

Workers with a Four-Year Degree Earn \$81,000 at the Median—70% More Than Workers with a High School Diploma Alone, Georgetown University Report Says

Median earnings vary widely across bachelor's degree majors, ranging from \$51,000 to \$146,000.

(Washington, DC, Oct. 16, 2025) As recent college graduates face an increasingly challenging job market, new analysis shows how influential the choice of bachelor's degree major can be in determining graduates' earnings potential and employment prospects. In general, workers with a bachelor's degree face better economic outcomes than high school graduates: Prime-age workers (ages 25–54) with a bachelor's degree earn 70% more at the median than workers with only a high school diploma and face much lower unemployment rates (2.9% and 6.2%, respectively). Yet new research from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) finds that median earnings vary significantly by major for prime-age workers, from \$58,000 in education and public service fields to \$98,000 in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields.

The Major Payoff: Evaluating Earnings and Employment Outcomes Across Bachelor's Degrees provides insight into key outcomes—including median earnings, the graduate degree earnings premium, and unemployment rates—associated with various majors for prime-age workers (ages 25–54) and recent college graduates (ages 22–26). The report categorizes 152 majors across fields, such as STEM, humanities and the arts, education and public service, and healthcare. In addition, an online data tool provides detailed information about median earnings, earnings at the 25th and 75th percentiles, the popularity of each major, and the graduate-to-bachelor's degree earnings premiums for all 152 majors.

“Choosing a major has long been one of the most consequential decisions that college students make—and this is particularly true now, when recent college graduates are facing an unusually rocky labor market. Students need to weigh their options carefully,” said Catherine Morris, lead author and senior editor/writer at CEW. “For instance, while STEM is the highest-paying field of study overall, some STEM majors actually lead to lower median earnings than some humanities majors once graduates are established in the workforce. In other words, median earnings at the field level can hide considerable variation across majors.”

For example, within the 65 STEM majors, median earnings range from \$64,000 for workers with a bachelor's degree in miscellaneous agriculture to \$146,000 for workers with a bachelor's degree in petroleum engineering. Although the range of median earnings across the 19 humanities and arts majors is relatively narrow (\$58,000 to \$73,000), 14 of these majors lead to median earnings above \$65,000.

Over the past 15 years, college students have increasingly majored in fields that lead to higher-paying jobs. The fastest-growing major groups between 2009 and 2023 were computers, statistics, and mathematics, followed by healthcare. Degree production in both of these major groups has more than doubled since 2009. Other STEM-related major groups—including agriculture and natural resources, biology and life sciences, and

architecture and engineering—have also seen increases in degree production. Majoring in these fields does not necessarily lead to immediate job security, however.

“The number of students graduating with degrees in computers, statistics, and mathematics has ballooned by 159% between 2009 and 2023, but the unemployment rate for recent college graduates with degrees in these fields is now 6.8%—the highest within STEM,” said Ban Cheah, co-author and senior economist at CEW.

“However, among those who do manage to land a job, earnings for recent graduates with bachelor’s degrees in computers, statistics, and mathematics are quite high: \$79,000 at the median and \$107,000 at the 75th percentile. This illustrates that high unemployment does not always go hand-in-hand with low earnings—and vice versa.”

When selecting an undergraduate major, students should consider whether they will need a graduate degree in order to advance in their careers and realize their full earnings potential. Overall, workers with a graduate degree earn 29% more than those with a bachelor’s degree alone, yet the graduate degree earnings premium varies across majors. For example, workers with a bachelor’s degree in health and medical preparatory programs earn \$70,000 at the median, compared with \$152,000 among those who also hold a graduate degree. However, students pursue graduate degrees for more reasons than higher earnings. In some professions—such as teaching and some medical professions—workers may need a graduate degree to advance in their careers.

As access to higher education has expanded to more students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, representation has remained unequal in lucrative fields of study. Certain groups—including male, white, and Asian/Asian American workers with bachelor’s degrees—continue to be overrepresented in STEM relative to their share of the bachelor’s degree–holding workforce overall.

“These imbalances have significant consequences not only for individual workers and their career prospects but also for the nation’s economic health,” said co-author and CEW Director Jeff Strohl. “As the country’s population becomes more diverse, we must provide pathways for more students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds to earn bachelor’s degrees in lucrative or in-demand majors—or both. Without better alignment between degree production and the needs of the labor market, the United States risks missing out on potential talent despite looming skills shortages in many critical areas.”

To view the full report and a comprehensive online data tool, visit: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/major-payoff>.

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