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Degrees Will Increasingly Dominate Job Growth in US, Defying the Decline in Public Trust in Higher Education, Georgetown University Report Says

The US is projected to have 171 million jobs in 2031, compared to 155 million in 2021.

(Washington, DC, November 16, 2023) New analysis from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) indicates that by 2031, 72% of jobs in the US will require postsecondary education and/or training. CEW researchers project that the US will have 171 million jobs in 2031, an increase of 16 million net new jobs from 2021. During that period, the analysis suggests there will be 18.5 million job openings per year on average, and some 12.5 million of these annualized openings will require at least some college education.

The new CEW report, *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031* includes a national overview of job projections and their educational requirements across industries, occupational clusters, and detailed occupational groups. These latest projections demonstrate the central role postsecondary education plays in preparing the workforce of the future, despite the fact that young people increasingly doubt the value of a degree and college enrollments continue to decline.

"We've seen waves of this in the past, but the growing doubt about the value of a college degree is alarming. Couple the influx of infrastructure jobs with politicians on both sides saying people don't need degrees, and you get a generation of young people who think college isn't necessary," CEW Director and lead author Anthony P. Carnevale said. "But our findings show, once again, that postsecondary education and training has become the threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings. It is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class jobs; it is increasingly the only pathway."

Two major factors contribute to the increasing demand for postsecondary education and training. First, the fastest-growing industries require workers with disproportionately higher education levels compared to industries with slower growth; and second, occupations as a whole are steadily requiring more education as tasks within occupations become more complex. In the early 1980s, there were more jobs available for workers with less than a high school education than there were for college graduates. In 2021 only 10% of jobs went to workers without a high school education while 36% went to workers with at least a bachelor's degree. That disparity will only grow: in 2031, only 6% of jobs will go to workers without a high school education and 42% will go to workers with a bachelor's degree or higher. Between 2021 and 2031, almost all job opportunities for workers with a high school education or less will be in the blue-collar and skilled-trades economy.

"The number of jobs in the blue-collar and skilled-trades economy is growing quickly and dominated by workers with lower levels of educational attainment. However, we found that degree requirements are also penetrating these occupational clusters. A significant number of sales and office support and healthcare support jobs will require postsecondary education and training especially for those seeking advancement in their careers," said Nicole Smith, CEW's chief economist and report co-author.

In addition to occupations and occupational clusters, CEW researchers analyzed 13 major industry groups. Between 2021 and 2031, all industries are expected to see increases in employment, but healthcare services, professional and business services, government and public education services, and leisure and hospitality services will grow the fastest. Notably, the two industries that will be adding the most net new jobs between

2021 and 2031—healthcare services and professional and business services—will grow so quickly that most annual job openings will be for completely new positions. In every other industry, the majority of annual job openings will be replacing workers who retired or otherwise permanently left an occupation.

The expansion in healthcare services should come as no surprise given the aging baby boomer population and rapid advances in health technologies. Between 2021 and 2031, employment in this industry is expected to increase by 20%, or more than 4.2 million net new jobs. This is far greater than any other industry, and by 2031, it will be the third largest industry in terms of jobs. Within that same timeframe, healthcare services will have the most annual job openings of any industry (3.2 million). Healthcare services will have the greatest number of annual job openings for middle-skills workers (1.2 million) and those with a bachelor's degree or higher (1.4 million).

The leisure and hospitality services industry is currently the fifth-largest employer by industry and it will remain the fifth-largest employer in 2031. Between 2021 and 2031, the leisure and hospitality services industry will generate 2.5 million job openings annually, second only to the healthcare services industry. A total of 1.6 million net new jobs will be added during that time period. In addition, this industry will have the most annual job openings for workers with no postsecondary education (1.2 million). However, this industry is not immune to the rising need for further education either. There will be 1.4 million annual job openings for workers with some college but no degree, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree or higher.

In any analysis of future job growth by economic sectors, industries, and occupations, one of the biggest unknown variables is how technological advancements, and artificial intelligence (AI) in particular, will affect the jobs economy. Throughout the technological revolution, advancements in technology have created more jobs than they have replaced, but some futurists have predicted that automation will cause significant job losses within 10 to 30 years. However, our research shows that automation primarily will eliminate specific tasks within jobs rather than wipe out entire jobs. We expect 28% of all tasks in current jobs will be at risk of automation by 2031. Jobs that combine repetitive physical and low-level cognitive tasks are most likely to be automated. While some job loss is inevitable, automation is more likely to displace some workers than to replace them all.

"Technological advances are a wild card anytime you are forecasting the future of the labor market," said Martin Van Der Werf, CEW's director of editorial and education policy and report co-author. "It has been that way for decades. The enduring lesson we have seen is that the best way for workers to protect their livelihoods is to always continue learning new skills and adapting to higher expectations."

In addition to the national report and executive summary of our findings, CEW is also releasing a state-by-state analysis of education demand and a technical appendix detailing our methodology, which are all available on the CEW website: https://cew.georgetown.edu/projections2031

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) is a research and policy institute within Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy that studies the links between education, career qualifications, and workforce demands. For more information, visit cew.georgetown.edu. Follow CEW on Twitter @GeorgetownCEW, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Medium.