



THE MISSING PIECE

Quantifying Non-Completion Pathways to Success

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executive
summary



SKILLS - BUILDERS

Documenting Employment Gains from Short-Term Course Taking



1 in 7 first-time California community college students enroll in six or fewer credits, succeed in those courses, but do not go on to attain a community college credential or transfer to a four-year institution. While these students are currently counted as failures in accountability measures, new research shows that many of those students—particularly those who enroll in career and technical education subjects—are attaining significant earnings gains.

The Return on Investment

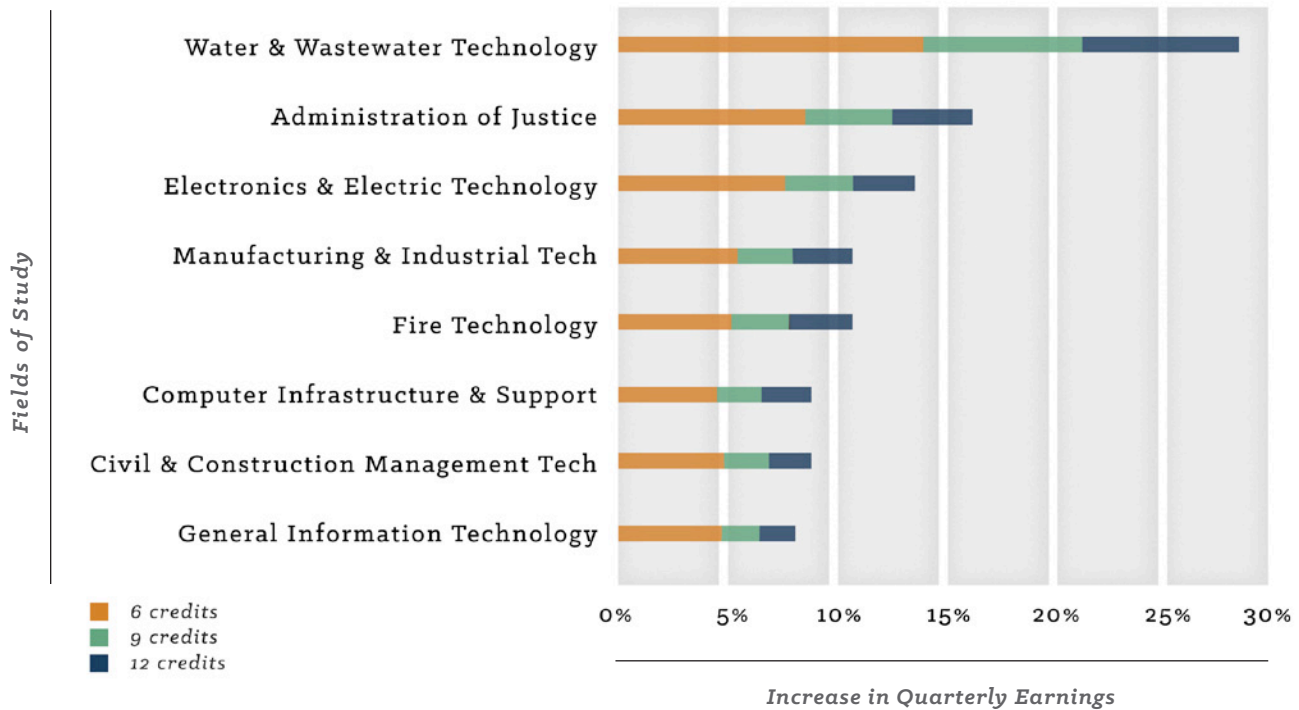
Successfully taking just one or two courses yields earnings increases of around 5% in many fields. Passing more courses can yield quarterly earnings increases of as much as 30%.

What Does This Mean?

Limiting the definition of success to completion of a community college credential or transfer to a four-year institution misses a substantial number of students who are improving their standard of living. Given that community colleges provide one of the most cost-effective means for low-income individuals to improve their earning potential, opportunities for short-term gains may be especially valuable.

We need to determine appropriate ways to capture labor market outcomes.

- **Earnings data** found in the unemployment insurance database can quantify one important facet of success, but it may not be sufficient to capture the full breadth of skills-builder outcomes because it does not include earnings for groups like the self-employed or those who move to other states. For example, two fields with high rates of self-employment—real estate and construction crafts—showed negative and negligible earnings gains.
- We need to determine how course-taking affects **job retention**, particularly for programs that support recertification. The earnings analysis found a low level of return for automotive technology courses, which might miss the important role community colleges play in helping workers maintain smog certifications.



Source: Bahr's analysis of data from the California unemployment insurance database (2002 through 2012).

- If **industry certification** and state licensing data are made available, colleges may find that students are gaining the skills that employers desire through community college coursework, yet electing to secure a better-recognized industry certificate or state license rather than a community college credential.

Colleges should work to improve short-term course-taking pathways, given that significant numbers of students are pursuing this route through community college and earning a better salary. Common skills-builder pathways may represent a foundation from which to better address the needs of displaced and under-employed workers, particularly if they become part of coherent, stackable pathways. For example, identifying common exit points for non-completers can help colleges pin-point where programs might need to be modularized or retooled to better meet industry needs.

The Bottom Line

With budgets tight, colleges have to make difficult choices

about which courses to offer and whether to invest in specific programs. One danger of focusing on completion alone is that pathways that lead to other successes, such as external certifications, job retention, and earnings gains, will be de-prioritized because they tend to produce lower completion rates. Career and technical education programs are vital to rebuilding the economy and helping people secure a family-sustaining wage—goals that are cited frequently by politicians but rarely recorded in community college success metrics. Examining non-completion pathways and better measuring employment outcomes will help colleges develop stronger programs. By following the pathways that students have forged to reach their goals, community colleges can find new routes to success.

Find Out More

You can read more about the studies that generated this information and download an interactive inquiry guide to support conversations on your own campus at: www.wested.org/project/quantifying-non-completion-pathways-to-success



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LearningWorks was founded by the Career Ladders Project for California Community Colleges, the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, and the California Community Colleges Success Network to facilitate, disseminate and fund practitioner-informed recommendations for changes at the community college system and classroom levels, infusing these strategies with statewide and national insights. LearningWorks seeks to strengthen the relationships that offer the greatest potential for accelerating action, including those between policy makers and practitioners, among overlapping initiatives, and across the 112 colleges. LearningWorks is supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

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