Beyond the Rankings of College Majors

Understanding Employment, Earnings, and the Value of an Education Beyond the Major

A low unemployment rate, a high salary, and a worthwhile education are different claims. **Students deserve to understand how they fit together.**

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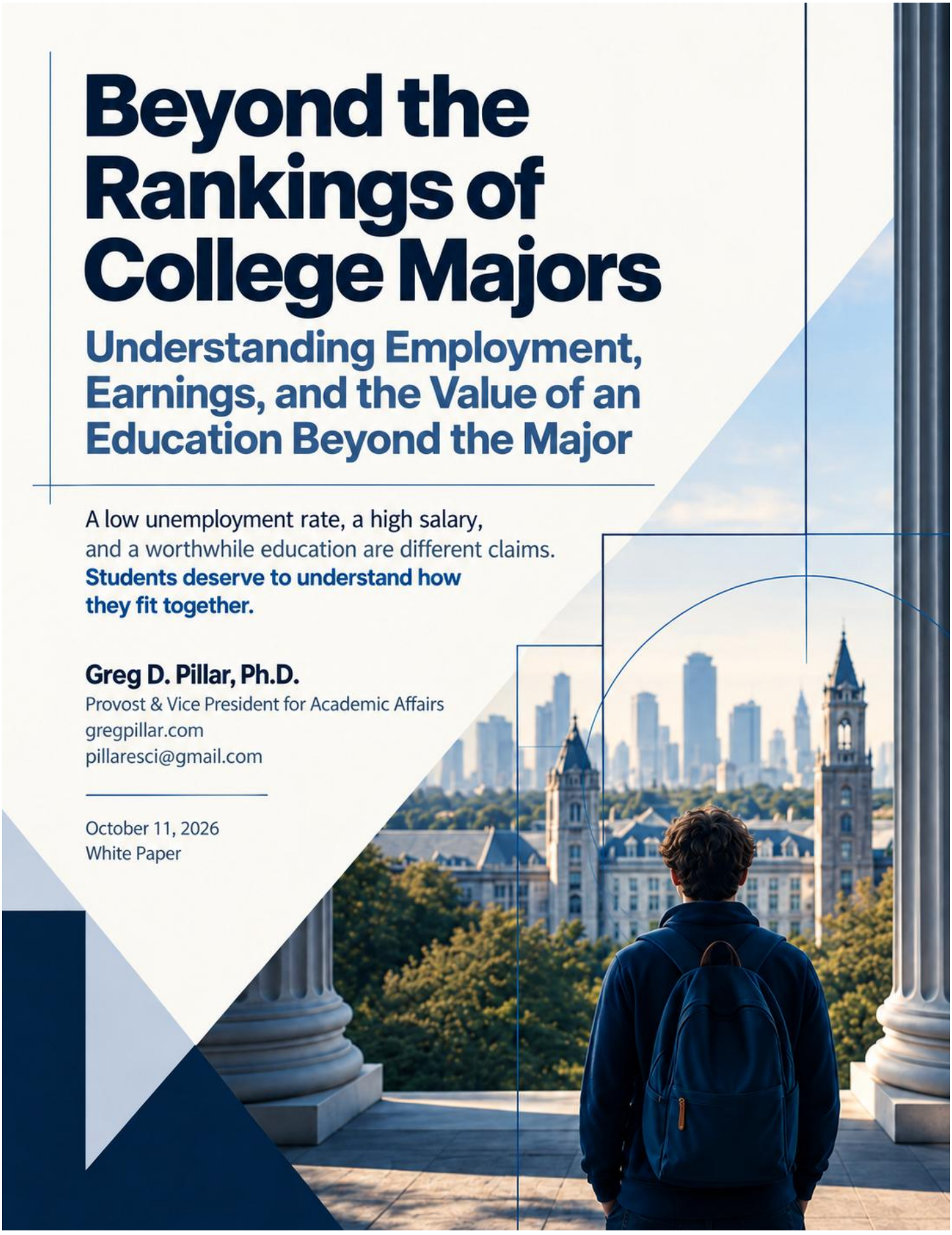


Author's Note

This paper began with a LinkedIn graphic ranking college majors by unemployment rate. The comments raised questions about earnings, affordability, career paths, and whether national figures reflected the opportunities available where graduates lived. As I examined the broader data, I kept returning to one question: what do we miss when we turn a major's ranking into advice about the major's value or a person's future?

As an educator and provost, I want students to have clear information about employment and earnings, including findings that challenge our assumptions about college. I also want institutions to account for what those figures cannot explain: the education within a particular program, its cost, the experiences students can access, and the people who help them connect their learning with possibilities beyond graduation.

This paper brings those questions together through published data, additional research, and my own professional experience. I offer it to colleagues, students, and others who want a more useful conversation about what higher education makes possible and what institutions owe the people who invest in it.

Disclaimer and Scope

The views, interpretations, and recommendations in this paper are my own. They do not represent the official positions or policies of my institution, its leadership, or any organization with which I am affiliated. References to institutional practices address higher education broadly and should not be read as assessments of my current institution.

This paper interprets publicly available data and published research; it does not report an original empirical study. Employment and earnings figures describe particular populations and periods and should not be treated as predictions for an individual student or judgments about a specific institution's program. Social-media comments helped frame the questions explored here but are not treated as representative evidence. The appendix explains the principal definitions, assumptions, and limitations relevant to interpreting the data.

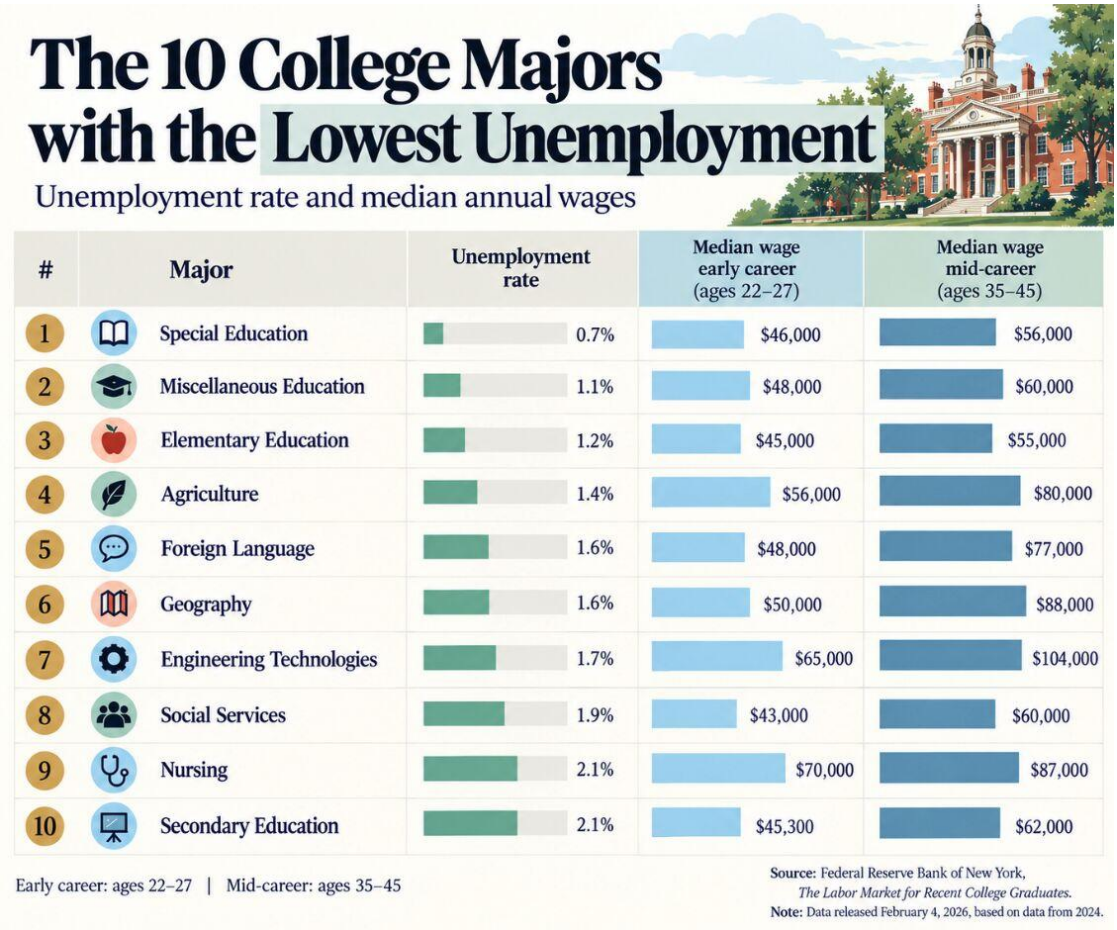
Sources and policy information reflect the materials available as of October 11, 2026. Any errors in interpretation are my responsibility.

Beyond the Rankings of College Majors: Understanding Employment, Earnings, and the Value of Education Beyond the Major.

A low unemployment rate, a high salary, and a worthwhile education are different claims. Students deserve to understand how they fit together.

By Greg D. Pillar, Ph.D.

A list of college majors with the lowest unemployment rates moves across social media. Education fields appear near the top. Nursing looks strong. Geography makes an appearance that surprises a few people. The apparent takeaway is reassuring: choose one of these majors, and your future should be reasonably secure.



#	Major	Unemployment rate	Median wage early career (ages 22–27)	Median wage mid-career (ages 35–45)
1	Special Education	0.7%	$46,000	$56,000
2	Miscellaneous Education	1.1%	$48,000	$60,000
3	Elementary Education	1.2%	$45,000	$55,000
4	Agriculture	1.4%	$56,000	$80,000
5	Foreign Language	1.6%	$48,000	$77,000
6	Geography	1.6%	$50,000	$88,000
7	Engineering Technologies	1.7%	$65,000	$104,000
8	Social Services	1.9%	$43,000	$60,000
9	Nursing	2.1%	$70,000	$87,000
10	Secondary Education	2.1%	$45,300	$62,000

Figure 1. The graphic shared in the original LinkedIn post by Julia R. Cartwright, ranking ten college majors by unemployment rate and showing early- and mid-career median wages. Data source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2024 data released February 4, 2026.

Then the comments arrive.

What do those jobs pay? Can graduates afford their student loans? Are they working full time? Are they using their education? Does the same opportunity exist where they actually live? Will these fields still look attractive when today's students graduate?

Those questions deserve a deeper look than a ranking can give them.

I recently followed that discussion from a post on LinkedIn and then spent time with the broader data behind it: the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's *The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates*. Adding unemployment, underemployment, early-career wages, mid-career wages, and historical trends made the picture considerably more interesting. It also made the familiar search for the "best major" feel increasingly inadequate.

Special education can have exceptionally low unemployment and relatively modest wages. Computer engineering can have very high wages alongside much higher unemployment. Agriculture can have low unemployment and substantial underemployment. A history graduate can build a career in banking, corporate strategy, or community administration without having taken a wrong turn.

Each observation raises a different question about the relationship between education and work. Higher education owes students a better conversation about those questions, including some that challenge how we organize and explain our own programs.

Unless otherwise noted, the employment and earnings figures discussed in this article come from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates (2026). The outcomes-by-major figures describe 2024; the historical wage data extend through 2025, and the unemployment and underemployment trends through the second quarter of 2026.

The Picture Changes When We Read Across the Table

Start with a few examples from the New York Fed's outcomes-by-major table. Comparing employment and earnings together reveals combinations that a ranking by unemployment alone can obscure. The employment rates concern recent graduates; the wage columns compare two age groups.

Table 1. Unemployment, Underemployment, and Median Annual Wages for Selected Undergraduate Majors, 2024

Undergraduate major	Unemployment	Underemployment	Early-career median wage	Mid-career median wage
Special Education	0.7%	16.0%	$46,000	$56,000
Elementary Education	1.2%	16.2%	$45,000	$55,000
Nursing	2.1%	12.8%	$70,000	$87,000
Aerospace Engineering	2.2%	14.7%	$85,000	$130,000
Computer Engineering	7.8%	15.8%	$90,000	$131,000
Computer Science	7.0%	19.1%	$87,000	$120,000
Agriculture	1.4%	57.1%	$56,000	$80,000
Engineering Technologies	1.7%	44.4%	$65,000	$104,000
History	4.3%	50.1%	$47,500	$80,000

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, outcomes by major, 2024 data. Unemployment and underemployment cover ages 22–27 with a bachelor's degree or higher. Wages cover full-time workers with a bachelor's degree only: ages 22–27 for early career and 35–45 for mid-career. Current students are excluded.

Reading down a single column produces a ranking. Reading across it produces a much more useful and interesting conversation.

Special and elementary education show low unemployment and low underemployment, yet comparatively low wages at both career stages. Their earnings cannot simply be explained by graduates failing to obtain work that requires a degree. Degree-level work itself can be relatively poorly compensated.

Computer engineering and computer science present a different combination: high wages and low underemployment among employed graduates, alongside relatively high unemployment. Graduates who secure employment may enter well-paid, degree-level work while others struggle to obtain a position. The earnings figures do not include a salary for the person still searching.

Agriculture and engineering technologies complicate the picture again. Both have low unemployment, but much larger shares of employed recent graduates work in occupations classified as not typically

requiring a degree. Engineering technologies nevertheless has a mid-career median above $100,000. Underemployment and low pay are not interchangeable measures.

There are also fields where the employment and earnings figures line up quite well, including aerospace engineering, civil engineering, and construction services. In civil engineering, unemployment is 2.3% and underemployment is 15.6%, with median wages of $75,000 early in a career and $115,000 at mid-career. Construction services has a similar employment picture, at 2.2% unemployment and 17.9% underemployment, while median wages range from $75,000 early career to $120,000 mid-career. That last example caught my attention, but it needs some context: "construction services" refers here to a college major. These figures do not tell us how earning that degree compares with entering construction through an apprenticeship.

Even closely related fields resist easy generalization. Early childhood education has 6.6% unemployment and median wages of $45,000 early career and $52,000 mid-career. A reassuring statement about "education majors" can conceal meaningful differences within education.

The point is to ask what kind of opportunity each measure captures, what it leaves out, and which combination matters to a particular student.

A Job Can Be Available and Still Be Difficult to Build a Life Around

Several comments on the original post raised a concern that connects directly to a point I made in the 34th edition of *Field Notes*: a lifetime return still needs a first return. Getting a job is part of that beginning, but so is earning enough to cover living expenses and start meeting the financial obligations that may have come with the degree. The promise of greater opportunity over a lifetime offers limited comfort when those obligations are already arriving.

The education and social-service figures make that concern difficult to dismiss. Social services reports only 1.9% unemployment, but median wages of $43,000 early career and $60,000 mid-career. Secondary education reports 2.1% unemployment and medians of $45,300 and $62,000.

Those numbers do not determine whether a profession is meaningful. They do raise practical questions about affordability, family responsibilities, housing, and financial flexibility.

They also raise a question that gets too little attention in discussions of college value: what happens when work society depends on is work society compensates modestly? Encouraging students to enter teaching or service professions while treating their lower earnings as evidence of an educational mistake is a difficult position to defend. When graduates enter the professions they prepared for and still struggle financially, their earnings tell us something about how that work is paid. Holding the degree responsible for the entire outcome lets employers, funding decisions, and our own expectations about what essential work should cost escape scrutiny.

Low starting pay may also affect how long someone can afford to remain in a field they care about. A graduate can find the work meaningful, perform it well, and still begin looking elsewhere because the paycheck does not cover the life they are trying to build. Research on teachers gives this concern some

grounding: financial anxiety was associated with subsequent departures from a San Francisco school district, while a separate survey of early career teachers identified low pay, difficult working conditions, and inadequate support as leading reasons for leaving or considering leaving the classroom (Spector, 2020; James & Shoemaker DeMio, 2025). These findings describe different decisions, including changing employers and considering leaving teaching altogether, but both connect the conditions of employment to whether people stay.

The question extends to social work, caregiving, and other health care roles, although the pressures can differ considerably across occupations and workplaces. Health care can offer stable employment and good earnings, yet those advantages do not necessarily make the daily work sustainable. A Swedish study conducted during the pandemic, primarily involving social workers and registered nurses in elderly care, found that greater work-related stress, difficulty balancing work and home life, and lower career satisfaction were associated with stronger intentions to leave a workplace or profession (Engström et al., 2023). The study measured intentions rather than actual departures, but it illustrates why pay alone cannot explain whether someone wants, or feels able, to continue.

For someone whose immediate difficulty is financial, the possibility of better earnings ten or fifteen years later offers little help with rent, childcare, or loan payments due now. Leaving under those circumstances does not necessarily mean the person chose the wrong major or lost their commitment to the profession; they may need a different employer, location, or line of work to make ends meet. That gives the need for a first return another dimension: early earnings can influence whether someone can afford to remain long enough to realize the later return at all.

The LinkedIn comments raised many of these same concerns, including burnout, scheduling, benefits, and retention. Those comments are not a representative survey, but they draw attention to conditions these tables do not capture. A field can have recurring openings because it is expanding, because employees are leaving, or because of some combination. A low unemployment rate alone cannot distinguish those possibilities.

For students, finding a job is only the beginning; they also need to understand whether its pay and working conditions will support the life they hope to build. Institutions have a responsibility to make those realities part of the conversation about career opportunities, particularly when asking students to commit substantial time and money to preparing for them.

The Price of the Education Belongs in the Conversation

I agree with the question of whether anticipated earnings justify the cost of college. I am less comfortable when that question is answered using an earnings table with no information about cost.

Consider a student choosing the same field at an elite institution, a small private nonprofit college, or a regional public university. If one option leaves that student paying substantially more, the financial decision changes even when the national earnings figure for the major stays exactly the same.

Institutional labels do not settle that comparison. An elite college may offer substantial aid. A small private institution may be less expensive for one student and more expensive for another. The relevant

comparison involves actual net cost, likely time to completion, borrowing, and the opportunities available along the way.

Federal financial accountability policies make the institution-specific question even more consequential. The Student Tuition and Transparency System (STATS) and Earnings Accountability regulations, scheduled to replace Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment (FVT/GE) regulations in July 2027, bring this distinction into federal policy. Under that framework, a program that repeatedly fails the applicable earnings standard can lose access to federal Direct Loans while a program in the same field at another institution remains eligible (U.S. Department of Education, 2026a, 2026b). A national ranking of majors cannot tell a student which of those programs they are considering.

That distinction also raises questions about what institutions provide for the price they charge. Programs carrying the same name may offer very different curricula, advising/mentoring, practical experience, and support (including connections to alumnae, employers, etc.) for translating learning into employment or adapting as work changes. Poor earnings outcomes warrant scrutiny, but they do not, by themselves, establish which of those elements fell short. Local wages, the students a program serves, and the careers graduates pursue also belong in that examination. The institution has responsibility for the education it provides, even when an earnings measure cannot fully explain the result. A higher price requires a credible explanation of additional value; a lower price still requires an education that delivers.

In their analysis, *Is College Still Worth It?*, New York Fed economists Jaison R. Abel and Richard Deitz (2025) estimate the financial return to college by weighing the earnings advantage of a degree against both its direct costs after aid and the wages students forgo while attending. A salary figure tells us what graduates earn, but calculating a return also requires knowing what they paid and what income they gave up along the way.

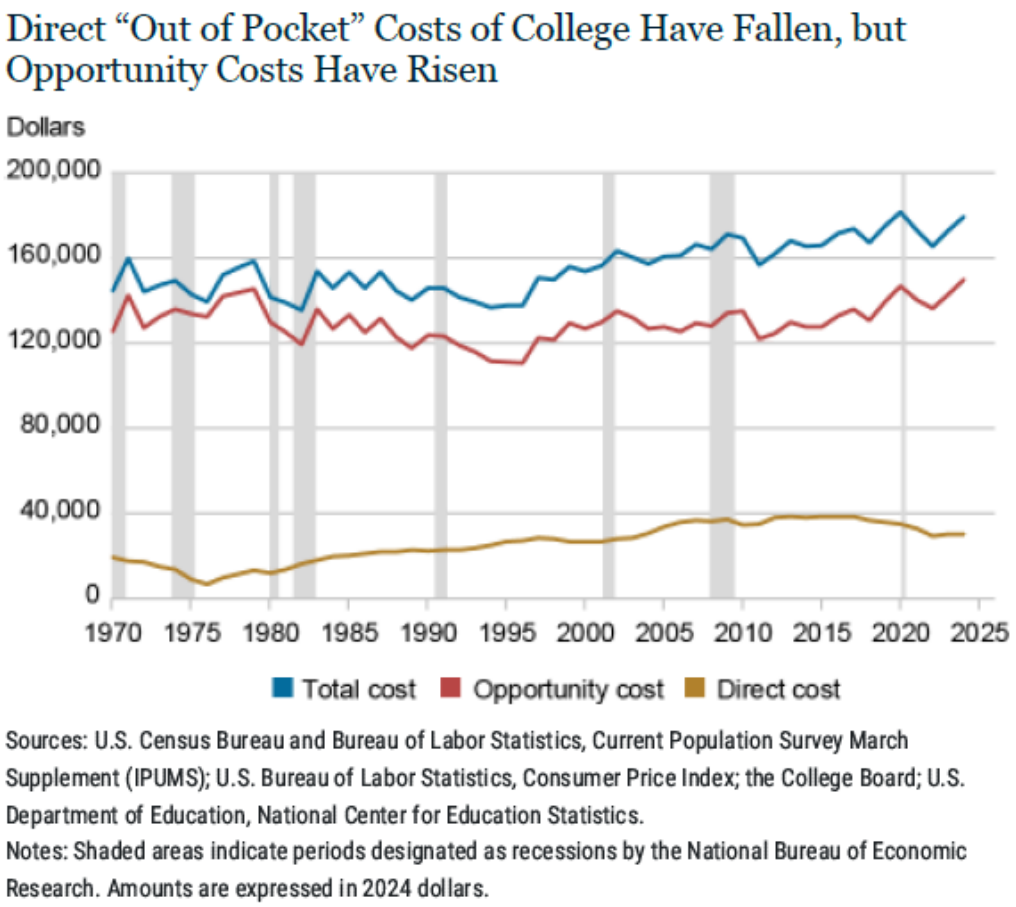


Figure 2. The cost of college extends beyond the tuition bill. *Estimated direct costs after financial aid, forgone earnings, and their combined total for four years of college, 1970–2024. Amounts are expressed in 2024 dollars. Forgone earnings represent income students could have earned while working instead of attending college; total costs should not be interpreted as tuition charges or student debt. Source: Abel and Deitz (2025), Is College Still Worth It?, Federal Reserve Bank of New York.*

For an adult learner, the decision may involve keeping a job, arranging childcare, transferring previous credits, and avoiding another year of tuition because a required course is unavailable. These are central features of the investment. Reporting on a California Competes study that followed 27 adults who returned to college and graduated, Bay (2026) describes how childcare expenses, forgone wages, and lost credits added to the cost of completing a degree. Participants' financial gains also varied, with some graduates in rural communities describing fewer opportunities to turn their education into higher earnings.

Those same graduates described benefits that a paycheck would not fully capture, including stronger skills, greater confidence, broader perspectives, and better opportunities for their children (Bay, 2026). Education also has intellectual, civic, relational, and personal value, and I believe deeply in those purposes. They strengthen the case for education, but they do not relieve institutions of the responsibility to explain its cost and help students reach viable futures.

A Major Is a Field of Study, Not a Career Boundary

I keep returning to how much we ask the major to explain.

Majors provide disciplinary depth, intellectual community, and a coherent course of study. They also give institutions a manageable way to organize faculty, requirements, budgets, and advising. In some professions, specific preparation is essential to the pathway into practice.

But we often extend that structure into an assumption that each major should lead to an obvious matching occupation. History leads to teaching or museums. Biology leads to medicine. Business leads to business. Anything less direct requires an explanation.

I have seen history graduates move into banking, corporate strategy, and civic or community administration. The title of the job may have changed. The usefulness of the education did not necessarily disappear.

Consider a history graduate evaluating evidence, investigating conflicting accounts, identifying patterns, and writing recommendations in corporate risk assessment. Or one using those capabilities to inform public strategy. Those are plausible applications of historical study. We should be able to recognize them without requiring the job title to contain the word "history."

Reporting in Forbes on an analysis of LinkedIn member data, Courtney Connley-Hampton (2026) offers another way to look at these career paths. Among the recent graduates included in the analysis, 69 percent of English majors worked outside the two industries most commonly employing graduates of that major (Connley-Hampton, 2026). LinkedIn described this spread across industries as "versatility." The analysis included graduates already employed full-time, so it does not establish their overall likelihood of finding work or whether their jobs used what they learned. Still, it shows how widely graduates from one discipline can be distributed across the economy. Working beyond a major's most common industries is not, by itself, evidence that the education has gone unused.

This is where the question "Are graduates working in jobs related to their education?" needs care. It can be a valuable question about whether learning is being used. It can also become an unnecessarily narrow test of whether a degree name matches an occupational label.

The New York Fed's underemployment measure does not make that match. It classifies work according to whether the occupation typically requires a college degree. A history graduate in a degree-level corporate role is not classified as underemployed simply for working outside a conventional history occupation. Conversely, a graduate using substantial knowledge in an occupation that does not typically require a degree may be classified as underemployed.

Knowing whether an occupation typically requires a degree helps us interpret these outcomes, but it leaves much of the actual work unexamined. The measure cannot tell us how often someone draws on research, judgment, communication, creativity, or disciplinary knowledge to do that work well.

I am not suggesting students ignore the differences in employment and earnings across majors. Those differences belong in their decisions, alongside a fuller understanding of what an education can make

possible. A major shapes opportunities, but it cannot tell us where a person's career will lead. I want the conversation to give more attention to what students learn deeply, the experience they gain applying it, and how well they can explain the value of those capabilities to someone who might hire them.

The First Salary Does Not Tell the Whole Story

Early-career wages deserve attention because graduates need to begin supporting themselves. But students considering a field also deserve to understand how earnings differ across career stages, without treating those differences as promises about their own futures.

Table 2. Median Annual Wages at Early and Mid-Career for Selected Undergraduate Majors, 2024

Major	Median early-career wage	Median mid-career wage
Elementary Education	$45,000	$55,000
Art History	$45,000	$91,000
History	$47,500	$80,000
Political Science	$52,000	$100,000
Marketing	$60,000	$100,000
Nursing	$70,000	$87,000
Civil Engineering	$75,000	$115,000

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2026), outcomes by major for 2024. Early career refers to ages 22–27; mid-career refers to ages 35–45. Wage figures describe full-time workers whose highest degree is a bachelor's.

Nursing and civil engineering report substantially higher early-career medians than the other fields shown here. The comparison changes at mid-career, where art history, political science, and marketing report higher medians than nursing. Elementary education remains comparatively modest at both stages. These are comparisons between age groups, not raises tracked over individual careers, so the differences cannot establish which choice will produce the strongest financial outcome for a particular student.

The financial implications also depend on what someone pays for the degree. Two students studying history at institutions with annual published prices of $45,000 and $90,000 face different starting points, although financial aid could substantially change that comparison. The more expensive institution's reputation, networks, or opportunities might help a graduate secure higher earnings, but its price does not guarantee that result. For students, the challenge is finding the strongest education and opportunities they can obtain at a manageable net cost. Paying less can improve the potential return, provided the program gives them the preparation, experience, and support to put their education to use.



Figure 3. Earnings vary considerably among recent college graduates. *Median annual wages for full-time workers ages 22–27 whose highest credential is a bachelor's degree or a high school diploma, 1990–2025. The shaded band shows the middle 50 percent of bachelor's-degree wages (25th–75th percentiles). Figures exclude people currently enrolled in school and are expressed in constant 2025 dollars. Vertical shaded bars indicate recessions. Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2026), The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates.*

The broader wage-distribution chart adds another consideration: graduates at a similar age can have very different earnings. At its 2025 endpoint, the median for young workers with only a bachelor's degree is roughly $60,000, compared with roughly $40,000 for similarly aged workers with only a high school diploma. The middle half of bachelor's-degree wages spans approximately $44,000 to $85,000. These are approximate readings from the graph, expressed in inflation-adjusted 2025 dollars. The degree is

associated with an earnings advantage, but the median alone gives a limited picture of what an individual graduate might earn. The historical trend also includes periods when purchasing power falls or stalls.

I keep coming back to the tension between those immediate needs and longer-term possibilities. Judging an education entirely by its first salary overlooks much of what may follow. Asking graduates to take comfort in future earnings while they struggle to pay their bills overlooks the circumstances they are living through now.

And before a graduate can earn that first salary, they have to find a job. In the second quarter of 2026, recent-graduate unemployment was approximately 5.6 percent, while underemployment among employed recent graduates was 42 percent. Recent graduates had higher unemployment than both the broader graduate population and workers overall, although their rate remained below that of similarly aged workers without a bachelor's degree. Students can therefore benefit from having a degree and still encounter considerable difficulty entering the labor market.

The underemployment history also reaches well before the current anxiety about AI. Recent graduates have generally experienced higher underemployment than the broader graduate population, and the recent deterioration adds to a longstanding problem. That history gives institutions reason to examine how they help students move from college into work, including how students gain experience, build professional relationships, and explain what they can contribute.

The broader graduate population includes older, more experienced workers. Its lower underemployment rate does not establish that today's recent graduates will reach the same outcomes simply by getting older.

National Opportunity Still Has a Local Address

Among the comments on the original LinkedIn post with the ranking of lowest unemployment by major, some readers were surprised by the unemployment rate for geography majors. Others raised a question that applies to every major: what opportunities are available where a graduate actually lives? National figures can obscure how much that answer depends on location.

A national unemployment rate does not tell a graduate whether relevant employers are hiring within commuting distance. A national salary does not tell a family what that income will purchase locally. A field's prospects can depend on regional industries, employer concentration, population changes, public funding, and the ability to relocate.

Claims that teachers will always have jobs, for example, need room for local enrollment and budget conditions. Healthcare demand does not establish that every region offers the same openings, schedules, or compensation. Certifications, licensing, supervised experience, and other entry requirements may introduce additional steps between a degree and a job.

Mobility is also a resource. A student with caregiving responsibilities may be choosing among opportunities within an hour of home. Advice based on national demand can be accurate and still be of limited use to that person.

For institutions, this means national rankings should inform regional investigation. Which employers need people? What capabilities do they need? What can graduates reasonably earn here? Which opportunities require relocation, and which can students pursue while remaining rooted in their communities?

Demand also has a scale. A low unemployment rate does not tell us how many additional graduates a field can absorb. Launching or expanding programs requires evidence about openings and supply, not simply a favorable percentage.

Preparing Students for Work That Will Change

Some comments on the original LinkedIn post attributed employment difficulties to AI and automation; others suggested that work built around human relationships would be more secure. Data on unemployment or underemployment cannot tell us how much AI contributed to the outcomes they report.

High unemployment in computer science does not, by itself, establish that AI caused it. Low unemployment in a care profession does not make that profession immune to technological, organizational, or financial change. Technology can reshape the daily work of an occupation without eliminating the need for it. Job losses elsewhere could also reduce household spending or strain the public budgets that support employment in education, health care, and community services. Looking only at whether a machine can perform an occupation's immediate tasks leaves those effects out of the picture.

For me, this raises questions about how we structure academic programs. We often tell students they will need to adapt, collaborate across disciplines, and solve unfamiliar problems. Where in their education do they practice doing those things, and how do we know they are getting better at them?

A history program might connect sustained disciplinary inquiry with quantitative analysis, public policy, or organizational decision-making. A business program might ask students to use historical context and ethical reasoning to examine the social consequences of a business decision. Technical programs might require students to explain AI-assisted work to different audiences, evaluate its effects on people, and take responsibility for the results.

Putting electives from several departments on a list does not ensure that students learn to connect them. That takes assignments and experiences in which students draw on their disciplinary knowledge, encounter the limits of one approach, and work with other perspectives to develop a fuller response. Faculty need time to design those experiences together and agree on what successful integration looks like in student work.

Existing majors offer room for this work, as do new programs. Adding another semester or another set of requirements could make the education less accessible without making it more coherent. I would start by examining what already occupies the curriculum: where courses build on one another, where students make connections largely on their own, and where requirements persist without a clear contribution to the learning we expect.

I am still working through what this should look like in practice. I do not expect every major to prepare students for every possible career. But when our departmental boundaries make it difficult for students to connect the knowledge they will need to use together, those boundaries become part of the problem.

Institutions Have Work to Do Between the Degree and the Job

Transferable skills cannot remain a reassuring phrase in a brochure. Students need to develop them, demonstrate them, and recognize where they can be applied. That means making career exploration part of the educational experience early. Internships, research, community projects, and employer partnerships should give students opportunities to test their learning in consequential settings.

Students also need help describing what they have done. "I studied history" tells an employer the discipline. "For my senior project, I used city records, newspaper coverage, and residents' accounts to investigate why a redevelopment project displaced some neighborhoods more than others, then wrote a report explaining whose perspectives were missing from the official account." This gives the employer something concrete to ask about. Both can describe the same education, but the second makes the research, judgment, and writing visible.

Faculty advising can give students a place to connect what they are learning with what they might do next. That requires faculty to invest in knowing their advisees: their interests, strengths, uncertainties, and the responsibilities that shape their choices. Checking requirements and approving a schedule are necessary, but students also need someone who can recognize a developing interest, suggest an experience they had not considered, or introduce them to a person whose work opens up a possibility.

Institutions have to make that level of attention possible. In my view, heavy teaching overloads and advising assignments that leave little time for individual students directly threaten this work. So can reliance on adjunct faculty when their appointments provide neither paid time for mentoring nor continuity with students across semesters. Adjuncts may bring valuable professional experience and invest deeply in students, but that commitment cannot substitute for a staffing model that supports sustained relationships. Who teaches, who advises, how many students they serve, and what time they have available all affect the experience an institution can realistically promise.

Even a well-funded and fully staffed career development center cannot, on its own, connect every student's classroom learning with professional possibilities. Alumni, community partners, and employers can contribute through class projects, mentoring, workplace visits, and introductions that develop over time. Institutions miss opportunities when those relationships remain confined to occasional events or depend entirely on whom an individual faculty member happens to know. Students who arrive without established professional networks need regular access to people who can help them build one.

That access also depends on how opportunities are structured. An unpaid internship, a placement beyond commuting distance, or an event scheduled during a student's work shift may be out of reach. Institutions cannot count an opportunity as available merely because it appears on a list; students need a realistic way to participate.

The availability of that support also belongs in an honest examination of programs whose graduates face difficult outcomes. Anthropology, fine arts, and performing arts combine relatively high unemployment and underemployment with lower wages than many technical fields in these data. Those figures do not tell us which institutions are preparing students well, but they give institutions reason to examine their own results. What are students paying? Where do they gain applied experience? Who helps them identify opportunities and build relationships before graduation? And what changes when graduates consistently struggle?

I believe in the enduring value of these disciplines. That belief makes me more concerned about what happens to the students who choose them. A student should be able to study a field deeply and graduate with experience applying that knowledge, people they can turn to for guidance, and a realistic understanding of the opportunities ahead.

What We Owe Students Beyond a Ranking

What do we miss when we turn a major's ranking into advice about a person's future? We miss the difference between studying the same subject at two institutions that charge different prices and provide different experiences. We miss the graduate whose skills lead somewhere unexpected, the adult who needs to keep working while finishing a degree, and the person who finds meaningful work but cannot afford to remain in it. None of those experiences makes the national data less useful. They make the questions we ask of it more specific.

I want students to have this information, including the findings that make those of us in higher education uncomfortable. Students considering a field with difficult employment outcomes deserve a candid conversation about those outcomes before they commit their time and money. They also deserve to know what a particular institution does to prepare them, what opportunities they will have to apply their learning, and who will help them find their way. If graduates repeatedly struggle, an institution's response has to include examining and changing what it provides.

As a provost, I have to ask whether the experience students receive supports the claims we make about the value of their education. But students enroll in particular programs, take particular courses, and depend on particular people. That is where our claims about preparation, mentoring, and opportunity have to become something they can actually experience.

A student choosing a major is trying to imagine a life with incomplete information. We cannot promise how that life will unfold. We can be clear about costs and outcomes, build programs that connect knowledge with experience, and make sure students have people who know them well enough to help when their plans change. When I think about what we owe students beyond a ranking, I think about whether we have earned their trust in making that decision.

Appendix: Understanding the Data

Things to Keep in Mind About the Data

These considerations help us use the findings responsibly. They are part of understanding what the measures can answer. They specifically reference the general overview and the main data source from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and not just data (tables and figures) in this white paper.

"Recent" means age, not time since graduation. In the unemployment and underemployment series, recent graduates are ages 22–27 and all graduates are ages 22–65, with a bachelor's degree or higher. Recent graduates are included in the broader group. Someone graduating at 40 is not counted as recent. Someone graduating at 22 ages out of the recent category at 28.

Adult degree completers are not separately visible. Older completers may appear in the broader graduate population, but these displays do not distinguish them from people who earned degrees years earlier. They cannot tell us directly how completing a degree changes the earnings, advancement, or career options of someone returning to education. That is a consequential gap for institutions serving adult learners; it does not mean no research on those learners exists.

The columns describe different populations. In the major table, unemployment and underemployment concern ages 22–27 with at least a bachelor's degree. Wage medians concern full-time workers with a bachelor's degree only. The graduate-degree share concerns ages 25–65 with at least a bachelor's degree. A large graduate-degree share should not be interpreted as meaning those graduate-degree earners are included in the wage columns.

Underemployment has a specific definition. It concerns the degree requirements of an occupation. It does not directly measure whether work matches a major, uses every capability a graduate possesses, pays well, or provides sufficient hours. Unemployment and underemployment also have different denominators, so their percentages cannot simply be added.

The data cover different years and use different surveys. The quarterly employment charts extend through the second quarter of 2026, the wage-distribution chart through 2025, and the major table describes 2024. The time series use the Current Population Survey; the major table uses the American Community Survey. The employment trend lines are seasonally adjusted and smoothed, and the notes identify October 2025 as estimated because of missing data.

Early- and mid-career wages are not individual trajectories. Ages 22–27 and 35–45 are different groups. Their differences cannot establish how much today's graduates will earn later. Current students are excluded, and the wage measures do not represent all graduates, including those who are unemployed or working part time.

Medians and rankings conceal variation. A median is not a promised salary, and a small difference in a rate does not necessarily establish a meaningful advantage. Survey estimates have uncertainty. The selected examples discussed here illustrate contrasts; they are not a complete ranking or a statistical test of differences among all majors.

These are national associations, not causal estimates for particular programs. Students entering different majors differ in preparation, interests, resources, and other characteristics. The tables do not isolate the effect of the major, identify the contribution of a particular college, or establish what would have happened had a person chosen differently. They also do not incorporate individual net price, debt, completion risk, local living costs, benefits, or working conditions.

The scope is narrower than the entire education-and-work decision. These displays do not provide a full comparison with associate degrees, certificates, or apprenticeships. Nor do they capture all the civic, intellectual, personal, and relational outcomes people may value. Those purposes belong in the conversation alongside financial outcomes, with equal care about what we can actually demonstrate.

Data Sources and Release Dates

Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates. Major comparisons use the February 4, 2026 release of 2024 American Community Survey data. Wage-distribution figures extend through 2025. Unemployment and underemployment trends use the August 6, 2026 release covering the second quarter of 2026. The chart notes and frequently asked questions explain the definitions, methods, and distinct populations used for each measure.

The social-media discussion informed the questions explored here. Individual comments are treated as perspectives and questions, not as representative evidence or independently verified labor-market findings.

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