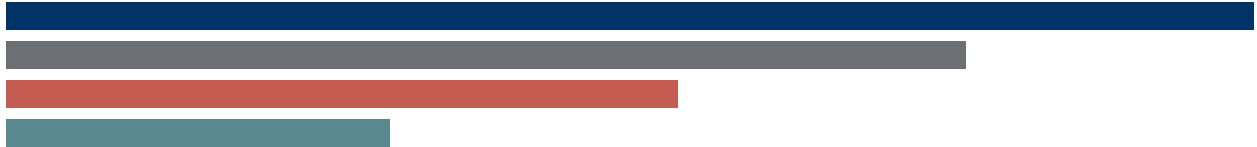
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This project was funded by a grant from the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) Coalition, made possible with support from Strada Education Foundation. The [PSEO Coalition](#) generates, analyzes, and shares employment data that demonstrates the value of higher education. The data are publicly available through a [dashboard](#) and [downloadable dataset](#) on the U.S. Census Bureau's website.

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June 15, 2026

Executive Summary

Median earnings are the workhorse metric for postsecondary accountability, but the median tells only part of the story. Across all three levels of this report – national, state, and institutional – pairing the median with distributional metrics reveals patterns that the median alone would not.

- **We present a framework to look beyond the median.** Using Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data, we examine three distributional metrics for undergraduate credentials: the earnings floor (25th percentile, one year after completion), earnings growth (change in 25th percentile from year one to five), and earnings dispersion (75th minus 25th percentile, one year after completion). Together, these capture downside risk, upward trajectory, and the gap between a program's most and least successful graduates.
- **Nationally, earnings growth never closes the initial gap for low earners.** Across every state and every undergraduate credential level examined, the bottom quartile of graduates does not catch up within five years to where the top quartile of their cohort started. This finding holds in all 13 states with strong PSEO coverage and is invisible in median-based comparisons. Minnesota stands out as the only state landing in the high-floor, high-growth sweet spot at all three credential levels; Texas leads on bachelor's-level floors and growth but shows persistently wide dispersion across every credential level.
- **Program choice can matter more than state of residence.** In Texas, two-digit CIP analysis reveals top-to-bottom program ranges of roughly \$23,000 at the certificate level, \$28,000 at the associate level, and \$35,000 at the bachelor's level – far wider than any cross-state gap. STEM programs frequently post both high floors and growth, while health professions exhibit a distinctive front-loaded pattern of strong entry wages followed by slower growth.

- **Methodological decisions in accountability frameworks carry substantive weight.** Under Texas's current Credentials of Value framework, a \$30,000 self-sufficient wage threshold is largely non-binding: 24 of 28 well-populated associate programs clear it at the bottom quartile of graduates. Under a population-weighted threshold closer to \$36,000, only 12 of 28 clear it, with academic and transfer-oriented programs – including the largest program, academic associate degrees – failing the test. Percentile choice, aggregation rule, and other assumptions together determine which credentials are deemed fundable.
- **Distributional metrics surface insights institutional program review may otherwise miss.** At Dallas College, healthcare programs are the only field cluster delivering high floors, strong growth, and tight dispersion at both the certificate and associate levels. IT and computing programs show stark divergence between certificate-level underperformance and associate-level strength, raising portfolio-design questions about how short-term tech credentials are positioned. A handful of certificate programs show negative wage growth at the bottom quartile, flagging cases where institutional engagement, pathway redesign, or finer program-level analysis is warranted.
- **A distributional lens does not replace the median, it contextualizes it.** Median earnings remain a useful, statistically rigorous indicator, but reading them alongside floor, growth, and dispersion surfaces equity questions that headline numbers obscure: whether the bottom quartile of graduates is being left behind, whether wage trajectories match the promise of entry wages, and whether program medians conceal materially different distributional outcomes. Differences between the median and the bottom quartile can spur institutional conversations to understand how to improve outcomes for all students.

The bottom-quartile graduate is not a statistical curiosity. They are a real student whose post-college trajectory is shaped by the program they chose, the institution they attended, the labor market they entered, and the policies that determined which credentials were available to them. Reading postsecondary outcomes as distributions whose shape matters as much as their center – rather than as single numbers attached to programs and institutions – is the next step toward accountability frameworks, institutional practices, and student-facing information systems that fully deliver on the promise of postsecondary outcomes data.

Visit the Dashboard to Explore More

A [companion dashboard](#) accompanying this report allows readers to explore even more findings, including PSEO data for other states and institutions not covered within this report.

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Acknowledgements

We thank the PSEO Coalition and Texas Higher Education Foundation for a grant that enabled this research. We also thank Jason Simon, Christopher Peña, and Gina Johnson for review of a first draft and technical insights shared through the PSEO Coalition's Research Community of Practice.

Introduction

As data coverage of post-college economic outcomes has expanded over the last decade, postsecondary institutions across the United States have broadened their view of student success to go beyond enrollment, retention, and completion to employment, earnings, and economic mobility (Aspen Institute, 2018; Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021; Mathematica, 2022; American Council on Education, 2025). During this time, evolving federal and state policies have sought to hold colleges and universities to account for post-college economic success, incentivizing institutions to prioritize programs that pay off, with the data to prove it (Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment, 2023; Texas House Bill 8, 2023). Increasingly, institutions are being tasked with integrating the financial outcomes of their graduates into their own internal systems of program review, institutional accountability, and goal setting. Criteria like the federal Do No Harm rule and [FAFSA lower-earnings designation](#), Texas's outcomes-based [community college financing model](#) (House Bill 8 and Senate Bill 1786), and evolving eligibility requirements for [Workforce Pell](#) funding are a few examples of how the wages and workforce outcomes of students matter more than ever before when it comes to institutional planning.

A common factor across these standards is that all use median, or 50th percentile, earnings. By definition, median earnings are the middle outcome for an institution or program, with half of measured students falling below and half above this midpoint. The median is a stable, disclosable, and interpretable measure that captures outcomes for the typical student, but it also sets a relatively low bar for programs, closer to a coin-flip test than a strong assurance of economic return. The median completer could earn more than a high school graduate, for example, while masking a scenario in which 30-40% of graduates from the same program do not, before even considering the fates of non-completers. Using [Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes \(PSEO\)](#) data, this report explores how institutions can operationalize outcomes data beyond the median. We use 25th and 75th percentile earnings data to examine student outcomes at the national, state, and institutional levels, with a focus on the 25th percentile, or the lower-tail earnings *floor*, earnings *growth* over time, and earnings *dispersion* between the 25th and 75th percentiles.

Data and Methods

PSEO data, developed and published by the U.S. Census Bureau, provide earnings and employment outcomes for postsecondary graduates by credential level, field of study, and institution for 35 participating states and systems with in-place data-sharing agreements (and counting). Drawing upon administrative data on jobs collected by the [Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program \(LEHD\)](#) at the Census, PSEO covers around 96% of employment in the United States. In a distinction from earnings data supplied by the [College Scorecard](#), PSEO can track student outcomes even if they are not Title IV recipients. And in a difference relative to [state](#)

[labor departments](#), which often report earnings data via their unemployment insurance (UI) systems, PSEO data capture employment and movement across state lines, not just within state. While partnering states have varying level of graduate coverage, with technical details described on the LEHD website, PSEO data are a promising tool through which to assess student outcomes. The exploratory analysis presented in this report, supported by the [PSEO Coalition](#), advances the use of PSEO data in research that furthers public understanding of the value of higher education. A [companion dashboard](#) accompanying the report allows readers to explore even more findings.

This report contributes to a growing body of work using postsecondary earnings data from a variety of sources to inform the national conversation about the value of higher education (Chetty et al., 2017; Carnevale et al., 2019; Itzkowitz, 2020; Lovenheim & Smith, 2023; Dhaliwal & Mahan, 2025). Most directly relevant to the analysis that follows is parallel work from the PSEO Coalition: Ithaka S+R's *Beyond the Median* (Childress & Miller McNeely, 2026), which uses PSEO 25th and 75th percentile earnings to examine within-program dispersion in South Carolina. We extend that approach by adding growth as a third distributional metric, applying the lens across national, state, and institutional levels, and connecting it directly to Texas's outcomes-based funding rules.

We use PSEO data to compare and characterize states, institutions, and programs across three primary metrics, drilling down from a national lens to Texas and then to [Dallas College](#) as an institutional example (Table 1). First, we review first-year 25th percentile, or lower-tail, earnings, which we stylize as a program's earnings *floor*. While not the absolute worst outcome, this value represents a program's downside risk; the bottom quarter of completers earn at or below this floor. A high floor indicates even the lowest-paid graduates do well immediately, while a low floor indicates poor initial outcomes for the bottom 25% of graduates. Second, we look at earnings *growth* from year one to five after program completion, again using 25th percentile earnings.¹ High growth means that the lowest earners of a program advance quickly from year one to five, while low growth suggests they advance more slowly. Third, we calculate the interquartile range of first-year program earnings, or 75th minus 25th percentile earnings, which we label the *dispersion* or spread of a program. Programs with high dispersion have more polarized outcomes, with the top 25% of graduates doing well, but not the bottom 25%. In contrast, programs with low dispersion have more consistent outcomes, interpreted as a lower level of risk for graduates.

¹ While PSEO data allow us to measure growth until year ten, and at the 25th percentile, median, or 75th percentile, we focus on growth for the lowest earners in a program over five years to understand how their outcomes evolve over time and whether they do so in a timely manner after graduation. Besides concern for early outcomes, we also choose year one to five growth because it has substantially better data coverage than year one to ten growth (64% vs. 56% of programs at the Texas two-digit CIP level and 28% vs. 20% at the Dallas College four-digit level). We also find year one to five growth has a 0.897 Pearson correlation with year one to ten growth nationally, a decent proxy for the longer horizon. We also recognize that the composition of the bottom 25% of can shift from year one to five as students move across or exit the earnings distribution.

Table 1

PSEO-Derived Metrics Characterize Lower-Tail Outcomes

Earnings Metric	Definition
<i>Floor</i>	25th percentile earnings, one year after credential completion
<i>Growth</i>	Change in 25th percentile earnings from year one to five after credential completion
<i>Dispersion</i>	75th minus 25th percentile earnings, one year after credential completion

Source: Research Institute calculations.

Using these data and definitions, the remainder of the report proceeds as follows:

1. **National benchmarking:** First, we begin with national benchmarking of undergraduate earnings distributions (earnings floor, growth, and dispersion) by state and credential level, pooling PSEO data across all available cohorts, partner institutions, and programs within each state. National benchmarking is used to illuminate differences in state-level patterns, identify bright spots for peer and policy learning, and note states where structural labor market differences generate highly disparate undergraduate outcomes. We will primarily focus on dispersion and growth differences across states, which we expect to be less susceptible to geographic variation in costs of living and wages than earnings floors are.
2. **State of Texas analysis:** Next, we zoom in on a specific state with high graduate coverage, Texas, to benchmark distributional earnings outcomes by credential level and general program of study (two-digit Classification of Instructional Program, or CIP, code). Within the context of Texas, we focus on the state’s policy incentives for institutions to graduate students with credentials of value, including the state’s outcomes-based funding model for community colleges. We will consider the potential implications of holding institutions accountable for the outcomes of their low earners (25th percentile) rather than the median (50th percentile).
3. **Dallas College program review:** Finally, we examine distributional earnings by credential and detailed program (four-digit CIP) at Dallas College as a worked example of how institutional practitioners can incorporate PSEO data into program review and continuous improvement processes. We will discuss the tradeoffs between using PSEO data and other sources, and tag programs based on their floor, growth, and dispersion. We conclude with a synthesis of findings from each section and general reflections.

National Benchmarking

To compare general trends in postsecondary earnings floors, growth, and dispersion across the national landscape, we pool all available cohorts per state and disaggregate data across three undergraduate credential levels: (1) short-term less-than-one-year certificates, (2) associate degrees, and (3) bachelor's degrees. We recognize the limitation here that each state available in PSEO data has differing rates of graduate coverage and different cohort years covered, so we caution that our findings are exploratory, painting regional trends with broad brushstrokes. To partially control for this, we focus our analysis here on states for which PSEO data cover at least 70% of graduates, cautioning that the 70% who are included varies by state. For example, some states have greater coverage of private institutions, while others primarily include public ones. This approach leaves us with 13 states: Virginia (87%), South Carolina (86%), Wyoming (86%), Montana (83%), South Dakota (79%), Indiana (77%), Texas (77%), Louisiana (74%), Minnesota (74%), Colorado (73%), Utah (73%), Hawaii (72%), and Oregon (70%). Each of these share data with the PSEO via a statewide system of some type (e.g., board of regents, higher education commission, or coordinating board) so cross-state comparisons more consistently reflect real labor market and program-mix differences rather than which institutions happened to share data. Metrics for these states are highlighted in Tables 2-4, with more in the accompanying dashboard.

Short-Term Certificates

Certificates show modest variation in starting earnings but striking variation in growth, with South Dakota emerging as the standout for both its floor and growth, and several high-floor states stalling out over time. On the floor, South Dakota leads at \$29,657, with Wyoming (\$28,271) and Texas (\$28,553) close behind, and Minnesota (\$27,675) and Oregon (\$27,230) rounding out the top of the list. The bottom of the distribution is Utah (\$23,435), South Carolina (\$24,674), Colorado (\$25,321), and Montana (\$25,402). Overall, the top-to-bottom spread across the states is about \$6,200, or a 27% gap, between South Dakota and Utah.

Growth tells a more differentiated story. South Dakota stands out at \$15,553, well clear of the next tier of Montana (\$11,153), Minnesota (\$11,130), and Indiana (\$9,036). Notably, South Dakota has a high share of students in health professions and related programs in the PSEO certificate data at 64%. Texas comes in mid-pack at \$7,751. On the lower end are Utah (\$5,751), Virginia (\$5,767), Wyoming (\$5,954), and South Carolina (\$6,409). Wyoming is the most notable concern: a top three floor paired with one of the weakest growth figures, meaning Wyoming certificate-holders start strong but barely move.

In terms of dispersion, Montana is remarkably tight at \$18,963, with South Carolina (\$24,605) and Oregon (\$26,086) next. The widest spreads are Texas (\$30,963), Virginia (\$30,395), Wyoming

(\$29,472), and Colorado (\$28,808). Across all 11 of the states with certificate data, earnings growth from year one to five never closes the original first year 25th to 75th percentile gap. Montana and South Dakota come closest – both cover about 60% of the starting spread – while Texas covers only about 25%, and Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming cover roughly 20%.

Table 2

Earnings Metrics by State, Short-Term Certificate Programs

State	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Arizona	\$30,719	\$14,658	\$28,189
Colorado	\$25,321	\$7,633	\$28,808
Connecticut	\$30,605	\$10,679	\$33,542
Georgia	\$29,997	\$268	\$38,072
Illinois	\$23,507	\$6,728	\$25,664
Indiana	\$25,877	\$9,036	\$26,650
Iowa	\$23,189	\$6,822	\$22,434
Maine	\$29,704	\$15,951	\$26,212
Massachusetts	\$28,758	\$9,258	\$29,306
Minnesota	\$27,675	\$11,130	\$27,814
Missouri	\$27,543	\$4,897	\$26,595
Montana	\$25,402	\$11,153	\$18,963
New York	\$27,444	\$12,810	\$30,161
North Carolina	\$28,899	-	\$53,338
Ohio	\$25,193	\$7,603	\$27,371
Oklahoma	\$24,565	\$5,318	\$20,801
Oregon	\$27,230	\$7,317	\$26,086
Rhode Island	\$39,655	-	\$59,537
South Carolina	\$24,674	\$6,409	\$24,605
South Dakota	\$29,657	\$15,553	\$26,311
Texas	\$28,553	\$7,751	\$30,963
Utah	\$23,435	\$5,751	\$27,947
Virginia	\$26,181	\$5,767	\$30,395
Wyoming	\$28,721	\$5,954	\$29,472

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values include all institutions, programs, and cohorts covered by PSEO data. Only less than one-year certificates are included. Highlighted rows denote states with more than 70% graduate coverage in PSEO data.

Associate Degrees

Associate degrees deliver higher and more varied starting wages than certificates, with Minnesota standing out in the top tier for both its floor and growth. On the floor, South Dakota again leads at \$32,688, followed by Indiana (\$30,096), Louisiana (\$28,865), South Carolina (\$28,713), Minnesota (\$28,649), and Montana (\$28,563). Texas sits at \$27,040, and the bottom is held by Utah (\$24,715), Hawaii (\$24,843), Oregon (\$26,050), Wyoming (\$26,236), and Virginia (\$26,401). The state-level spread is about \$8,000 – slightly wider than the certificate floor spread, suggesting associate-degree starting wages may be more sensitive to state context than certificates are.

Earnings growth for associate degrees is more broadly competitive. Utah leads at \$12,775, with Texas (\$11,577) and Minnesota (\$11,263) close behind, and Hawaii (\$9,949), Montana (\$9,859), Wyoming (\$9,611), and Virginia (\$9,591) in the next tier. The weak end is South Carolina (\$6,968), Louisiana (\$7,761), Indiana (\$7,943), South Dakota (\$8,015), and Colorado (\$8,452). States like Indiana, Louisiana, South Dakota, and South Carolina all combine above-average floors with weak growth, for solid starts that don't move much. While general academic associate programs in liberal arts, sciences, and general studies are common across states, Minnesota's program mix skews more toward health professions and related programs, 30% in health vs. 28% in general studies, perhaps part of why Minnesota performs well for both its earnings floor and growth at the associate level. In contrast, the Texas split is 23% to 37%, not in favor of health programs.

For dispersion in first-year earnings, South Dakota is tightest at \$24,697, followed by Hawaii (\$26,829), Montana (\$27,876), and Utah (\$29,443). The widest spreads are Louisiana (\$37,067), Texas (\$36,669), Wyoming (\$35,858), and Virginia (\$34,019). Again, growth is not able to fully match initial earnings dispersion, but Utah comes closest; its \$12,775 of growth covers about 43% of its \$29,443 starting spread. Texas's strong \$11,577 of growth covers only about 32% of its much wider \$36,669 initial spread. Minnesota's moderate dispersion \$30,057 is less concerning than it might be otherwise given that the state's floor and growth are both on the higher end.

Bachelor's Degrees

Bachelor's degrees produce the most uniform starting wages and the strongest growth, with Texas leading both, though dispersion remains wide. The floor at the bachelor's level is where Texas's profile becomes most distinctive. Texas leads cleanly at \$33,653, with Indiana (\$32,241), Utah (\$31,934), Minnesota (\$31,845), and South Dakota (\$31,647) the next tier. The bottom is Montana (\$27,595), Hawaii (\$27,935), South Carolina (\$28,487), Oregon (\$28,558), and Louisiana (\$28,830). The total spread is about \$6,000, the narrowest of any undergraduate credential level, suggesting bachelor's degrees produce the most uniform starting wages across states.

Growth reinforces rather than reshuffles the floor ranking. Texas leads again at \$16,753, with Minnesota (\$16,182), Utah (\$16,123), and Virginia (\$16,123) right behind, and Wyoming (\$15,456), Oregon (\$15,024), Louisiana (\$14,563), and Hawaii (\$14,450) in the next tier. The tail end is Indiana (\$13,521), Montana (\$13,548), South Carolina (\$13,721), South Dakota (\$13,839), and Colorado (\$14,388). The total range is narrow (roughly \$3,200 between the highest and lowest growth) meaning bachelor's growth, like the bachelor's floor, varies less by state than associate or certificate outcomes do. Indiana again pairs a top-tier floor with bottom-tier growth.

Even with strong floors and strong growth, dispersion gaps remain. South Carolina has the lowest dispersion at \$27,259, followed by South Dakota (\$28,732), Hawaii (\$28,788), and Montana (\$29,167). The widest spreads are Texas (\$35,493), Virginia (\$34,658), Indiana (\$33,930), Minnesota (\$32,306), and Wyoming (\$32,180). Texas thus shows the same pattern across all three credentials: consistently wide dispersion regardless of level, possibly a result of its large size and diverse program mix. Even at the credential level where the growth-dispersion comparison looks most favorable, a bottom quartile bachelor's graduate doesn't catch up within five years to where the top quartile of their cohort started. Utah comes closest, with \$16,123 of growth covering about 50% of its \$32,112 spread, and Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming each cover roughly 47-48%.

Cross-State Insights

A few patterns hold up across these comparisons. Texas's profile is fairly consistent, likely reflecting something real about the state's labor market: a clear bachelor's-floor leader, top-tier bachelor's and associate growth, middling certificate growth, and persistently wide dispersion at every level – the kind of pattern one might expect from a large state with high-paying urban sectors coexisting with rural and service-sector wages. Minnesota is the only state that lands in the high-floor, high-growth sweet spot at all three credential levels, suggesting something durable about its labor market and program mix. South Dakota emerges as a sleeper standout at the sub-bachelor's levels, leading on the certificate and associate floors and on certificate growth. Indiana shows a recurring "high start, low climb" pattern across associate and bachelor's levels. And the single finding that holds across every state and every credential level is that growth never closes the dispersion gap. Put another way, the bottom quartile of graduates, in every state and at every credential level examined, do not catch up within five years to where the top quartile of their cohort began. Because our aggregation to the state level includes a mix of all available programs, it is plausible that most of this dispersion is caused by the spread between high and low-paying fields rather than reflecting highly variable outcomes *within* fields. We drill down to Texas, where we analyze outcomes at the two-digit CIP program level, to further explore this question. We also consider the potential policy implications of substituting the earnings floor for median earnings.

Table 3**Earnings Metrics by State, Associate Degree Programs**

State	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Colorado	\$26,963	\$8,452	\$32,253
Connecticut	\$28,886	\$10,437	\$39,422
Georgia	\$25,886	\$10,809	\$34,918
Hawaii	\$24,843	\$9,949	\$26,829
Idaho	\$21,222	\$11,200	\$20,233
Illinois	\$24,834	\$10,557	\$31,702
Indiana	\$30,096	\$7,943	\$32,661
Iowa	\$26,404	\$9,700	\$27,678
Louisiana	\$28,865	\$7,761	\$37,067
Maine	\$27,496	\$6,512	\$26,950
Massachusetts	\$27,796	\$11,951	\$35,545
Minnesota	\$28,649	\$11,263	\$30,057
Missouri	\$24,427	\$8,749	\$26,907
Montana	\$28,563	\$9,859	\$27,876
New York	\$24,646	\$11,080	\$32,078
North Carolina	\$29,089	\$9,915	\$16,819
Ohio	\$28,292	\$8,836	\$30,700
Oklahoma	\$27,538	\$9,999	\$33,364
Oregon	\$26,050	\$9,350	\$30,864
Pennsylvania	\$32,569	\$11,769	\$35,774
South Carolina	\$28,713	\$6,968	\$31,391
South Dakota	\$32,688	\$8,015	\$24,697
Texas	\$27,040	\$11,577	\$36,669
Utah	\$24,715	\$12,775	\$29,443
Virginia	\$26,401	\$9,591	\$34,019
West Virginia	\$29,259	\$7,234	\$33,068
Wisconsin	\$19,715	\$12,243	\$19,262
Wyoming	\$26,236	\$9,611	\$35,858

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values include all institutions, programs, and cohorts covered by PSEO data. Highlighted rows denote states with more than 70% graduate coverage in PSEO data.

Table 4**Earnings Metrics by State, Bachelor's Degree Programs**

State	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Alabama	\$31,646	\$16,317	\$32,904
Arizona	\$31,892	\$15,249	\$31,854
Colorado	\$29,357	\$14,388	\$31,909
Connecticut	\$31,759	\$19,380	\$36,453
District of Columbia	\$34,772	\$13,746	\$36,540
Georgia	\$30,493	\$14,811	\$31,201
Hawaii	\$27,935	\$14,450	\$28,788
Idaho	\$27,332	\$15,273	\$30,706
Illinois	\$31,131	\$15,818	\$32,270
Indiana	\$32,241	\$13,521	\$33,930
Iowa	\$31,373	\$16,785	\$30,486
Louisiana	\$28,830	\$14,563	\$31,911
Maine	\$28,319	\$10,651	\$25,310
Massachusetts	\$32,721	\$18,019	\$32,232
Michigan	\$32,885	\$20,556	\$46,275
Minnesota	\$31,845	\$16,182	\$32,306
Missouri	\$29,371	\$13,784	\$28,043
Montana	\$27,595	\$13,548	\$29,167
New York	\$28,937	\$17,974	\$33,160
North Carolina	\$29,473	\$14,373	\$29,238
Ohio	\$30,709	\$15,257	\$33,168
Oklahoma	\$31,361	\$13,292	\$31,032
Oregon	\$28,558	\$15,024	\$30,259
Pennsylvania	\$33,351	\$18,810	\$37,479
Rhode Island	\$40,913	\$24,727	\$30,382
South Carolina	\$28,487	\$13,721	\$27,259
South Dakota	\$31,647	\$13,839	\$28,732
Texas	\$33,653	\$16,753	\$35,493
Utah	\$31,934	\$16,137	\$32,112
Virginia	\$30,571	\$16,123	\$34,658
West Virginia	\$27,923	\$15,675	\$30,631
Wisconsin	\$30,299	\$16,088	\$29,101
Wyoming	\$30,639	\$15,456	\$32,180

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values include all institutions, programs, and cohorts covered by PSEO data. Highlighted rows denote states with more than 70% graduate coverage in PSEO data.

Zooming in on Texas

In our national analysis, we found that earnings growth does not surpass dispersion for any state. Wide dispersion in state results is not surprising, however, since it likely captures cross-program earnings variation, e.g., engineering majors earning more than humanities majors in their early career. Turning to Texas, we narrow the scope of our analysis to within-program floors, growth, and dispersion, using statewide aggregates across all institutions, broken out by two-digit CIP code, restricted to programs with at least 500 graduates statewide so that percentile estimates are stable enough to support comparison. After this filter, 18 less-than-one-year certificate categories, 31 associate categories, and 28 bachelor's categories remain. The framework is identical to the state-level analysis, but we make two interpretive caveats: first, two-digit CIP categories pool many narrower programs that may differ substantially from one another (Health Professions notably pools nursing, allied health, and lower-paid support occupations), and second, in the interest of retaining large numbers of graduates, the analysis here is one level of CIP detail coarser than is usually used for the state's credential of value policy (four-digit CIP code). Tables 5-7 present data on large two-digit CIP programs in Texas across all covered institutions.

Short-Term Certificates

Short-term certificate outcomes are dominated by technical and protective-service programs at the top, with sharp drop-offs into low-paying personal-service and humanities-adjacent programs at the bottom. Science Technologies / Technicians and Homeland Security and Law Enforcement are the clear sweet-spot programs, both with top three floors and top three growth. Engineering Technologies and Transportation are not far off. The floor for Science Technologies / Technicians stands out at \$42,562, followed by Homeland Security and Law Enforcement (\$36,788), Engineering Technologies (\$33,208), Construction Trades (\$32,810), Transportation and Materials Moving (\$31,550), and Health Professions (\$29,433). The bottom is held by Culinary and Personal Services (\$19,439), Family and Consumer Sciences (\$21,013), Visual and Performing Arts (\$21,211), Foreign Languages (\$21,683), Communications Technologies (\$21,723), and Education (\$22,599). The top-to-bottom spread is roughly \$23,000, making it far wider than any state-level gap, indicating which certificate likely matters far more than which state you earn it in.

Growth at the certificate level reinforces floor rankings. Science Technologies leads dramatically at \$21,581, nearly double the next-best program, followed by Homeland Security (\$12,421), Engineering Technologies (\$10,477), Transportation (\$10,145), Precision Production (\$9,638), Mechanic and Repair Technologies (\$9,289), and Construction Trades (\$8,206). The lower end includes Family and Consumer Sciences (\$3,195), Education (\$4,547), Business (\$4,604), and Culinary (\$5,612). Business is noteworthy here due to its relatively low floor (\$27,489), large size of 31,000 graduates, and low growth, making it a high-volume program where wages stall early.

Dispersion is where short-term certificates look most concerning. The Family and Consumer Sciences spread is \$13,372, followed by Education (\$15,298), Culinary (\$15,558), and Agricultural Sciences (\$19,621). The widest spreads belong to Science Technologies (\$60,692), Construction Trades (\$40,544), Engineering Technologies (\$39,073), Computer Science (\$33,240), and Transportation (\$31,190). The significant gap between lower and upper quartile earnings could mean that further CIP disaggregation is needed, or that these programs potentially serve a diverse set of learners who span very different stages and pay grades in their professional careers.

Associate Degrees

Associate degrees show a wider top tier, with health and technical fields dominating the floor and STEM fields driving the strongest growth. Science Technologies leads (top three on both floor and growth), with Precision Production and Engineering Technologies also being strong performers. At the floor, Health Professions tops the list at \$48,481. Unlike many top-of-distribution outliers, this rests on 140,600 graduates, so the signal is robust. Science Technologies (\$41,994), Construction Trades (\$41,980), Engineering Technologies (\$36,884), Precision Production (\$34,726), Mechanic and Repair Technologies (\$31,274), Computer Science (\$28,977), Transportation (\$28,703), and Legal Studies (\$28,112) round out the top tier. The bottom is dominated by liberal-arts and humanities programs: Education (\$20,220), Parks / Recreation (\$20,360), Communications (\$20,664), Visual and Performing Arts (\$20,861), Biological Sciences (\$20,771), and Psychology (\$21,065). The top-to-bottom spread is about \$28,000 – even wider than at the certificate level, with Health Professions standing apart.

Growth at the associate level is the most differentiated of any credential. Science Technologies leads again at \$31,875, followed by Engineering (\$22,662), Mathematics and Statistics (\$19,917), Transportation (\$16,947), Biological Sciences (\$13,736), Precision Production (\$13,677), Education (\$12,755), Physical Sciences (\$12,488), Multi / Interdisciplinary Studies (\$12,400), and Liberal Arts (\$12,029). Several low-floor programs show very strong growth; Education starts at \$20,220 but adds \$12,755 over four years, and Biological Sciences starts at \$20,771 and adds \$13,736. Health Professions, the floor leader, adds only \$9,455, suggesting a front-loaded wage premium. Lower-growth fields include Family and Consumer Sciences (\$3,100), Culinary (\$5,981), Agricultural Sciences (\$6,910), Legal Studies (\$7,293), and Visual and Performing Arts (\$7,541).

Earnings dispersion for Family and Consumer Sciences is narrowest at \$14,154, followed by Education (\$16,117), Parks / Recreation (\$16,643), Culinary (\$17,486), and Visual and Performing Arts (\$18,459). The widest spreads belong to Science Technologies (\$57,925), Construction Trades (\$48,621), Engineering Technologies (\$39,557), Homeland Security (\$37,192), Engineering (\$34,299), and Physical Sciences (\$32,872). Overall, these patterns mirror certificate patterns.

Table 5**Earnings Metrics for Texas Short-Term Certificate Programs**

Area of Study (Two-Digit CIP Code)	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Science Technologies/Technicians (41)	\$42,562	\$21,581	\$60,692
Homeland Security, Law Enforcement, Firefighting and Related Protective Services (43)	\$36,788	\$12,421	\$29,665
Engineering/Engineering-Related Technologies/Technicians (15)	\$33,208	\$10,477	\$39,073
Construction Trades (46)	\$32,810	\$8,206	\$40,544
Transportation and Materials Moving (49)	\$31,550	\$10,145	\$31,190
Health Professions and Related Programs (51)	\$29,433	\$7,869	\$26,502
Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services (11)	\$28,040	\$5,703	\$33,240
Precision Production (48)	\$27,947	\$9,638	\$29,543
Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services (52)	\$27,489	\$4,604	\$29,199
Mechanic and Repair Technologies/Technicians (47)	\$27,154	\$9,289	\$25,240
Legal Professions and Studies (22)	\$26,638	\$6,186	\$25,779
Agricultural/Animal/Plant/Veterinary Science and Related Fields (01)	\$25,127	\$6,105	\$19,621
Education (13)	\$22,599	\$4,547	\$15,298
Communications Technologies/Technicians and Support Services (10)	\$21,723	\$7,680	\$22,901
Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (16)	\$21,683	\$6,587	\$21,251
Visual and Performing Arts (50)	\$21,211	\$6,354	\$21,130
Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences (19)	\$21,013	\$3,195	\$13,372
Culinary, Entertainment, and Personal Services (12)	\$19,439	\$5,612	\$15,558

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values are aggregated statewide across all institutions covered by PSEO data. Only less than one-year certificates are included. All programs shown have at least 500 graduates across all cohorts.

Table 6**Earnings Metrics for Texas Associate Degree Programs**

Area of Study (Two-Digit CIP Code)	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Health Professions and Related Programs (51)	\$48,481	\$9,455	\$30,841
Science Technologies/Technicians (41)	\$41,994	\$31,875	\$57,925
Construction Trades (46)	\$41,980	\$8,097	\$48,621
Engineering/Engineering-Related Technologies/Technicians (15)	\$36,884	\$11,710	\$39,557
Precision Production (48)	\$34,726	\$13,677	\$32,858
Mechanic and Repair Technologies/Technicians (47)	\$31,274	\$11,828	\$29,357
Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services (11)	\$28,977	\$10,100	\$29,798
Transportation and Materials Moving (49)	\$28,703	\$16,947	\$29,494
Legal Professions and Studies (22)	\$28,112	\$7,293	\$23,581
Agricultural/Animal/Plant/Veterinary Science and Related Fields (01)	\$27,503	\$6,910	\$19,318
Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services (52)	\$26,810	\$10,261	\$28,170
Homeland Security, Law Enforcement, Firefighting and Related Protective Services (43)	\$26,791	\$10,233	\$37,192
Engineering (14)	\$24,543	\$22,662	\$34,299
Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences (19)	\$23,781	\$3,100	\$14,154
Physical Sciences (40)	\$23,780	\$12,488	\$32,872
Social Sciences (45)	\$23,729	\$11,202	\$26,381
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities (24)	\$23,519	\$12,029	\$26,591
Culinary, Entertainment, and Personal Services (12)	\$23,445	\$5,981	\$17,486
Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (16)	\$23,429	\$8,657	\$20,829
Mathematics and Statistics (27)	\$22,546	\$19,917	\$30,946
Public Administration and Social Service Professions (44)	\$22,428	\$9,094	\$20,563
Communications Technologies/Technicians and Support Services (10)	\$22,097	\$9,364	\$23,114
Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies (30)	\$22,002	\$12,400	\$21,973
English Language and Literature/Letters (23)	\$21,890	\$11,985	\$24,850
History (54)	\$21,425	\$9,449	\$22,628
Psychology (42)	\$21,065	\$8,755	\$19,748
Visual and Performing Arts (50)	\$20,861	\$7,541	\$18,459
Biological and Biomedical Sciences (26)	\$20,771	\$13,736	\$21,903
Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs (09)	\$20,664	\$9,249	\$19,728
Parks, Recreation, Leisure, Fitness, and Kinesiology (31)	\$20,360	\$10,690	\$16,643
Education (13)	\$20,220	\$12,755	\$16,117

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values are aggregated statewide across all institutions covered by PSEO data. All programs shown have at least 500 graduates across all cohorts.

Bachelor's Degrees

Bachelor's degrees post the most extreme floor differentiation across programs, with engineering and computing standing apart while health professions show a striking front-loaded pattern. At this level, Engineering is the standout (best floor, top two growth), with Computer Science the runner up (number four floor, top growth), and Engineering Technologies and Transportation rounding out the top programs. Despite solid initial outcomes, Health Professions do not make exhibit the strong growth that these top programs do. At the floor, Engineering leads at \$60,643 (with a robust 86,000 graduates) followed by Engineering Technologies (\$53,854), Health Professions (\$53,758), Computer Science (\$47,896), Transportation (\$42,246), Business (\$37,760), Mathematics (\$37,026), Multi / Interdisciplinary Studies (\$35,510) (in Texas, often used for teacher preparation programs), Architecture (\$34,445), and Physical Sciences (\$30,855). The bottom is held by Biological Sciences (\$25,245), Philosophy and Religious Studies (\$25,450), Psychology (\$26,020), Parks / Recreation (\$26,043), Visual and Performing Arts (\$26,276), Family and Consumer Sciences (\$27,563), and Natural Resources (\$27,718). The top-to-bottom range is roughly \$35,000, far wider than any other credential level, meaning program choice at the bachelor's level produces the largest single-decision earnings effect in the entire dataset.

Growth at the bachelor's level continues to favor STEM but with notable surprises in the middle of the distribution. Computer Science leads at \$23,111, with Engineering (\$23,066) essentially tied, followed by Physical Sciences (\$21,613), Parks / Recreation (\$21,286), Biological Sciences (\$20,174), Engineering Technologies (\$19,235), Transportation (\$19,195), Natural Resources (\$18,258), Mathematics (\$17,973), Agricultural Sciences (\$17,834), Architecture (\$17,655), Business (\$17,456), and Family and Consumer Sciences (\$17,071). Health Professions, despite holding the third-highest floor, has the lowest growth at \$9,111, similar to the front-loaded pattern seen at the associate level. Visual and Performing Arts (\$12,305), Public Administration (\$13,192), Philosophy (\$13,366), Legal Studies (\$13,520), and Homeland Security (\$13,915) round out the weak end.

As far as dispersion, Public Administration is best at \$21,906, followed by Psychology (\$22,460), Family and Consumer Sciences (\$23,943), Biological Sciences (\$24,535), Communication (\$24,736), and Homeland Security (\$25,171). The widest spreads belong to Transportation (\$47,975), Computer Science (\$43,399), Health Professions (\$37,449), Engineering (\$36,063), Physical Sciences (\$32,681), Business (\$32,154), and Engineering Technologies (\$32,015).

Table 7**Earnings Metrics for Texas Bachelor's Degree Programs**

Area of Study (Two-Digit CIP Code)	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
Engineering (14)	\$60,643	\$23,066	\$36,063
Engineering/Engineering-Related Technologies/Technicians (15)	\$53,854	\$19,235	\$32,015
Health Professions and Related Programs (51)	\$53,758	\$9,111	\$37,449
Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services (11)	\$47,896	\$23,111	\$43,399
Transportation and Materials Moving (49)	\$42,246	\$19,195	\$47,975
Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services (52)	\$37,760	\$17,456	\$32,154
Mathematics and Statistics (27)	\$37,026	\$17,973	\$31,966
Multi/Interdisciplinary Studies (30)	\$35,510	\$14,905	\$27,818
Architecture and Related Services (04)	\$34,445	\$17,655	\$25,897
Physical Sciences (40)	\$30,855	\$21,613	\$32,681
Public Administration and Social Service Professions (44)	\$30,448	\$13,192	\$21,906
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities (24)	\$30,351	\$14,408	\$29,827
Agricultural/Animal/Plant/Veterinary Science and Related Fields (01)	\$30,333	\$17,834	\$27,458
Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (16)	\$29,970	\$14,793	\$29,116
Social Sciences (45)	\$29,914	\$16,351	\$28,732
Area, Ethnic, Cultural, Gender, and Group Studies (05)	\$29,814	\$12,934	\$28,932
Communication, Journalism, and Related Programs (09)	\$29,530	\$15,913	\$24,736
Homeland Security, Law Enforcement, Firefighting and Related Protective Services (43)	\$29,520	\$13,915	\$25,171
Legal Professions and Studies (22)	\$28,760	\$13,520	\$26,078
English Language and Literature/Letters (23)	\$28,406	\$14,715	\$26,955
History (54)	\$27,888	\$16,438	\$28,598
Natural Resources and Conservation (03)	\$27,718	\$18,258	\$25,640
Family and Consumer Sciences/Human Sciences (19)	\$27,563	\$17,071	\$23,943
Visual and Performing Arts (50)	\$26,276	\$12,305	\$27,624
Parks, Recreation, Leisure, Fitness, and Kinesiology (31)	\$26,043	\$21,286	\$26,760
Psychology (42)	\$26,020	\$14,648	\$22,460
Philosophy and Religious Studies (38)	\$25,450	\$13,366	\$28,550
Biological and Biomedical Sciences (26)	\$25,245	\$20,174	\$24,535

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Values are aggregated statewide across all institutions covered by PSEO data. All programs shown have at least 500 graduates across all cohorts.

State Policy Implications

Texas community colleges are funded under a system that ties state dollars to *Credentials of Value* that pay off for students through legislation like House Bill 8, Senate Bill 1786, and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) rules. For most associate degrees, [recent THECB rules](#) require two outcomes within five years of graduation: graduates need to recoup the cost of their education plus the wages they could have earned without it, and a typical graduate's earnings need to clear a self-sufficient wage benchmark. (A few fields, including Education, Library Science, childcare-related services, and Health Professions get a longer ten-year window and only face the return on investment test.) The framework essentially asks whether typical, or median, graduates do well enough. A natural follow-up is whether even the lower-earning graduates do well enough, i.e. whether credentials that pass the bar at the median graduate would still pass if we asked the same question of graduates at the floor or 25th percentile of the earnings distribution.

The statewide threshold THECB is applying for the current funding year is \$30,000, derived from unweighted median county-level data and rounded up to the nearest thousand (THECB, 2025). The benchmark is derived from the Texas Workforce Commission's Self-Sufficient Wage data, which is built on the University of Washington's Self-Sufficiency Standard for a typical Texas family. We compare the \$30,000 to year five earnings data for the lowest quartile of earners (or, with our definitions, the earnings floor plus earnings growth). We assume this THECB rule, like PSEO data, is expressed in 2023 dollars, but we could not find a specification in proposed rules text other than the mention of real wages. The findings that follow are sensitive to inflation adjustments and cohort timing, especially those right on the threshold boundary. Nevertheless, they illustrate how the choice of median or floor could in principle affect which programs are fundable as credentials of value.

Among the 28 well-populated ($N \geq 500$) associate programs in Texas PSEO data (excluding the three carve-outs of Education, Health Professions, and Family and Consumer Sciences, which contains most childcare-related fields), every program clears the self-sufficient threshold at the median graduate. When the same comparison is run at the bottom-quartile graduate, only 24 of 28 still clear it. Communications and Journalism associate degrees fall just \$100 below the self-sufficient wage, Psychology associate degrees are \$200 below it, and Culinary associate programs are \$600 short. Visual and Performing Arts associate completers are \$1,600 below the threshold, posting the lowest overall associate degree earnings among well-populated programs in year five.

Ultimately, the percentile choice changes the picture slightly under current rules, but the self-sufficient wage portion of the framework just barely binds at the bottom quartile. This is not because Texas associate-degree graduates are uniformly thriving. It is because the threshold itself

is set relatively low. Aggregating county-level standards by taking an unweighted median across all 254 Texas counties means the rural and lower-cost counties – where housing, childcare, and transportation cost less – carry equal weight to the much larger metros where most Texans actually live. A population-weighted threshold would land considerably higher, with around \$36,000 per year suggested by [Texas 2036 in comments to the THECB](#). At that level, the percentile choice would matter a great deal: an additional 12 programs would fail the threshold, with only 12 out of 28 clearing it. Programs that would fail include veterinary science, legal professions, history, English, psychology, other social sciences, foreign languages, and the largest field, awarded to more than 225,000 students in PSEO data – the general studies associate degree. Withdrawing state support from this many programs would amount to a fundamental redefinition of the community college mission – removing public funding from most academic and transfer pathways in favor of those with stronger initial labor market outcomes. While certainly unlikely, this analysis offers a striking reminder that methodological choices like percentile, aggregation rule, and dollar-year quietly determine the accountability framework shaping program portfolios.

Dallas College in Focus

So far, we have explored how PSEO data can offer insights at both the state and national levels. Looking at the national landscape, we used PSEO data to broadly identify states with a program mix or labor market conditions that are favorable for even the lowest-earning graduates. Diving into data for Texas, we observed considerable variation within and across programs, with STEM fields often posting both high floors and high growth and Health Professions generally exhibiting a front-loaded earnings premium. We also explored a simple policy use case for 25th percentile earnings, one that would raise the standard needed for several Texas associate degrees to be considered fundable credentials of value under a newly updated self-sufficient wage baseline. A key remaining question is how individual institutions can leverage PSEO data to benefit their own institutional practices and policies, particularly the floor, growth, and dispersion metrics.

The PSEO Coalition provides one-pager resources for [chancellors and presidents](#), [university staff, faculty](#), and [students and families](#), which discuss how PSEO data can be used, and the [Research Institute's past work](#) has examined how institutions can coalesce post-college economic data from a variety of sources – including the PSEO Explorer – to triangulate student outcomes. The PSEO's wide coverage, clear focus on completer outcomes, and industry and geography flows are ways in which institutions can add value to their program evaluation processes, probing deeper into insights that other data sources surface. Furthermore, the floor, growth, and dispersion metrics allow us to investigate the equity implications of programs without focusing on any one student population, because they prompt us to ask which programs produce boom-or-bust, or feast-or-famine, outcomes, and whether the bottom 25 percent of completers are being left in untenable

financial positions after college. We examine certificate and associate degree programs at Dallas College at the four-digit CIP level as a case study of how this process can work at other institutions. Tables 8 and 9 contain this data, with the companion dashboard offering even more information.

Short-Term Certificates

Across all Dallas College short-term certificate programs, the typical bottom-quartile graduate starts at \$45,938, gains an extra \$12,859 by year five, and faces a first-year gap of \$27,551 vs. their top-quartile peers. That all-programs floor is high for short-term certificates, roughly \$17,000 above the Texas statewide certificate floor of \$28,553, which suggests Dallas College's certificate mix tilts toward higher-paying technical and healthcare programs and toward an urban labor market that pays a premium even at entry wages. The all-programs growth figure is also strong, exceeding Texas statewide certificate growth (\$7,751) by about 66%. The all-programs dispersion of \$27,551 means that the top-quartile first-year earner in a Dallas College certificate program out-earns the bottom-quartile earner by roughly 60% of the bottom-quartile graduate's full starting wage, even before accounting for any divergence over time.

Four programs surpass the all-programs average: Allied Health Diagnostic (\$63,072), Criminal Justice (\$55,750), Fire Protection (\$55,075), and Electrical / Electronic Engineering Technologies (\$57,372). The strongest combined floor-and-growth profiles are Fire Protection (\$55,075 + \$15,370) and Allied Health Diagnostic (\$63,072 + \$11,444), both of which represent the high-floor plus high-growth sweet spot that defines a strong short-term credential. On the other end, two programs exhibit negative growth: Business Operations Support (-\$1,439) and Practical Nursing (-\$916). This means that bottom-quartile earnings in those fields decreases over time, in real terms. Practical Nursing is particularly striking because it pairs a respectable floor (\$42,273) with that wage erosion, suggesting a credential that opens a decent entry-level door but does not lead anywhere from there without further training. This could be an institutional opportunity to further engage and develop offerings for these students. Computer Programming is another underperformer: a \$32,639 floor combined with just \$1,712 of growth over four years, hard to square with conventional wisdom about tech-related awards, perhaps reflecting a gap between short-term coding certificates and bachelor's-level credentials that unlock the high-paying roles. Again, this represents an institutional opportunity to bolster transfer pathways in computer programming or build out new programs, like in-house community college bachelor's degrees. Dallas College now offers multiple bachelor's degree programs including a [Bachelor of Applied Technology in Software Development](#) and a [Bachelor of Science in Nursing](#) program, but these programs were only opened in the last few years and hence are not covered by PSEO data.

Several programs show dispersion well above the \$27,551 all-programs benchmark, including Computer Programming (\$41,662), Computer Systems Networking (\$34,931), Business Operations Support (\$33,676), and Computer Software and Media Applications (\$30,088) – a clear pattern where IT-adjacent certificates produce wide initial earnings spreads, suggesting the bottom-quartile graduate of a Dallas College tech certificate ends up in materially different jobs than the top-quartile graduate of similar programs. For large institutions like Dallas College, several distinct programs are often housed within one four-digit CIP code; wide dispersion may suggest some programs within that area are performing well, but others are not. Allied Health Diagnostic dispersion (\$28,542) also runs high despite its strong floor, meaning even the high-paying credentials do not pay equally for everyone who earns them. The tightest dispersions belong to Specialized Sales (\$14,111), Allied Health / Medical Assisting (\$15,890), Criminal Justice (\$17,333), Fire Protection (\$18,339), Culinary (\$18,437), and Vehicle Maintenance (\$18,940) – all programs where graduates tend to enter relatively standardized occupational categories with narrower wage bands. The takeaway is that program choice in Dallas College's certificate portfolio shapes not just expected earnings but expected consistency of earnings: a student entering Fire Protection or Allied Health / Medical Assisting can plan around a fairly predictable wage outcome, while a student entering Computer Programming or Business Operations Support faces a much wider range of plausible post-credential earnings, and a meaningfully higher chance of landing in the lower part of that range than program-average figures alone would suggest.

Associate Degrees

Across all Dallas College associate degree programs, the typical bottom-quartile graduate starts at \$35,907, gains \$15,898 over four years, and faces a first-year gap of \$38,141 vs. the top quartile. The all-programs floor sits roughly \$9,000 above the Texas statewide associate floor of \$27,040, consistent with the urban wage premium reflected in the certificate-level data. However, the gap is narrower than at the certificate level, suggesting Dallas's labor-market premium is somewhat more concentrated in short-term credentialed roles. All-programs growth (\$15,898) substantially exceeds the Texas statewide associate growth (\$11,577), and the all-programs dispersion (\$38,141) is wide, slightly above the wide \$36,669 figure that already characterized Texas statewide associate outcomes. Notably, the all-programs floor for Dallas College associate degrees (\$35,907) lands meaningfully below the all-programs floor for Dallas College short-term certificates (\$45,938), an inversion that likely reflects program-mix and age differences more than degree value: the certificate side concentrates in high-paying technical and health programs, while the associate side mixes those with broader liberal arts and general business pathways.

Three programs clear the all-programs floor by a wide margin: Registered Nursing (\$58,846), Dental Support Services (\$54,993), and Allied Health Diagnostic (\$53,999). All are healthcare

credentials, and all are roughly 50% above the all-programs floor. Computer Systems Networking (\$37,592), Clinical / Medical Lab Science (\$37,132), Legal Support Services (\$35,621), and Business Administration (\$31,823) round out the next tier. The strongest combined floor-and-growth profiles are Registered Nursing (\$58,846 + \$15,369), Allied Health Diagnostic (\$53,999 + \$10,976), and Computer Systems Networking (\$37,592 + \$15,610). Accounting (\$30,162 floor + \$15,898 growth) and Design and Applied Arts (\$27,582 + \$15,465) are honorable mentions where modest floors are paired with growth at or above the all-programs benchmark. Teacher Education stands out for closing a floor gap: it starts well below the benchmark at \$23,258 but adds \$13,213 over four years, lifting bottom-quartile graduates to roughly \$36,500 by year five, close to where many programs start. While these associate-level teaching programs historically focused on early childcare center occupations, newer Dallas College credentials like the [Bachelor of Applied Science in Early Childhood Education](#) position graduates to earn closer to \$60,000 per year as certified school teachers. On the underperformer side, Culinary Arts pairs a sub-benchmark floor (\$27,349) with the weakest growth in the table (\$5,176), and Liberal Arts and Sciences, the CIP code used for a general academic associate degree, combines a low floor (\$25,651) with mediocre growth (\$10,067). Business Operations Support and Specialized Sales sit at the bottom of the floor distribution (\$25,214 and \$22,658) without reported growth figures, but their combination of low entry wages and small samples for growth measurement suggests programs to watch.

Dispersion at the associate level is wider than at the certificate level, with the all-programs spread of \$38,141 nearly 40% larger than the certificate-level \$27,551 figure. Several programs run well above the all-programs average, with Fire Protection (\$60,911) being the most extreme – a stark difference from its tight \$18,339 dispersion at the certificate level, suggesting Dallas College's Fire Protection associate-degree graduates fan out into a much wider range of post-credential roles than its short-term Fire Protection certificate-holders. Accounting (\$35,561), Computer Systems Networking (\$32,592), Business / Commerce General (\$32,002), Criminal Justice (\$31,639), Liberal Arts (\$31,126), and Business Administration (\$30,383) also run noticeably above average in terms of dispersion. The tightest dispersions belong to Culinary Arts (\$17,147), Specialized Sales (\$18,496), Teacher Education (\$18,823), Data Processing (\$19,433), and Dental Support Services (\$22,100). At the associate level, even programs with strong floors do not necessarily deliver predictable outcomes. Registered Nursing's \$22,974 dispersion is notably tighter than its \$58,846 floor would predict, making it a standout combination of high earnings and consistent earnings. Allied Health Diagnostic (\$26,364), Clinical Lab Science (\$22,567), and Dental Support (\$22,100) also show that healthcare programs broadly cluster on the favorable side of the equity-of-outcomes question. By contrast, Fire Protection at the associate level is the clearest case where program choice opens a wide range of potential outcomes. A graduate could end up in a fire-service career with strong wages or in adjacent public safety or unrelated work with lower wages.

Table 8**Earnings Metrics for Dallas College Short-Term Certificate Programs**

Field of Study (Four-Digit CIP Code)	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
All Instructional Programs	\$45,938	\$12,859	\$27,551
Computer Programming (11.02)	\$32,639	\$1,712	\$41,662
Data Processing (11.03)	\$27,495	\$3,089	\$28,222
Accounting and Related Services (52.03)	\$32,550	\$4,317	\$23,491
Culinary Arts and Related Services (12.05)	\$25,937	\$8,678	\$18,437
Fire Protection (43.02)	\$55,075	\$15,370	\$18,339
Criminal Justice and Corrections (43.01)	\$55,750	\$8,279	\$17,333
Allied Health and Medical Assisting Services (51.08)	\$25,943	\$6,479	\$15,890
Allied Health Diagnostic, Intervention, and Treatment Professions (51.09)	\$63,072	\$11,444	\$28,542
Business Administration, Management and Operations (52.02)	\$31,436	\$10,859	\$28,364
Business Operations Support and Assistant Services (52.04)	\$26,543	-\$1,439	\$33,676
Computer Software and Media Applications (11.08)	\$23,963	\$5,006	\$30,088
Computer Systems Networking and Telecommunications (11.09)	\$40,342	\$11,447	\$34,931
Electrical/Electronic Engineering Technologies/Technicians (15.03)	\$57,372	-	\$24,299
Heating, Air Conditioning, Ventilation and Refrigeration Maintenance Technology/Technician (HVAC) (47.02)	\$29,948	-	\$29,900
Practical Nursing, Vocational Nursing and Nursing Assistants (51.39)	\$42,273	-\$916	\$22,921
Specialized Sales, Merchandising and Marketing Operations (52.19)	\$20,606	\$10,320	\$14,111
Vehicle Maintenance and Repair Technologies/Technicians (47.06)	\$32,088	-	\$18,940

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars. Only less than one-year certificates are included.

Table 9**Earnings Metrics for Dallas College Associate Degree Programs**

Field of Study (Four-Digit CIP Code)	Floor	Growth	Dispersion
All Instructional Programs	\$35,907	\$15,898	\$38,141
Fire Protection (43.02)	\$28,969	-	\$60,911
Accounting and Related Services (52.03)	\$30,162	\$9,493	\$35,561
Computer Systems Networking and Telecommunications (11.09)	\$37,592	\$15,610	\$32,592
Business/Commerce, General (52.01)	\$27,994	-	\$32,002
Criminal Justice and Corrections (43.01)	\$28,703	-	\$31,639
Liberal Arts and Sciences, General Studies and Humanities (24.01)	\$25,651	\$10,067	\$31,126
Business Administration, Management and Operations (52.02)	\$31,823	\$8,765	\$30,383
Legal Support Services (22.03)	\$35,621	\$8,777	\$29,119
Business Operations Support and Assistant Services (52.04)	\$25,214	-	\$28,129
Design and Applied Arts (50.04)	\$27,582	\$15,465	\$26,469
Allied Health Diagnostic, Intervention, and Treatment Professions (51.09)	\$53,999	\$10,976	\$26,364
Registered Nursing, Nursing Administration, Nursing Research and Clinical Nursing (51.38)	\$58,846	\$15,369	\$22,974
Clinical/Medical Laboratory Science/Research and Allied Professions (51.10)	\$37,132	\$9,987	\$22,567
Dental Support Services and Allied Professions (51.06)	\$54,993	-	\$22,100
Data Processing (11.03)	\$23,614	\$13,213	\$19,433
Teacher Education and Professional Development, Specific Levels and Methods (13.12)	\$23,258	\$9,904	\$18,823
Specialized Sales, Merchandising and Marketing Operations (52.19)	\$22,658	-	\$18,496
Culinary Arts and Related Services (12.05)	\$27,349	\$5,176	\$17,147

Sources: Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes data; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: All values expressed in 2023 dollars.

Synthesis for Program Review

Looking across both credential levels together, the most striking pattern is that Dallas College's urban labor market premium is concentrated at the certificate level rather than the associate level. The floor advantage it holds over Texas statewide outcomes is roughly twice as large for certificates as for associates, and its certificate growth runs nearly 70% above the statewide certificate average while its associate growth only modestly outpaces it. This does not mean one credential is better than the other, just that some parts of Dallas College's portfolio may be better leveraging local labor market demand or serving a greater share of adult learners with more years of experience and hence higher average pay. The College's short-term programs concentrate in fields where local employers hire directly off its credential lists; its associate portfolio includes more transfer-oriented and general-academic pathways where the Dallas labor market matters less to graduate outcomes because graduates often continue elsewhere.

A second cross-cutting pattern is the strong combined performance of the healthcare cluster, viewed across both credential levels together, mirroring statewide and national patterns. Looking at certificate and associate data side by side, healthcare programs are the only category that consistently delivers high floors, growth, and low dispersion at both credential levels. No other field cluster among Dallas College programs with available data shows that triple combination. This makes healthcare not just a strong field for individual programs but the most reliable category for students who want predictable post-credential outcomes regardless of which credential level they pursue.

A third observation is the divergence between certificate and associate outcomes within the same broad fields. Dallas College's IT / computing programs are the clearest example: at the certificate level, they're among the lowest performers on floor, growth, and dispersion combined; at the associate level, the same broad field (Computer Systems Networking) does well on each metric. The takeaway is that field choice and credential level choice are not independent decisions for students. Success coaches offering one-on-one advising to students interested in IT or computing should be prepared to inform them that the associate pathway delivers materially different outcomes than the certificate pathway, and that the difference is not just more education yielding more earnings but a qualitative difference in the labor market they will enter.

Another striking finding that warrants review are the few certificate programs showing negative wage growth at the 25th percentile: Business Operations Support and Assistant Services and Practical Nursing, Vocational Nursing, and Nursing Assistants. These are cases where the College may be delivering credentials without delivering trajectories. In the nursing example, the 25th percentile outcome – a \$900 decline – contrasts with the median and 75th percentile, both of

which show more than \$8,000 in wage growth from year one to five. This may reflect sorting and heterogeneity within the CIP category, such as certified nursing assistants seeing flat or declining wages while licensed vocational nurses realize wage growth. Compounding these differences, if these two populations exit the earnings dataset at different rates from year one to five (e.g., more licensed vocational nurses returning to school), the composition may shift toward a larger proportion of lower-earning nursing aides, affecting the 25th percentile. While the public PSEO data do not offer a clear answer, institutional context and internal data should be used to further probe why the decline exists at the lowest quartile but not others.

The Business Operations Support and Assistance Services example is substantively different, with outcomes that are potentially even more alarming. For these students, earnings fall by around \$1,400 at the 25th percentile, but we see even steeper earnings declines from year one to five at the 50th (\$7,500) and 75th percentiles (\$14,000). It is difficult to identify a singular reason why, but age and further education may play a role. Returning adults who are pursuing certificates in this CIP category may be seeking a raise in existing administrative, office, or executive assistant roles; a high share of adults with existing jobs would help contextualize high first-year earnings at every quartile. Some of these adults might retire within five years, changing the composition of who remains for wage measurement. Others might opt to return to higher education, possibly exiting the wage measurement cohort depending on how their labor market attachment changes. These changes in composition could completely alter the interpretation of what at the surface may appear to be a negative outcome. As a first step to explore this idea, Dallas College should analyze age and survey data on completers of certificate programs belonging to this CIP code.

Pairing PSEO data with institutional context and knowledge unlocks opportunities for meaningful program review conversations. In Dallas College's case, the CIP categories with negative growth offer a clear example of how PSEO and internal data complement one another. As another example, the PSEO data also make a strong case for protecting and expanding healthcare program capacity, since healthcare is the cluster where Dallas College delivers consistent value at both credential levels and across the earnings distribution. And in yet another example, the certificate-versus-associate divergence in IT and computing could prompt a portfolio-design conversation: our short-term tech certificates may be better positioned as stackable credentials feeding into the associate networking pathway, rather than as standalone credentials competing in a labor market increasingly screened by bachelor's degrees. We hope these cases begin to showcase the range of possibilities that PSEO earnings data can offer to institutional practitioners for a variety of purposes, particularly when they look beyond the median alone.

Conclusion

Median earnings are the workhorse metric for postsecondary accountability. But the median tells institutions, policymakers, and students only about the typical graduate, and our analysis shows that the experience of the typical graduate is frequently a limited proxy for the experience of graduates as a whole. Across all three levels of this report, pairing the median with floor, growth, and dispersion metrics revealed patterns that the median alone would not. States that look comparable on average earnings differ meaningfully in how their lower-earning graduates fare. Programs that appear similar on median outcomes sharply diverge on whether bottom-quartile graduates catch up or fall further behind. And institutions whose all-programs averages look strong can still house individual programs where graduates are seeing real wage erosion in their early careers. The floor, growth, and dispersion lens does not replace the median; it contextualizes it, and in doing so it surfaces equity questions that headline numbers obscure.

For state policymakers, the implication is that methodological choices baked into accountability frameworks deserve scrutiny commensurate with the funding decisions they shape. Our exploration of Texas's Credential of Value framework illustrated how the choice of percentile, the aggregation rule used to construct a self-sufficient wage benchmark, and the underlying dollar-year assumptions can together change which programs are deemed fundable. Under the current rules, the self-sufficient wage prong is largely non-binding for well-populated associate programs at either the median or the floor; under alternative aggregations advocated during rulemaking, it would bite materially and the percentile question would become a meaningful policy lever. Neither finding suggests the framework is right or wrong, but both illustrate why distributional sensitivity analyses belong in the toolkit of how outcomes-based funding policies are evaluated.

For institutional practitioners, the Dallas College case study points toward concrete uses of PSEO data in program review, portfolio design, and the conversations that follow. PSEO's strengths, like broad coverage of completers regardless of Title IV status, capture of cross-state employment, and field-by-institution detail, make it well-suited for surfacing the boom-or-bust patterns that program-average data conceal. The metrics we have used here can help institutions identify their strongest value programs, flag programs where wage trajectories may not match the promise implied by entry wages, and structure conversations about whether short-term credentials are best positioned as standalone awards or as stackable steps toward longer programs. None of these conversations are complete on the basis of PSEO data alone – labor market context, student demographics, regional employer demand, and qualitative program knowledge all matter – but PSEO can anchor them in distributional evidence that would otherwise be missing.

We hope this report contributes to broader reflection on how postsecondary outcomes are understood: not as single numbers attached to programs and institutions, but as distributions whose shape matters as much as their center. The bottom-quartile graduate is not a statistical curiosity. They are a real student whose post-college trajectory is shaped by the program they chose, the institution they attended, the labor market they entered, and the policies that determined which credentials were available to them. Building accountability frameworks, institutional practices, and student-facing information systems that take seriously the distributional shape of outcomes – not just the typical case – is the next step toward postsecondary outcomes data that fully delivers on its promise.

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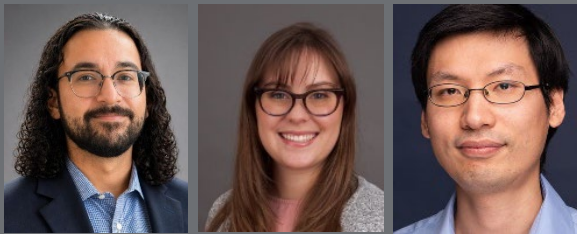
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