



THE VALUE OF  
**COMMUNITY COLLEGE**  
SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges offer a variety of workforce-oriented programs intended to help students gain skills and knowledge for a specific career or occupation. Among these are short-term credentials, designed to teach students a specific skillset related to an occupation, often in response to local labor market needs. Types of short-term credentials can include certificate programs and industry-recognized credentials. While there is no one definition for “short-term,” this report focused on programs that are less than 15 weeks long or less than 600 “clock hours.”

### Current Challenges

While short-term credentials have long been offered at community colleges, the current policy discussion centers on whether federal financial aid should be extended for these programs. Funding for workforce programs is neither new nor controversial; the current debate is over whether the Department of Education and Pell Grants should fund these programs. Currently, students who participate in short-term programs qualify for federal student loans, but not for Pell Grants. The Pell Grant program is the cornerstone federal need-based financial aid program; however, only students participating in programs longer than 15 weeks or 600 clock hours currently qualify for this aid. In recent years, community colleges have advocated for the expansion of Pell Grant eligibility for students participating in short-term programs, also known as “Short-Term Pell.” However, many higher education stakeholders have called for caution in expanding aid eligibility due to concerns about their labor market value and potential abuse of the expanded eligibility criteria by for-profit colleges.

A major limitation of assessing the value of short-term credentials is a lack of publicly available data on students’ academic success and employment outcomes. Prior studies on these programs typically assess data of all short-term credentials across higher education, which limits the ability to identify specifically how community college students fare. In addition, while many community colleges and statewide systems have data on their students’ labor market outcomes, the data are inconsistently available publicly and no national database exists.

### Data Collection

The data collection, analysis, and research for this report began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors recognize that the economic changes resulting from the pandemic have profound impacts for colleges, students, and employers. To address these changes, the authors included questions about COVID-19 as part of the qualitative interviews for this report. While the quantitative data analysis is not specific to the COVID-19 economy, prior research on short-term credentials indicates that such programs are central to the postsecondary education landscape during times of economic downturn and change, as adults seek training opportunities to re-enter the workforce or change careers.

This paper aims to fill a gap in the existing research by analyzing student data specifically from community college short-term programs. For this study, ACCT collected data from three statewide community college systems: Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS), North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), and the Virginia Community and Technical System (VCCS). In addition to quantitative data analysis, ACCT interviewed leaders from each college system to gain insights on program characteristics, implementation, and strategies to connect students to careers in their fields of study.



## Findings

Research findings contained in this report demonstrate that many employer-aligned, short-term programs can lead to increased wages and a higher quality of life for students who complete them. As a result, community college leaders are committed to supporting students by expanding access to short-term programs, continuing to work with industry leaders to align short-term programs with the needs of employers and helping students access basic needs supports.

## Recommendations

The authors offer the following recommendations to help modernize the nation's federal postsecondary policies to reflect the true needs of today's students.

1. Expand Pell Grant eligibility to short-term education and training programs by:
  - a. Lowering the clock-hour threshold for Pell Grant eligibility;
  - b. Ensuring short-term programs lead to recognized postsecondary credentials; and
  - c. Ensuring short-term programs can articulate to longer-term educational pathways.
2. Support student success during and after program participation by:
  - a. Funding community college and business partnerships; and
  - b. Expanding basic needs services for students in short-term programs.
3. Improve data infrastructure to connect students' academic and employment outcomes.



## SHORT-TERM CREDENTIALS: WHAT WE KNOW

While the landscape of research on short-term credentials at community colleges is greatly varied, the prior research on these programs addresses key areas, including the definition of short-term credentials, students' employment and educational outcomes, and student demand. Much of the prior research on sub-associate degree credentials does not distinguish between the different types of short-term credentials, such as both for-credit and non-credit programs, nor does much of the prior research distinguish the postsecondary sector through which different credentials are offered, combining data for programs offered at both community colleges and for-profit institutions. The purpose of our literature review is to summarize this past research and identify the gaps where additional research is needed specifically on programs within the community college sector.

In addition, because the efficacy of short-term credentials to positively impact students' employment outcomes is central to current public policy discussions about expanding financial aid to these programs, we include an overview of the federal policy landscape.

### Defining Short-Term Credentials and Prevalence


Community colleges and other postsecondary institutions provide a wide range of workforce credentials below the associate degree level. These include both credit and non-credit programs. They can range in length from a few days to several months to over a year. The goal and format of credential programs also vary from industry-certification courses, employer training, broader occupational training, and work-based learning such as apprenticeships.

Prior research on short-term credentials provides frameworks for the differences between programs. According to Opportunity America researchers, short-term credential programs vary based on program length, the types of students participating and occupation areas.<sup>1</sup> Credential Engine researchers have identified over 10 types of short-term programs, including certificates, certifications, and badges.<sup>2</sup> Jobs for the Future researchers have categorized the three most common types of short-term programs offered at community colleges: 1) certificates usually one year or less in length; 2) certifications awarded for the mastery of specific industry-based skills and competencies; and 3) micro-credentials for narrowly focused recognition skills such as through a digital badge.<sup>3</sup>

Given the variety of short-term programs, it is no surprise that credentials below the associate degree level make up a significant portion of community college enrollments and have been increasing, especially since following the Great Recession. According to data from U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, the number of certificates below the associate degree level conferred by public institutions increased from approximately 520,000 in the 2010-11 academic year to over 670,000 in the 2017-18 academic year.<sup>4</sup> For community colleges specifically, according to the American Association of Community Colleges, approximately 40% of community college credentials conferred are certificates and over 40% of students are enrolled in non-credit programs.<sup>5</sup>

### Employment and Educational Outcomes

Several prior studies provide data on employment outcomes for students participating in short-term credentials; however, most of the prior research does not distinguish between the type of short-term credential and the type of institution. In general, prior research demonstrates that students who participate in short-term credential programs experience a wage and employment premium over individuals with no postsecondary education and those with only some college credits, but no credential; however, their wage premium is typically less than students who earn an associate or bachelor's degree. Furthermore, prior research demonstrates a wide variation in employment outcomes among short-term credential holders, typically associated with program of study, race, and gender.



According to an influential 2012 study by researchers from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), which examined national data of certificate holders, over 10% of Americans hold a certificate as their highest level of education. Georgetown researchers found that, on average, certificate holders earn 20% more than individuals with only a high school diploma and no postsecondary education. Among certificate holders, their research found variation in employment outcomes based on occupation, race, and gender. In general, they found that males with certificates in fields such as auto mechanics earned the highest wages, while women in fields such as cosmetology earned the lowest. Their research also found that certificate holders are most commonly Black or Hispanic; however, they experience smaller wage returns than White individuals who earn similar credentials.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the CEW findings are supported by a 2017 study by researchers at the Columbia University Teachers College Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE), which examined multi-state data of community college students' employment outcomes from a short-term credential. The CAPSEE study also found small but positive wage gains for individuals who earn short-term credentials, with variation by occupation and gender.<sup>7</sup>

Two more recent studies from The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) and New America analyzed outcomes for community college students participating in short-term training programs in the context of expanding federal Pell Grant aid to such programs. The TICAS study, published in 2019, examines state data for students participating in short-term credential programs at two- and four-year colleges. Like the CEW and CAPSEE findings, TICAS researchers found a range in employment and wage outcomes based on area of study. For example, their research found that students who participated in education-related programs experienced relatively higher earnings; whereas students who participated in healthcare training experienced relatively lower earnings.<sup>8</sup> The 2021 New America study of short-term credential programs in Washington state also found mixed labor market outcomes for participating students. In particular, New America researchers found that, on average, students who earn a short-term credential earn more than minimum wage, but not a family-supporting wage for the state.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, both TICAS and New America document the challenges of analyzing labor market data for students who participate in short-term programs, such as inconsistent data availability and challenges linking data to state unemployment insurance databases.

## Student Demand

Prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, student demand has been increasing for short-term credential programs. Much of the increased interest in these programs is likely due to adults seeking further education to advance their careers, but they are unable to commit to full degree programs due to personal responsibilities such as work or family care.<sup>10</sup> According to the Strada Education Network national *Public Viewpoint* survey, over 60% of adults who currently are considering enrolling in higher education institutions prefer nondegree programs. Reasons given by respondents include that they believe nondegree programs are a better value, better fits for their personal lives, and offer better opportunities for job advancement.<sup>11</sup> Strada's survey findings are further supported by data analysis by Moody, which shows that non-degree credentials and certificates are the fastest-growing program types in higher education.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to being quicker to complete, short-term programs can be “stackable.” In some cases, stackability can mean multiple short-term programs can be completed as part of an educational pathway that leads toward a longer-term certificate or associate degree. While stackable credentials offer a promising option for students who do not want to complete a traditional degree program, the efficacy and prevalence of these programs have been questioned by higher education researchers due to mixed findings on student uptake and outcomes. A study by researchers from Columbia University's Community College Research Center (CCRC), found that less than five percent (5%) of postsecondary students had earned a stackable credential. Furthermore, their study found that stacking certificates and other non-degree credentials led to little or no earnings gains for students.<sup>13</sup> A more recent study examined stackable credentials within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and found that stacking credentials led an increase in both employment and wages, with the greatest gains for students participating in healthcare and business programs.<sup>14</sup>



## Federal Policy Landscape

Current federal policy discussions on the efficacy of short-term credential programs hinge on the question of what types of federal financial aid should be available for participating students and institutions. While community college tuition is known to be affordable, especially in comparison to other postsecondary sectors, many community college students cannot afford to pay out-of-pocket for workforce training. Under the federal Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA), displaced workers and other job seekers can access funds through individual training accounts (ITAs). Most community colleges are considered eligible training providers under WIOA. ITAs can be a critical resource for many students; however, the ITA program falls short of providing funding for all needy students. States have wide discretion in administering WIOA dollars and frequently operate on a first-come, first-served model. Because ITAs are not an entitlement and students must meet strict eligibility requirements, many needy students are unable to access funds.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years, community colleges have advocated to expand federal Title IV aid eligibility for students participating in short-term programs. Currently, students in programs of fewer than 600 clock hours or 15 weeks are sometimes eligible to receive student loans, but are not eligible for Pell Grants. In 2013, the Obama administration launched the Short-Term Pell experiential sites initiative to explore the efficacy of expanding Pell Grant eligibility to programs of fewer than 600 clock hours or 15 weeks. Twenty-eight colleges participated in the experimental program, which required collecting outcomes data for participating students. An evaluation of the pilot program found that offering students financial aid increased their likelihood of degree attainment. However, the evaluation did not consider labor-market outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Most recently, legislation has been proposed to change the Higher Education Act (HEA) in order to allow for the expanded Pell Grant eligibility. One proposal is the bi-partisan JOBS Act, which would expand Pell Grant eligibility for students participating in short-term programs between 150-600 clock hours or 8-15 weeks at public postsecondary institutions. The proposal includes several quality-assurance measures including that programs would be aligned with local workforce needs and offered by WIOA-eligible training providers, such as community colleges. Critics of the JOBS Act call for more data and research on outcomes for students participating in such programs and stronger “guardrails” for quality assurance. Some critics argue that aid for workforce training should remain under WIOA, rather than expand to HEA.





## SUMMARY OF DATA FINDINGS

For this report, the authors analyzed data from three community college systems: Louisiana Community and Technical College System, North Carolina Community Colleges, and Virginia's Community Colleges. The collected data include students who participated in short-term programs within each system, demographic information, academic outcomes, and employment outcomes. It's important to note for the analysis that the structure and characteristics of the data vary among each system. The authors avoid drawing comparisons among the sectors due to differences in the data. More details about the data are included in the profile for each system and the data methods appendix.

Our main data findings, common to each system, include 1) stark disparities in gender by program type and 2) varied levels of wage gains by employment type. Our analysis found that program participation was highly segregated by gender in key industries, including health care and education programs, which have predominately female enrollment, and construction and other skilled trade programs that have predominately male enrollment. The authors' analysis also considered college and regional differences. However, within each system, the differences between program were greater than the differences by geography.

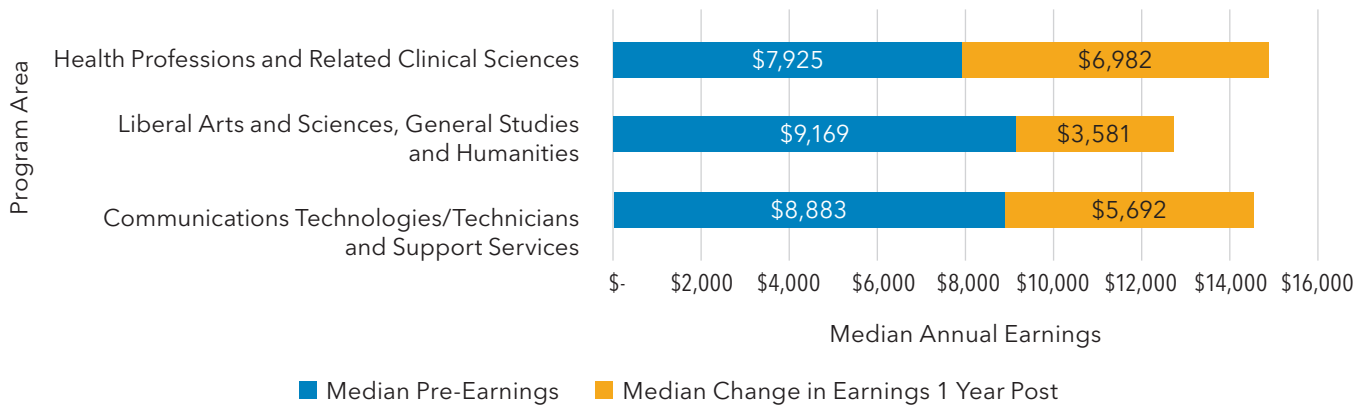
In addition, common to all three systems is the varied nature of wage increases by program of study. The existing literature on short-term programs points to minimal or unclear labor market returns. Our analysis finds that the labor market outcomes are much more nuanced and can vary significantly by program of study. For each system, we will focus on three types of wage outcomes: 1) high-wage programs; 2) lower-wage programs but with significant increases; and 3) programs with little wage changes or decreases.

# LOUISIANA COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

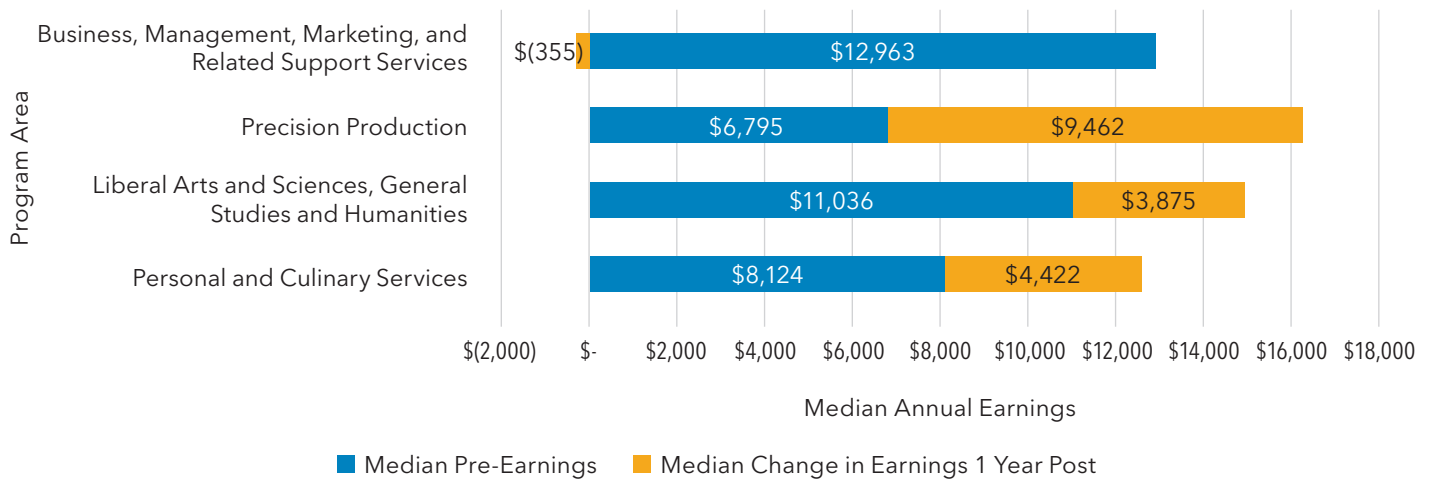
The Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) includes thirteen colleges across the state. The system includes both comprehensive community colleges and workforce-centered technical colleges. LCTCS colleges were part of the U.S. Department of Education's Short-Term Pilot program. The data collected for this report includes ex-site colleges and students who received Pell Grants as part of the pilot program. For this report, we have chosen to highlight data from three LCTCS colleges: Bossier Parish, Baton Rouge, and Delgado. These colleges represent regional diversity across Louisiana as well as both smaller (Baton Rouge and Bossier Parish) and large (Delgado) institutions.

The following graphs show earnings data for students enrolled in Fall 2017 in the three different colleges. The median pre-earnings from one year before students' enrollment is compared to the change in median post earnings one year after their enrollment.

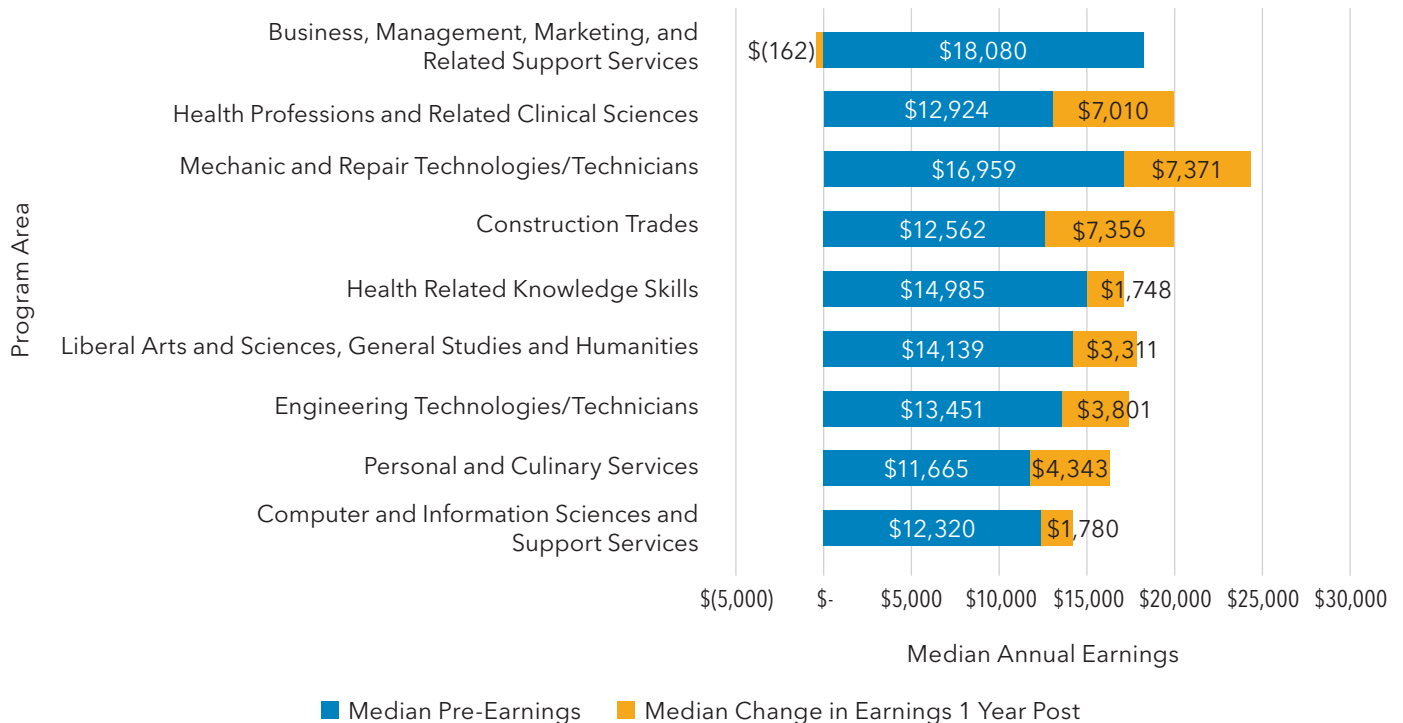
## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings Louisiana - Bossier Parish, Students Enrolled 2017




## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings Louisiana - Baton Rouge, Students Enrolled 2017



## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings Louisiana - Delgado, Students Enrolled 2017





Across all three colleges and most programs, students experienced increased wages following their enrollment in a short-term program, with the exception of those participating in business related programs at Baton Rouge and Delgado. The overall pattern of wage increases demonstrates that, on average, students were experiencing poverty-level wages prior to their program enrollment. For example, students in healthcare programs at Bossier Parish increased their wages from approximately \$8,000 to \$15,000, on average. This is a significant increase in earnings; however, the post-enrollment wages remain below a family sustaining wage.

In addition to our quantitative data analysis, the authors also interviewed Dr. Monty Sullivan, President of LCTCS. During our interview, Dr. Sullivan emphasized the importance of short-term trainings programs to support both adult students seeking postsecondary education and local businesses in need of well-trained employees. For students, Dr. Sullivan described the role of LCTCS short-term programs as an avenue to introduce students to industries and careers they may not have been previously aware of or have little experience with in the past. Because LCTCS short-term programs are aligned with local employer needs, the program offerings provide students with a greater understanding of job opportunities available in their area.

In order to ensure short-term programs are aligned with current employer demand, LCTCS works to develop strong partnerships with local businesses and industries. These partnerships inform both the creation of new short-term programs, and ending programs that are no longer relevant to the local job market. In addition to strong business partnerships, LCTCS relies on labor market data and analysis conducted by their internal researchers and external partners. However, Dr. Sullivan emphasized that better data infrastructure is needed to improve tracking of students' employment outcomes overtime.

Though LCTCS participated in the federal Short-Term Pell pilot program, Dr. Sullivan described how the lack of permanent need-based aid for workforce training excludes adults who could most benefit, including those who are low-income and out of work. In addition to increased federal financial aid, students participating in short-term training could benefit from increased support services, typically geared towards degree-seeking students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, LCTCS increased supports for unemployed individuals seeking workforce training. Using CARES Act funds, LCTCS created the \$10 million Reboot Your Career program which provided scholarships and reduced application fees, with the goal to train 5,000 adults in the state. While LCTCS experienced overall enrollment declines during the pandemic, the Reboot Your Career program led to enrollment increases specifically in short-term programs.

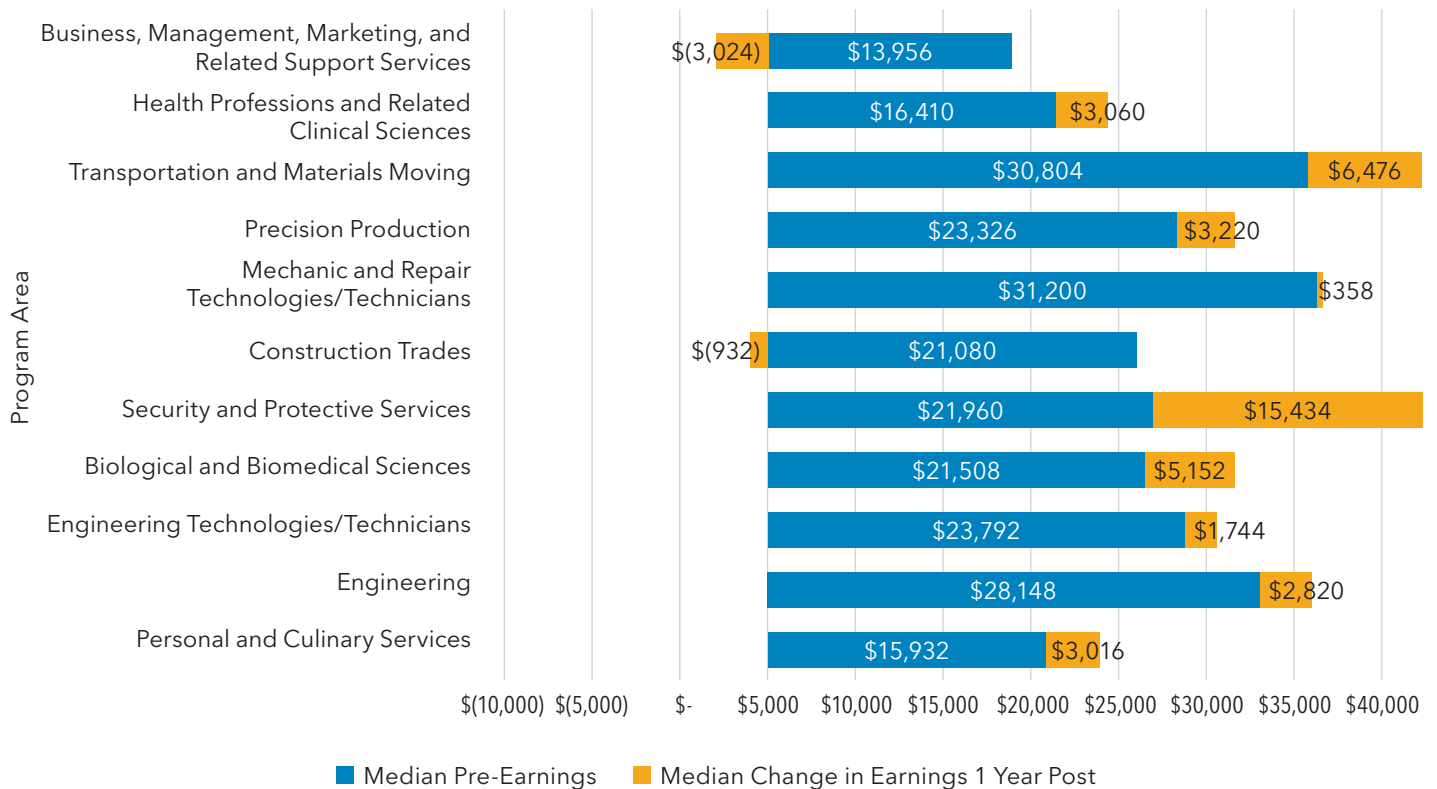
# NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM (NCCCS)

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) encompasses 58 community colleges across the state, enrolling over 600,000 students annually. The system includes both comprehensive community colleges and workforce-oriented technical colleges. NCCCS offers a variety of short-term credential programs, including credit, non-credit, and industry certificates. The system did not participate in the federal Short-Term Pell pilot program nor does the state offer a specific financial aid program for participating students.

The authors' quantitative analysis of NCCCS data is aggregated by regions aligned with the state's economic development regions, also known as Prosperity Zones. The North Carolina Department of Commerce has designated a total of eight zones across the state.<sup>17</sup> For this report, we have chosen to highlight data from three prosperity zones: North Central, Southwestern, and Western. These three zones represent geographic diversity in the state, including urban, suburban, and rural, and the zones include a diversity of both small and large colleges.

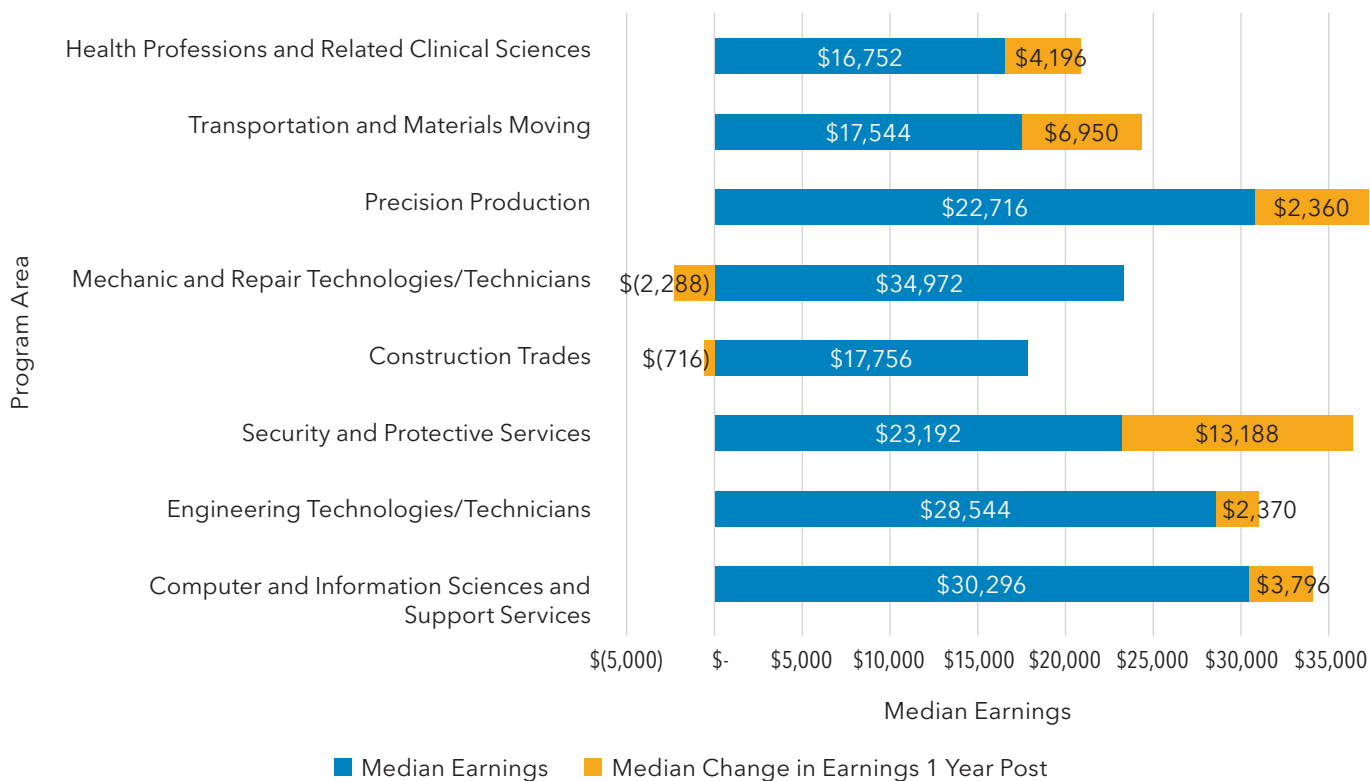
Below is NCCCS data, by region, for students enrolled during 2017. The graphs show an estimate<sup>1</sup> of students' median earnings the years before and after their enrollment by program area (2-digit CIP). In addition to the variations in programs by region, data has been suppressed for programs with fewer than 20 students in order to protect privacy and where the employment match data are available for fewer than 20 students. (See data methods appendix for more information.)

## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings - North Central, Students Enrolled 2017

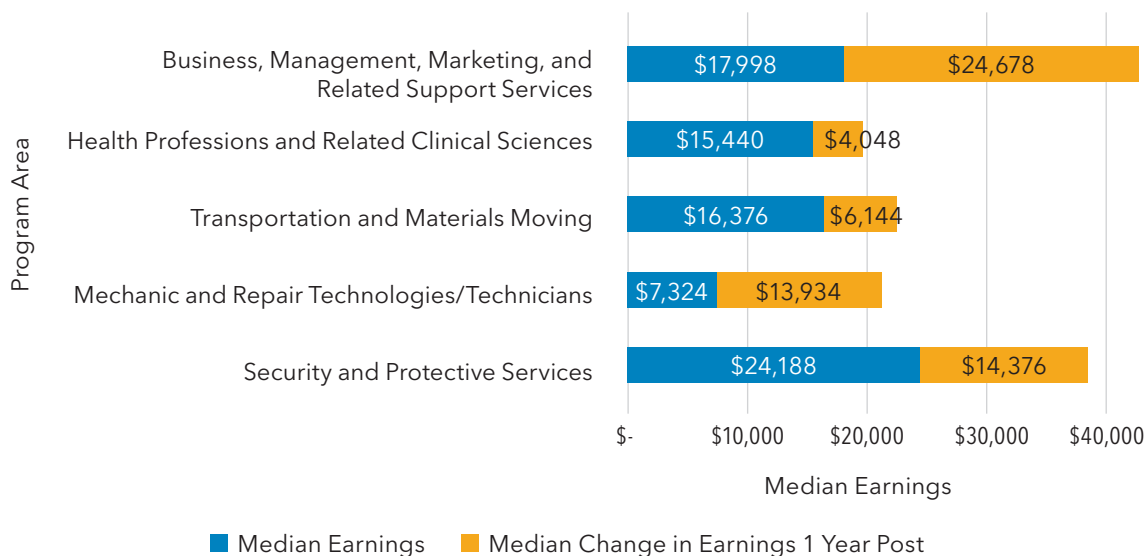



1 Note: North Carolina wage data are reported as median quarterly earnings. To estimate yearly wages, the authors extrapolated one quarter of years times four.

## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings North Carolina - Southwest, Students Enrolled 2017



## Pre- and Post-Participation Earnings North Carolina - Western, Students Enrolled 2017





The pre- and post-earnings reflect that, on average, students participating in short-term programs experience wage gains follow program completion. For programs such as healthcare and related services, gains in earnings are similar across the three regions. However, for others such as business management, there is greater regional variability. In addition, the data reveal stark gender disparities in overall wages. Students who participate in programs with large proportions of male enrollment, such as transportation and security professions, have overall higher wages post enrollment. An exception to relatively higher wages for programs with large percentage of male enrollment is mechanic and repair technologies. Conversely, students who participated in programs with mostly female enrollment, such as healthcare, experienced relatively lower wages.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, the authors also interviewed Dr. Scott Ralls, president of Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) in Raleigh, North Carolina. Our interview with Dr. Ralls focused on the college's overall strategy for offering non-degree and short-term training programs. As a technical college, according to Dr. Ralls, the institution enrolls more non-degree and adult basic education students than degree-seeking students. Therefore, many of the college's academic initiatives are geared towards adult students and those seeking career education.

To ensure non-degree and short-term credentials can be part of students' long-term academic and career plans, Wake Tech works to ensure that credentials are stackable—a strategy Dr. Ralls refers to as “laddering.” In particular, the college has created a series of stackable credentials for information technology programs, which allows students to start by earning non-degree credentials that can be stacked to a full associate degree.

One challenge experienced by Wake Tech is having access to reliable wage data to track students' unemployment outcomes. While ACCT collected wage data from NCCCS, there were many limitations, such as matching employment records for students who work for the government or move out of state and are therefore not included in the records system.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NCCCS including Wake Tech increased their supports for students in workforce-training programs. According to Dr. Ralls, campus support services are typically not tailored to students in workforce programs because of the brief nature of students' enrollment. However, during COVID-19, the system leveraged federal support of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund to provide scholarships up to \$750 for students who participated in short-term training programs for high-demand fields.

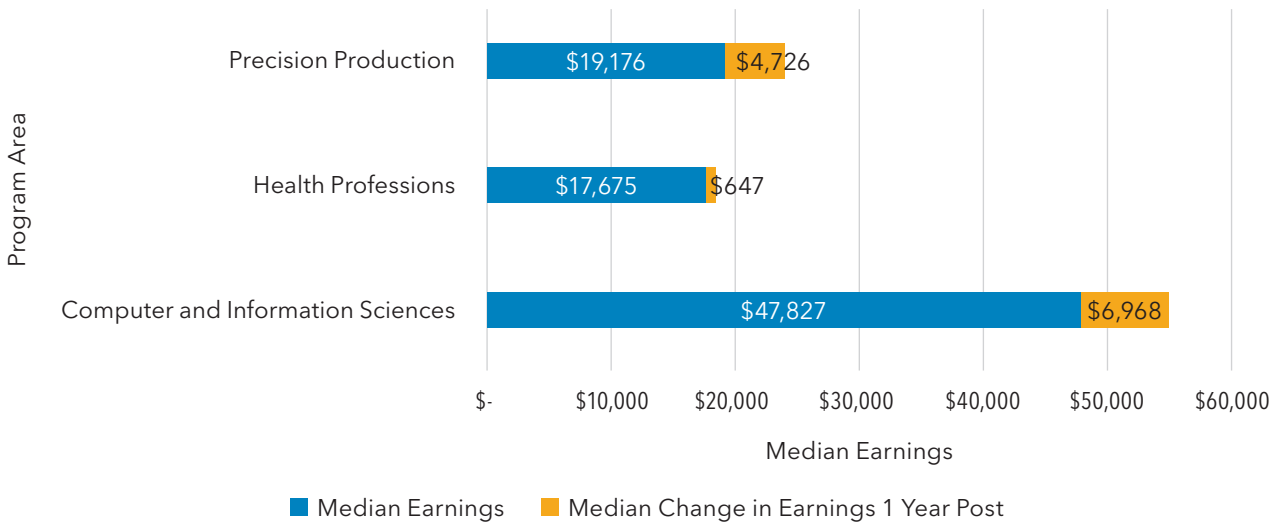
# VIRGINIA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) includes 23 colleges, enrolling over 250,000 students across the state. All of VCCS colleges are comprehensive; however, the system includes a large number of workforce-development programs. FastForward is a cornerstone job-training program across the state. Our analysis focuses on students enrolled in the FastForward program. For Virginia, the data are also grouped by regions in order to protect student data privacy.

The FastForward program serves as a key job-training program in Virginia and seeks to make workforce training more affordable and to encourage students to complete their programs with additional financial aid. Participating students pay one-third of their tuition upon enrolling in the program, another one-third is automatically covered by the state, and the remaining one-third is paid by the state when the student completes their program.

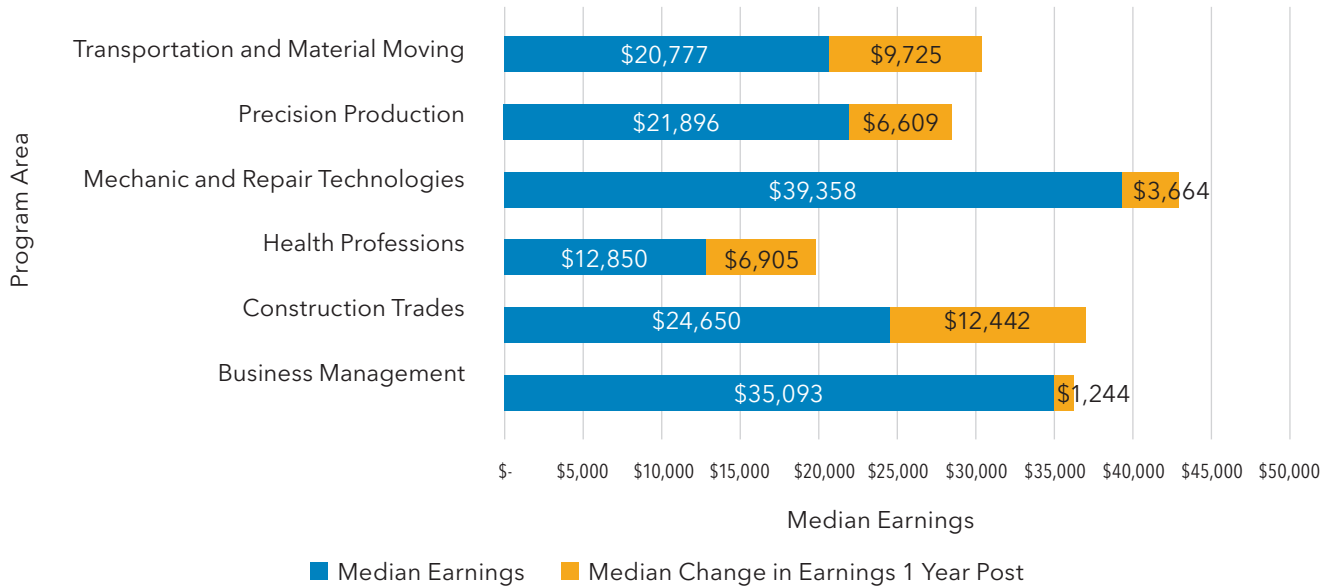
For our research, the authors collected aggregate VCCS student data by three geographic areas: Northern Virginia, Rural Horseshoe, and other non-rural areas. The geographic separation of the data is critical due to regional differences in industries and economic condition and the nature of short-term programs to be connected to regional and local labor market demand. Below is VCCS data by region for students enrolled during 2017. The graphs show their median earnings four quarters pre-enrollment and four quarters post-enrollment for each program area (2-digit CIP). In addition to the variations in programs by region, data have been suppressed for programs with fewer than 20 students in order to protect privacy and where the employment match data is available for fewer than 20 students. (See data methods appendix for more information.)

**Pre and Post Earnings  
Northern Virginia, Students Enrolled 2017**

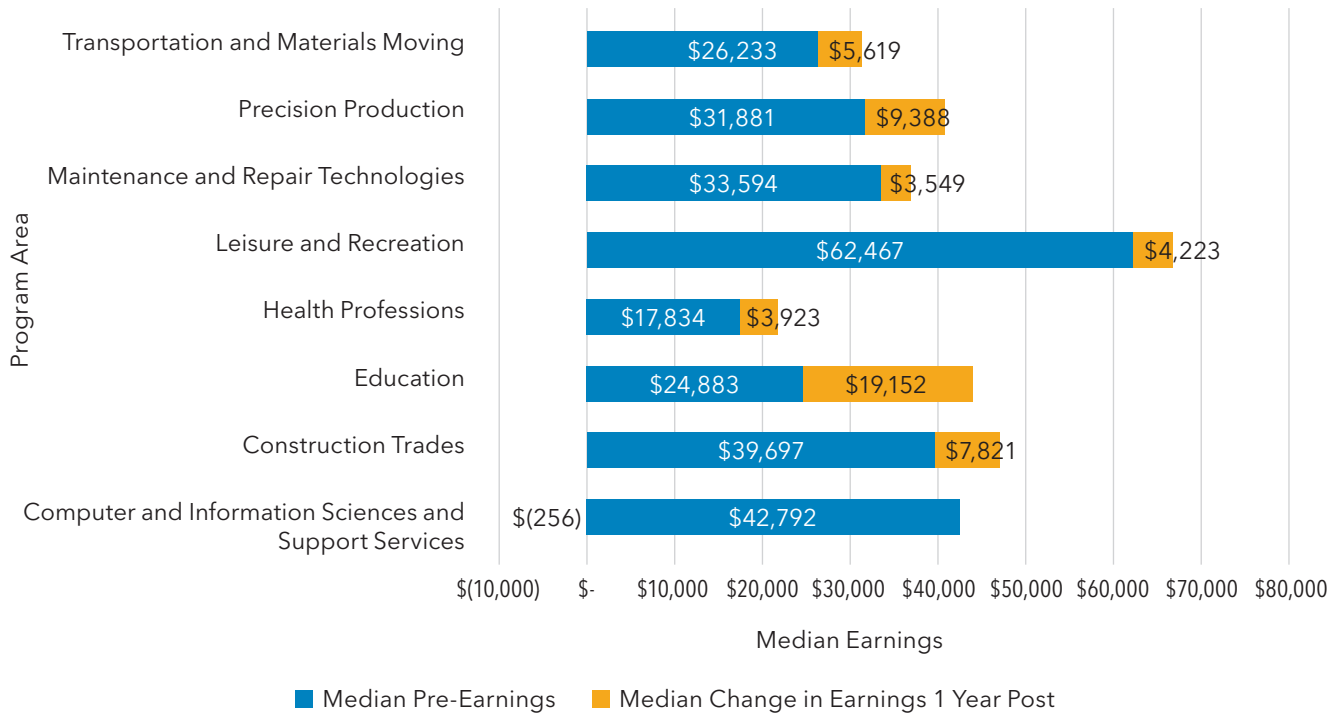





## Pre and Post Earnings Virginia Rural Horseshoe, Students Enrolled 2017



## Pre and Post Earnings Virginia Non-Rural, Students Enrolled 2017





The pre-and post-earnings data demonstrates considerable variability in students' wages by program area and some variability by region. For example, students participating in healthcare programs experienced relatively low wages, compared to higher-wage programs such as computer and information sciences, leisure and recreation, education, and construction trades. Disparities in wages are also heavily associated with gender differences, with healthcare programs enrolling predominately women compared to construction trades that enroll predominately men. In the case of healthcare programs, while students experienced relatively lower wages, the increases do move students from poverty level to more self-sustaining wages.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, to learn more about the FastForward program, the authors interviewed Steve Partridge, vice president of workforce and economic development at Northern Virginia Community College, and Elizabeth Creamer, vice president of workforce development at Credential Attainment, a workforce-development partnership organization for John Tyler and Reynolds Community Colleges in the Greater Richmond Area.

Both Partridge and Creamer emphasized the importance of short-term credentials as stackable parts of students' longer-term education and career pathways. According to Partridge and Creamer, short-term programs provide an entry point to postsecondary education for students who do not want to pursue a degree or cannot make the time commitment due to other work or family responsibilities.

With flexibility and stackability in-mind, FastForward programs are geared towards adult students. The authors' quantitative analysis found that the typical age of a FastForward student is over 30 years old. According to Creamer, the flexibility of the FastForward program attracts mostly non-traditional students and those who have barriers to employment, such as formerly incarcerated students, single parents, and veterans and military-connected students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike most associate degree programs, FastForward short-term programs experienced large increases in enrollment. In particular, enrollment increases were fueled by displaced and essential workers who were seeking new or safer employment opportunities.

The financial aid model for FastForward described above is a key component of the program and supports affordability for students who are not eligible for financial aid. In addition, during COVID-19, the state expanded FastForward financial aid to cover all tuition costs for students who had lost employment. According to Partridge, the increased aid influenced increased enrollments in the program. In addition to financial aid, the FastForward program also seeks to encourage program completion with student support services, including career coaching, referrals to social services, tutoring, and access to the Network2Network statewide career-finder.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community colleges offer a wide range of education and training programs, including workforce-oriented, short-term programs between 150–600 clock hours in length that are intended to help students gain the skills they need for a specific career or occupation. While students who choose to enroll in these programs currently qualify for federal student loans, they do not qualify for Pell Grants—which are the cornerstone of federal financial aid.

Community college leaders have first-hand knowledge of the value that short-term programs can have in the lives of students. As this report concludes, many employer-aligned short-term programs can lead to increased wages and a higher quality of life for students who complete them. As a result, community college leaders are committed to supporting students by expanding access to short-term programs, continuing to work with industry leaders to align short-term programs with the needs of employers, and helping students access basic needs supports.

The following recommendations can help improve our nation's federal postsecondary policies to reflect the true needs of today's students.

### 1. Expand Pell Grant Eligibility to Short-Term Education and Training Programs By:

- a. **Lowering the clock-hour threshold for Pell Grant eligibility** — Under current law, students can only qualify for a federal Pell Grant if they are enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program that is at least 600 clock hours over 15 weeks of instruction. To extend critical Pell Grant aid to students enrolled in short-term programs, the clock-hour threshold for Pell eligibility should be lowered to 150 clock hours over 8 weeks of instruction for students enrolled in public and non-profit institutions of higher education. This clock-hour requirement is in line with the Obama Administration's Short-Term Pell experimental site, which was launched in 2013.
- b. **Ensuring short-term programs lead to recognized postsecondary credentials** — Community colleges are committed to ensuring that the short-term education and training programs they offer lead to positive outcomes for students. Short-term programs that award students a recognized postsecondary credential—including an industry-recognized certificate or certification, or a license recognized by a state or federal government—can help solidly connect students to jobs in their fields of study. Short-term education and training programs should provide students with a recognized postsecondary credential upon completion.
- c. **Ensuring short-term programs can articulate to longer-term educational pathways** — Community colleges serve students with a wide range of career and academic goals. Some students pursue short-term programs that can quickly lead to employment in their chosen fields of study, while others elect to pursue longer-term certificate or degree pathways upon completion of their short-term programs. Short-term education and training programs should articulate for students interested in enrolling in longer term certificate or degree programs at their institutions.



## 2. Support Student Success During and After Program Participation By:

- a. **Funding Community College and Business Partnerships** — Community colleges work closely with industry leaders to offer high-quality training and academic instruction in line with the needs of employers. However, federal-level investments in community college-business partnerships have waned since the expiration of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCCT) grant program in 2014. Additional support for these partnerships will help community colleges sustain and expand their efforts to tightly link short-term education and training programs to today's jobs.
- b. **Expanding Basic Needs Services for Students in Short-Term Programs** — Community colleges serve a high number of nontraditional students, including students who work full- or part-time, are parents or caregivers, or are financially independent for student-aid purposes. The true cost of higher education for these students extends beyond the price of tuition. Increasing the capacity of community colleges to connect students with basic needs services, such as child care, transportation, nutrition services and healthcare, will help ensure students can persist and succeed in their postsecondary pathways.
- c. **Improve data infrastructure to connect students' academic and employment outcomes** — The current landscape of data on short-term programs is disjointed and inconsistent. There is currently no federal data system that collects and tracks data for all students participating in short-term programs. While many states have their own data systems that link postsecondary and employment data, these systems are often unreliable due to gaps in data reporting and challenges tracking students if they move out of state, are self-employed, or are employed in the public sector. To better track outcomes for students who participate in short-term programs, we recommend expanding federal data collection to link postsecondary outcomes to labor-market information.



## APPENDIX: DATA METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

For this report, the authors collected academic and employment data for students participating in short-term training programs from three community college systems: North Carolina Community College System, Virginia Community College System, and Louisiana Community and Technical College System. We collected data for several metrics including:

- Student enrollment;
- Demographics including age, gender, and race/ethnicity;
- Program completion;
- Employment status; and
- Wages pre- and post-participation in a training program.

All program-level analysis is based on the U.S. Department of Education Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) at the two-digit code level.<sup>1</sup> Short-term training programs are defined as those less than 600 clock hours, or equivalent.

The structure of the short-term programs and data privacy requirements varied across the three college systems. The following is a description of the data included for each system and differences in the collection methods.

### North Carolina Community College System:

Our data set for NCCCS includes academic and employment records for students participating in credit and non-credit short-term training programs. Due to data privacy rules, NCCCS provided the authors with aggregate data at the 2-digit CIP code level by geographic region. Geographic regions correspond with the eight Prosperity Zones determined by the N.C. Department of Commerce.<sup>2</sup> For the written report, the authors decided to include data from three Prosperity Zones that reflect urban, rural, and suburban diversity across the state. For North Carolina, students' median earnings are reported as a quarterly value. Therefore, the authors multiplied these earnings by four quarters to estimate a yearly equivalent.

### Virginia Community College System:

Data for VCCS includes records for students who participated in short-term training as part of the state's FastForward program. FastForward programs are non-credit and aligned with high-demand fields in the state and currently offered in seven industry areas. Due to data privacy rules, VCCS provided the authors with aggregate data at the 2-digit CIP code level by geographic region. The authors consulted with VCCS institutional researchers and system leaders to identify regions based on state economic development goals and regional diversity. The three regions for analysis were Northern Virginia, Rural Horseshoe,<sup>3</sup> and all other non-rural areas.

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2 N.C. Department of Commerce. NC Prosperity Zones. Retrieved from <https://www.nccommerce.com/about-us/nc-prosperity-zones>

3 ConnectVA. Rural Horseshoe Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.connectva.org/programs/rural-virginia-horseshoe-initiative/>



## Louisiana Community and Technical College System:

Our dataset for LCTCS includes records for students who participated in credit and non-credit training programs across the system's twelve colleges. LCTCS provided the authors student-level data with program information by 2-digit CIP code. LCTCS participated in the U.S. Department of Education's Short-Term Pell Pilot program; therefore, the LCTCS data includes students who were able to receive federal Pell Grants, unlike students in the other two systems included in this report. For the written report, the authors decided to include data on three colleges that reflect urban, rural, and suburban geographic diversity in the state.

### Data Limitations

In order to collect information on students' employment status and wages, colleges rely on matching academic records to their state's Unemployment Insurance (UI) data source. Matching to UI records allows researchers to analyze student outcomes including job placement rates and earnings overtime. However, there are many limitations to the UI data match, including incomplete records and the inconsistencies in data collection and reporting across states.

Two reports by researchers at The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) document the challenges with collecting labor market data, including a lack of a federal student data system and incomplete employment records.<sup>4</sup> The authors of this report encounter similar data challenges as documented in past reports. In particular, the authors were limited by incomplete employment records for students not included in the state UI systems, such as those who moved across state lines or were employed in a field not tracked in the UI database including public sector jobs. For this report, a limitation with the UI data is that it is unknown why a student may have an incomplete employment and/or wage data; therefore, our analysis only includes students with a full employment record match. For students without a complete match, it is unknown whether they were unemployed or did not have a record match for a different reason. For example, a student with a \$0 reported income could either be unemployed or working in a job not covered by UI. Therefore, students with \$0 reported income are excluded from our analysis.

A second limitation of the data collected from this report is small sample size of students participating in programs and those with fully-matched employment records. At each college, many short-term programs enroll only a handful of students each term. To create larger sample sizes, the authors worked with researchers from the college systems to appropriately aggregate data at regional levels, which include several colleges with similar programs. Small sample sizes also limited the authors from reporting cross-tabulations on academic and employment metrics with demographic indicators. To protect student privacy, the authors did not report on any program where enrollment and employment match sample size was less than 20 students.

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## ENDNOTES

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