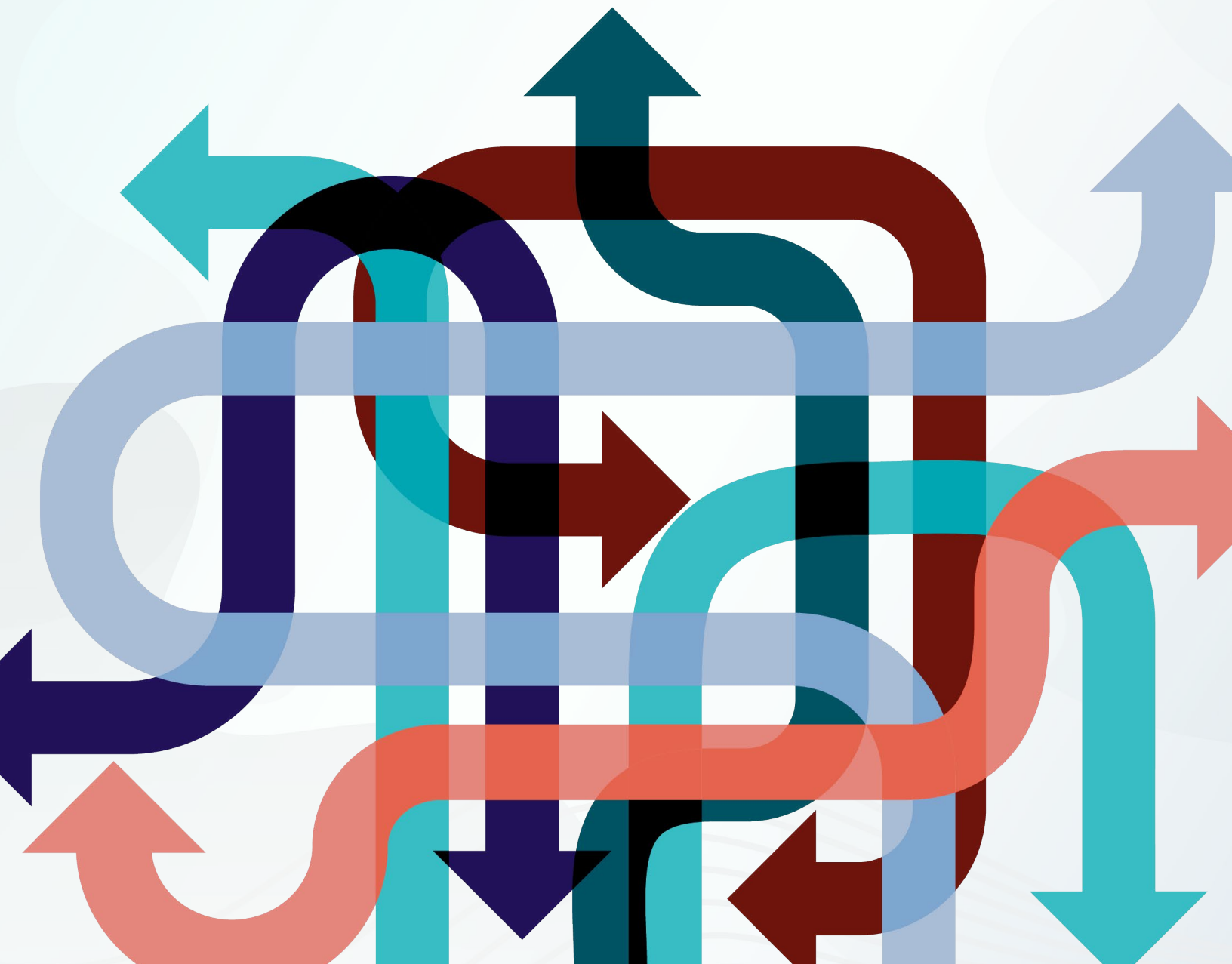
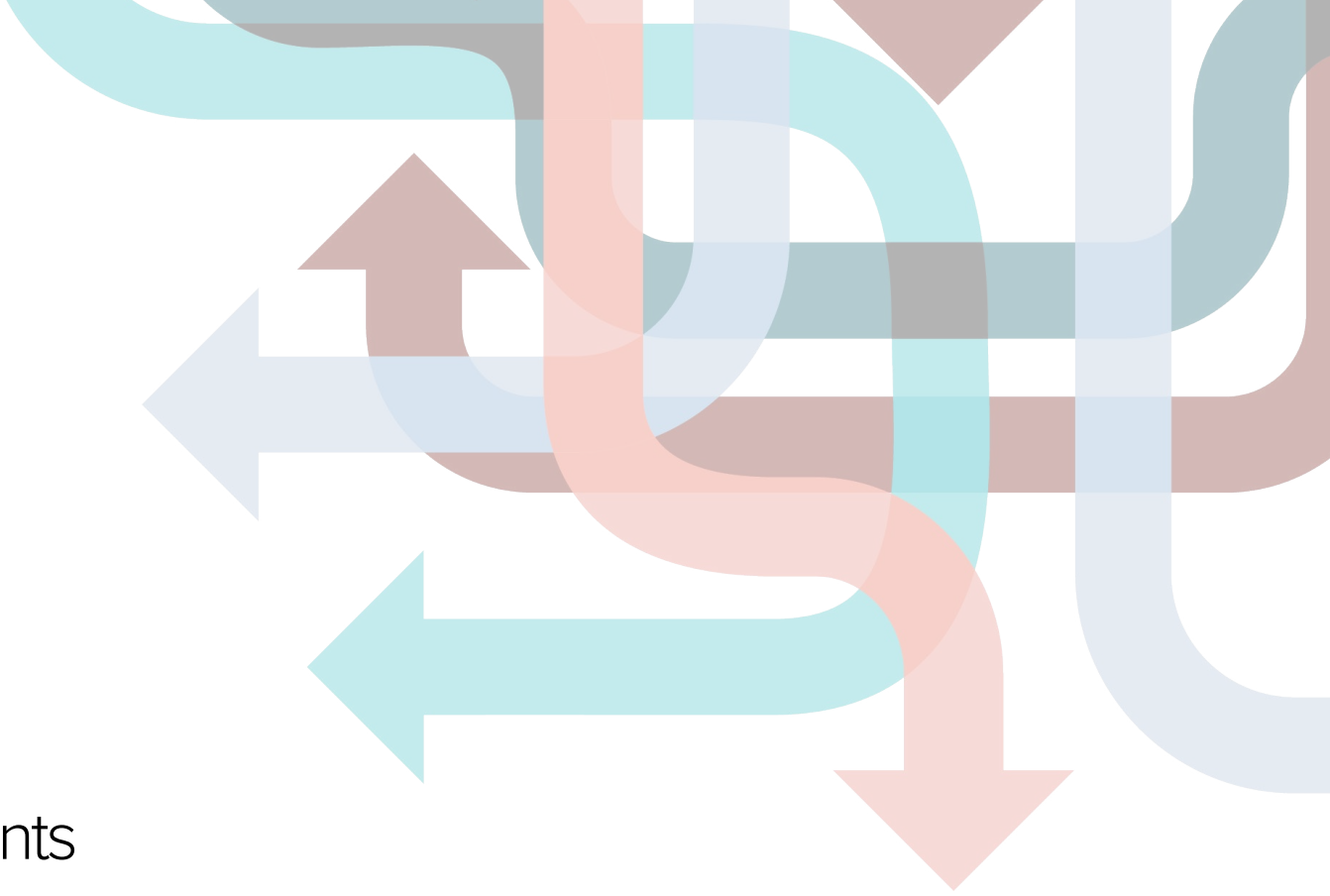


How Clear Is Their Path?

Guided Career Pathways and Community College Students





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How Much Do Students Know About Their Chosen Career Path?



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 (Carnevale et al., 2023, p. 12).



At their core, community colleges are engines of social and economic mobility. As low-cost and open access institutions, they serve as a gateway to higher education for students who may have otherwise been excluded, particularly those in historically underserved and underrepresented populations. Community colleges give students the opportunity to earn associate degrees and career and technical credentials as well as access to vertical transfer pathways for those ultimately seeking baccalaureate degrees or higher. For students to fully benefit from the economic mobility that a postsecondary certificate or degree can offer, however, they must not only complete their goals but also find success in the labor market.

The 2023 administration of the Community College Survey of Students Engagement (CCSSE) included five special-focus items—developed in collaboration with Jobs for the Future (JFF)—on the topic of guided career pathways to investigate just how prepared students were for meeting their career goals. What we learned is that over 90% of students reported that they had chosen a career path, but when asked more specific questions, many were missing vital information.

RESPONDENTS:

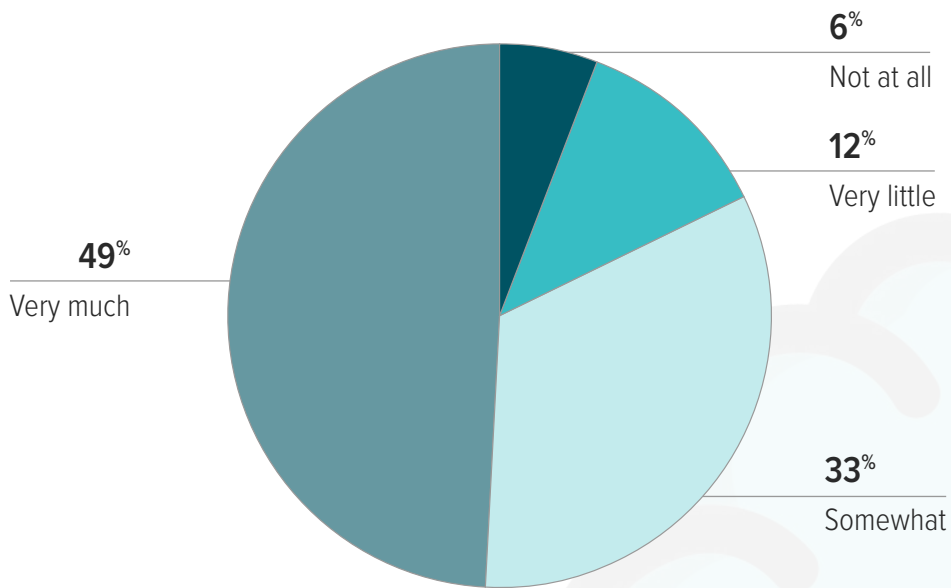
This report contains data from 83,189 community college students across 199 colleges who responded to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) in spring 2023.



DO THEY KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT REQUISITE SKILLS?

Knowing which skills they will need for their chosen career path is clearly important information for students. Almost half of respondents indicated that their coursework at the college *very much* provided them with the information they need in their chosen career path, compared to 18% who reported *very little* or *not at all*.

How much has your coursework at this college provided information about the skills you will need in your chosen career path?



N = 65,860

Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path

“I love the fact that this school is very career oriented and says, ‘This is some of the stuff that you can do when you graduate.’ You don’t have the anxiety and the worry of am I spending all this time, all this money doing all these classes, and then get out and go, ‘I don’t have a job. How am I going to pay all this? How am I going to take care of myself?’”

– Student

“One of my favorite classes that I’ve taken was my observation class for education because I got to be in the classroom with kids, watching kids, seeing how their teacher interacts with them. I only needed 30 observation hours. I ended up with 50.”

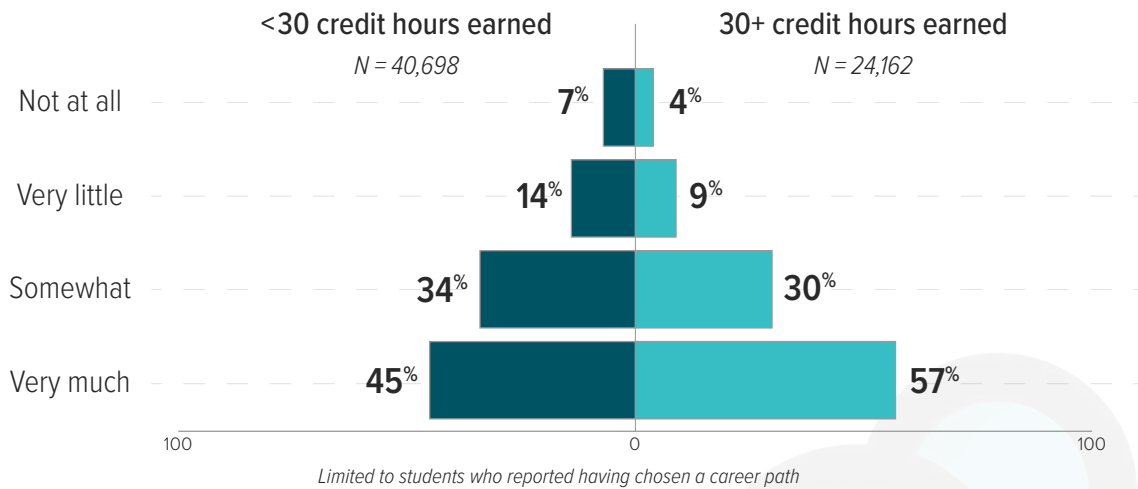
– Student

WHAT HELPS STUDENTS KNOW MORE

Credit accrual

Not surprisingly, students with 30 or more credit hours were more likely to report that their coursework had *very much* equipped them with information about the **skills needed for their chosen career path** than were students who had earned fewer than 30 credit hours.

How much has your coursework at this college provided information about the skills you will need in your chosen career path?

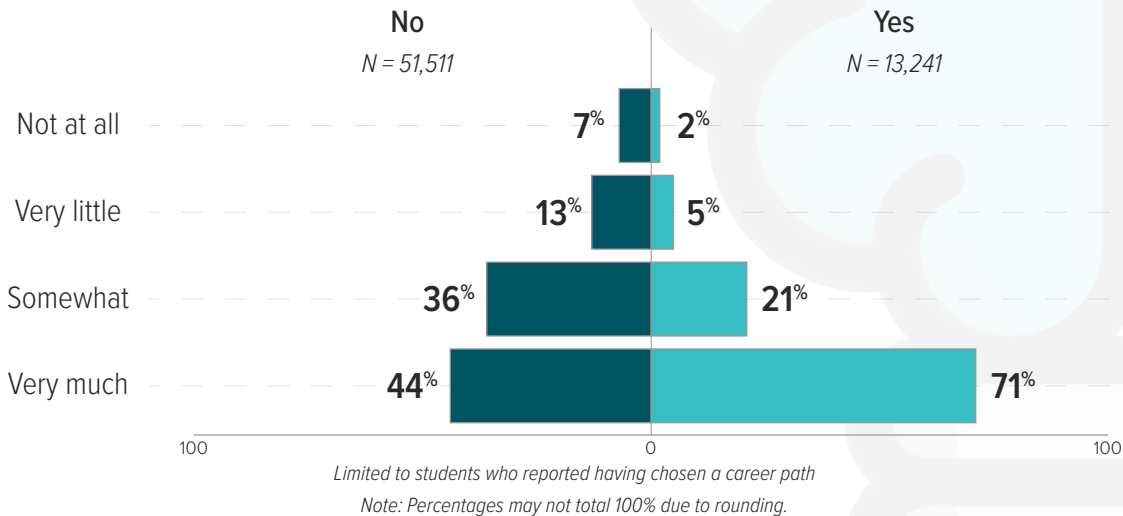


Participation in an internship-type experience

Students who engaged in internships or similar experiences were much more likely to report that their coursework provided them with information about the **skills they would need in their chosen career path**.

How much has your coursework at this college provided information about the skills you will need in your chosen career path?

Participated in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment

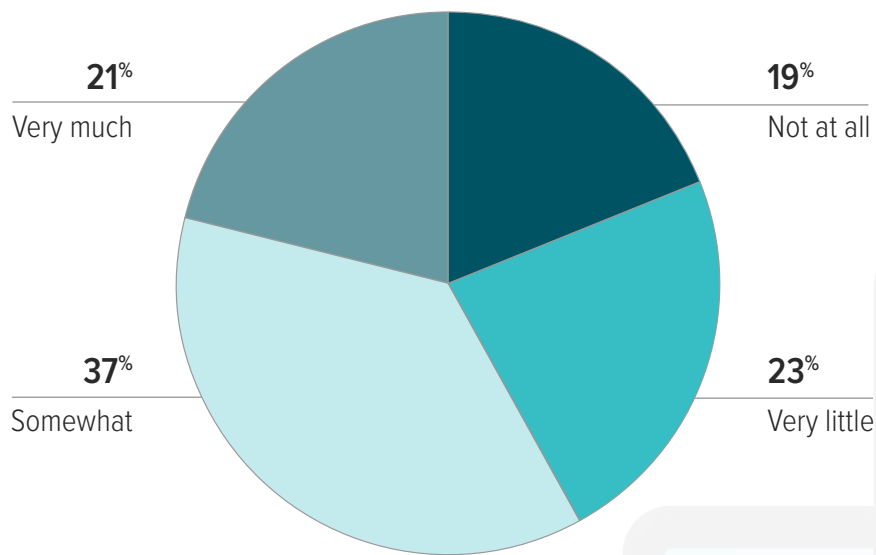




DO THEY KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT IN-DEMAND JOBS?

Community college students are much more likely to stay in their local area after obtaining a degree than are their four-year counterparts. One recent study found that 72% of two-year college graduates stayed within the same metro area after completing, compared to 47% of public four-year college graduates (Conzelmann et al., 2023). Therefore, when community college students are choosing a career path, knowing which jobs are most in demand in their local job market is quite important. But only one-fifth of survey respondents who had chosen a career path reported their college contributed to their knowledge about the local job market *very much*.

How much has your experience at this college contributed to your knowledge about which jobs are most in demand in your local labor market or area?



N = 66,772

Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path

“Have they talked to us about career services? Unlike the nursing program, we don’t get that. ... We don’t get anyone to come and talk to us about career choices. We don’t talk about it. We just go to class, do the chapter for that week, and then that’s about it. ... Hearing other classes like the nursing programs and all that they have basically on a weekly basis, I envy that. I wish we had that.”

– Student

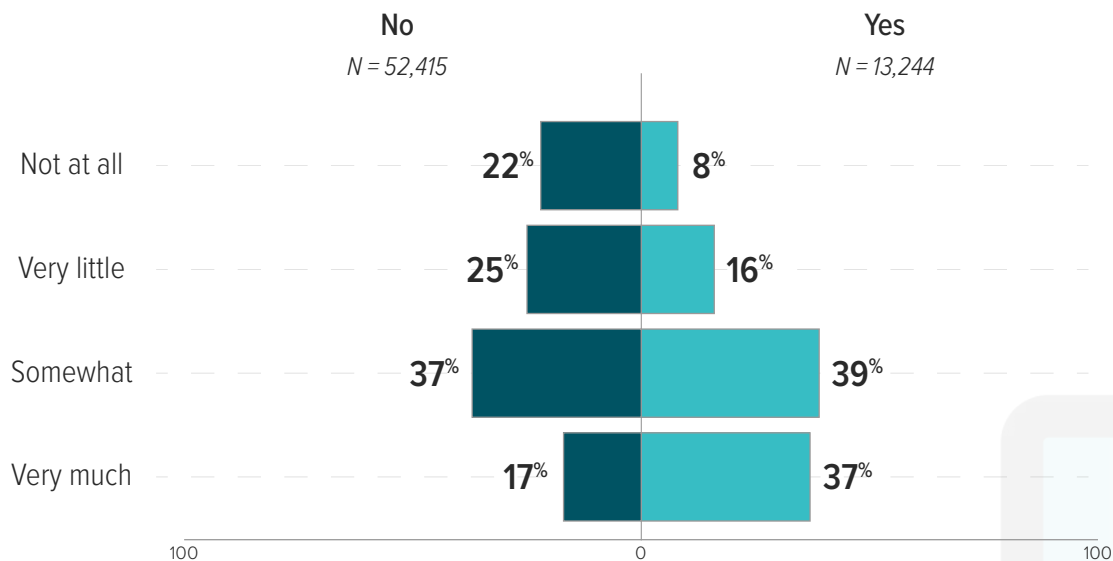
WHAT HELPS STUDENTS KNOW MORE

Participation in an internship-type experience

Students who reported that they had participated in an internship or similar experience were much more likely to say that their experience at the college had contributed to **their knowledge about in-demand jobs** in their local area.

How much has your experience at this college contributed to your knowledge about which jobs are most in demand in your local labor market or area?

Participated in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment



Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path
Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

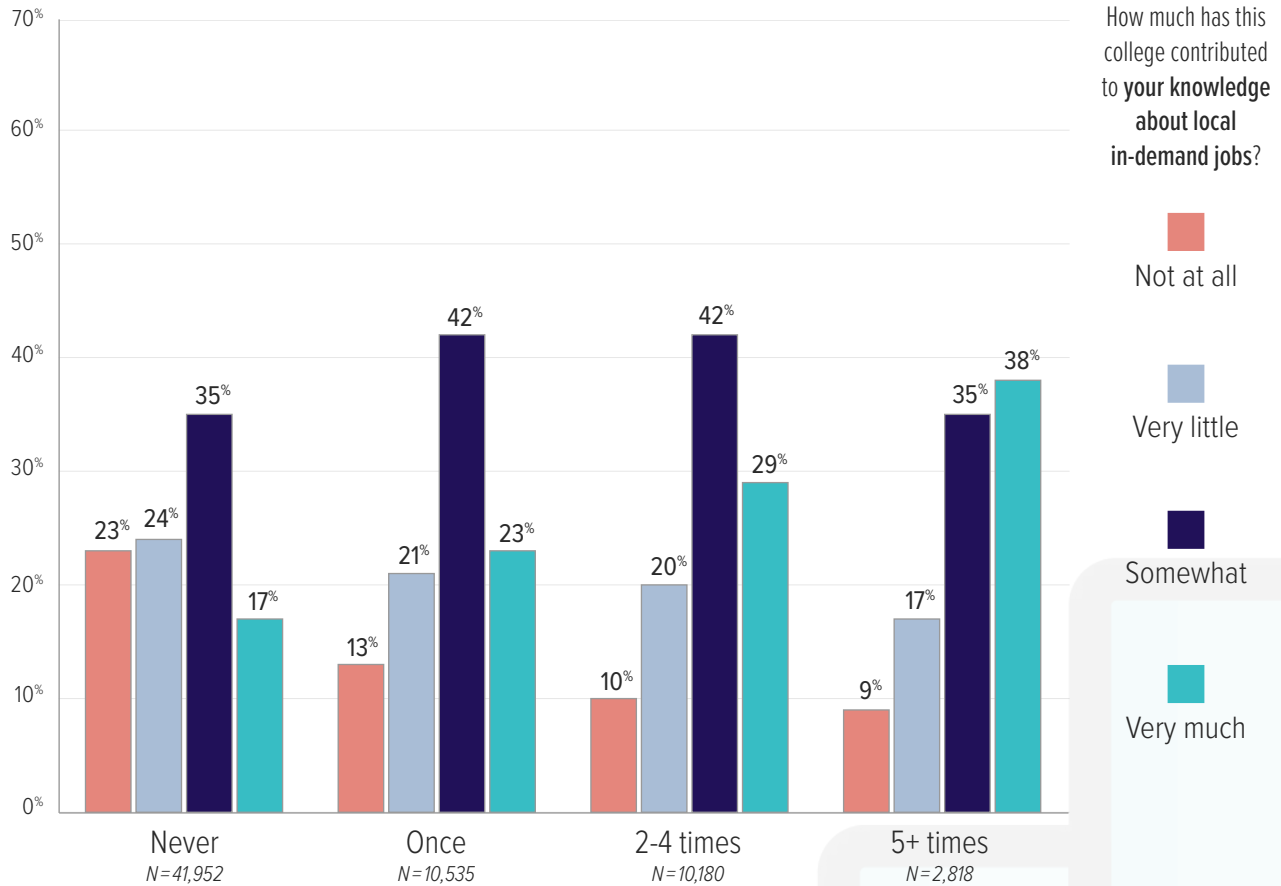
“Specifically in the welding program, I do communicate with a lot of companies around our local area quite frequently. ... On top of connecting my students to them, I always talk to them about the specific processes that they do. Not only do we hit the major points on all the different welding processes that we teach here at the college, but I make sure to include specific processes that I know companies are performing in our local area. That way, when students graduate, they’re ready to get those jobs.”

– Faculty member

Using career counseling services

Likewise, students who reported more frequently using career counseling services were more likely to report that their experience at the college had contributed to **their knowledge about in-demand jobs** in their local area. It should be noted that 64% of respondents who reported having chosen a career path also reported having *never* used career counseling services.

How often have you used career counseling services?



Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path
 Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

“I’ve had a lot of success with our career portion of the student development class, where students will feel that it was valuable, that it gave them some other ideas maybe they didn’t have before. ... It gets them talking to the advisors and other people on possible options that they can look into.”

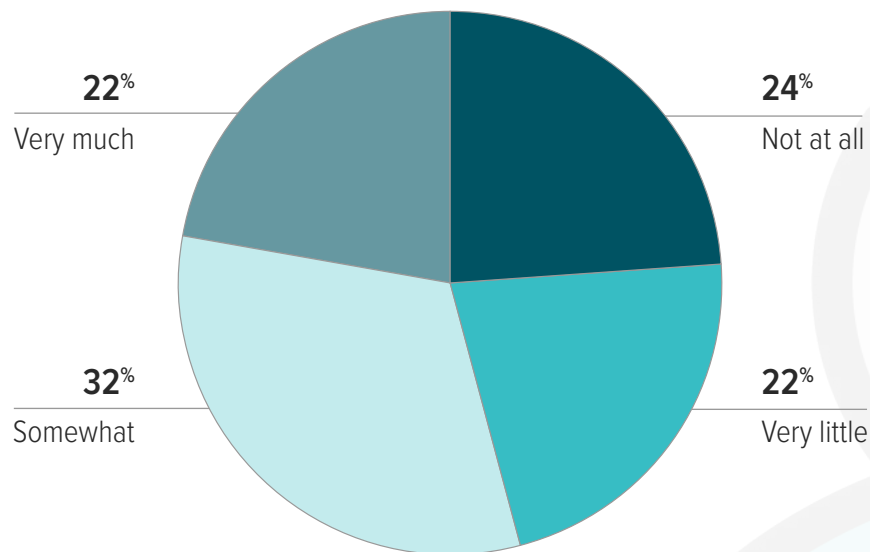
– Staff member



DO THEY KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT FUTURE EARNINGS?

A survey of 376 California community college students found that less than half of the respondents could accurately rank salaries across major categories and that they regularly assumed higher wages than labor market data indicated. Further, students underestimated the probability of finding a job by almost 25% (Baker et al., 2018). While all students may not be aware of the wide variability in earnings based on major type, this information could certainly help with their decision making about their chosen career path. At a minimum, students can be made aware of resources such as [O*NET](#) and [My Next Move](#).

How much has this college helped you learn about the average earnings for your chosen career path?



N = 66,061

Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path

“If a student is undecided, I’ve referred them to something called Career Coach. Career Coach ... has multiple videos for different professions. The student can ... watch a video about an individual who is doing that profession. Maybe it’s a stenographer. That individual talks about their job, what do they do, how much ... they make on an average.”

– Faculty member

“Every student is required their first year to take a first-year experience class. You kind of dive into whether your career is going to make money, the money you’re hoping it’s going to make, and if you’re a good fit for it. That was really nice to take during my first semester here.”

– Student

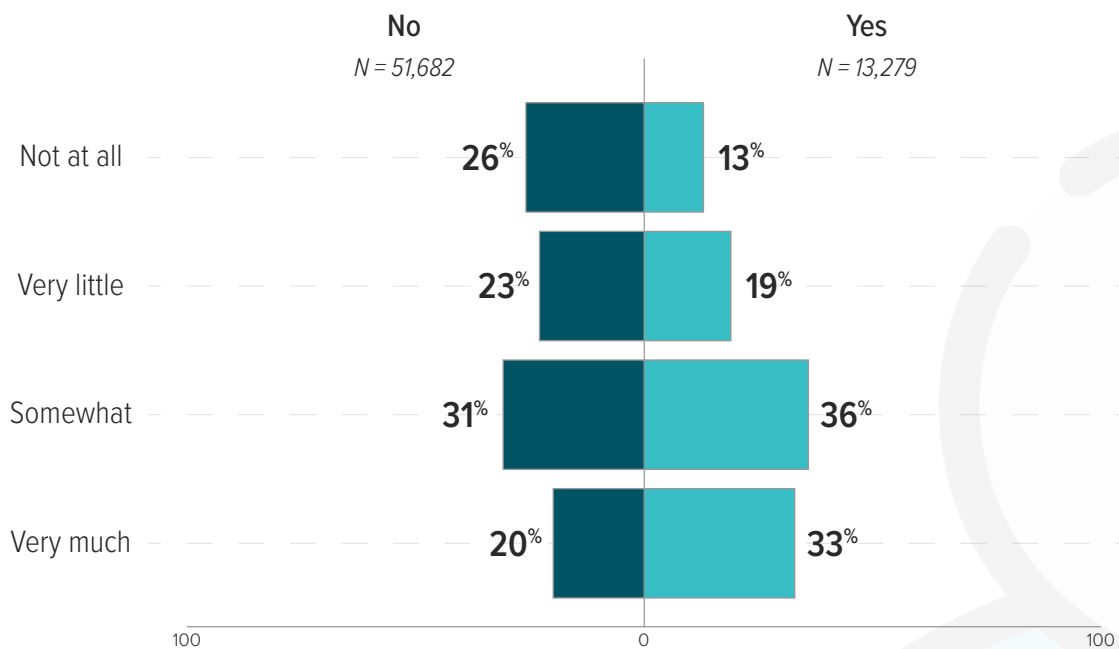
WHAT HELPS STUDENTS KNOW MORE

Participation in an internship-type experience

As with knowing more about the skills needed for their chosen career and about in-demand jobs in their local area, students who reported that they had participated in an internship or similar experience were more likely to say that their college had helped them learn about the **average earnings for their chosen career path**.

How much has this college helped you learn about the average earnings for your chosen career path?

Participated in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment



Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

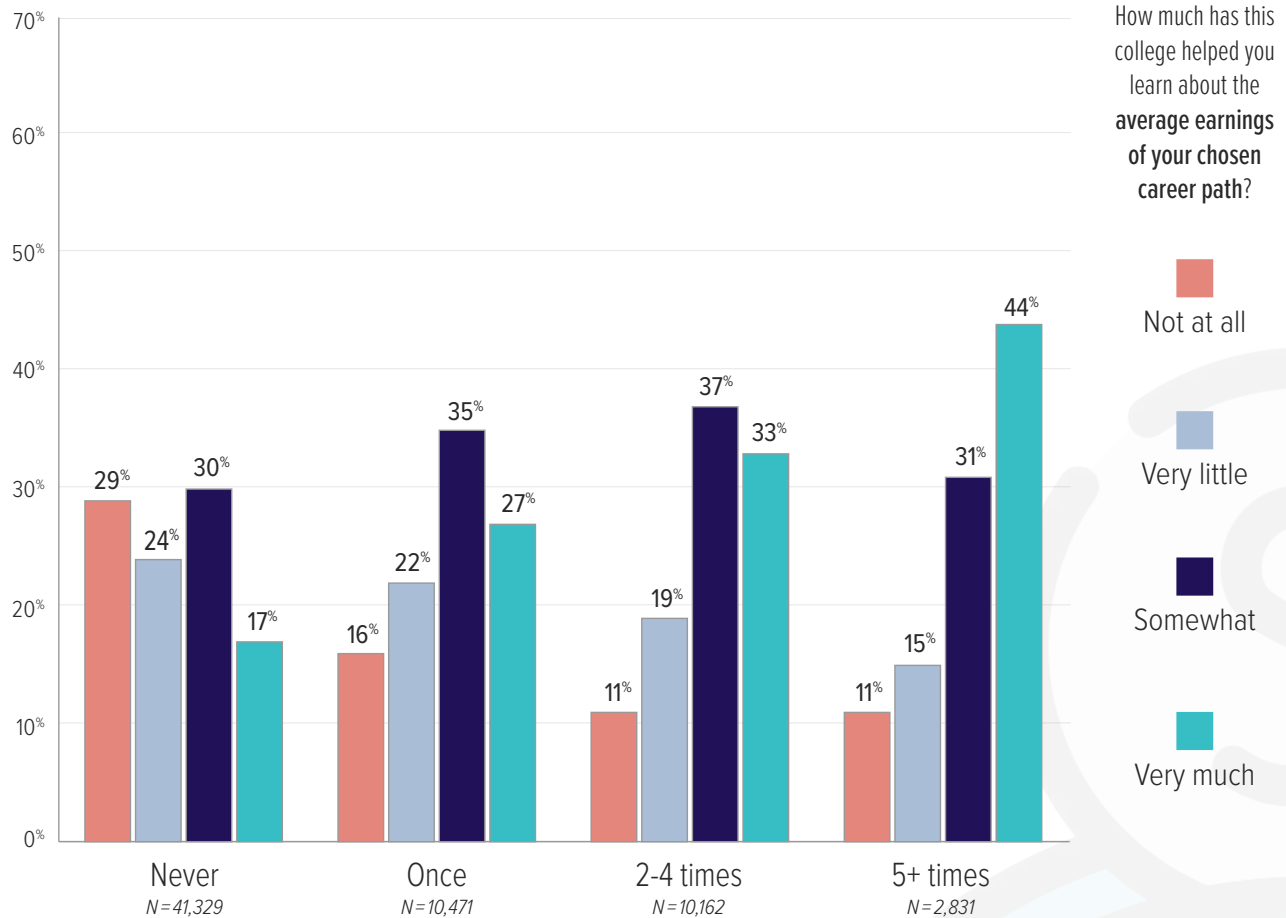
“In my accounting class, I had to get an accounting internship. I talked to my advisor. They set me up with three different firms to talk to and interview with. ... We had actually a class that was specifically designed around the internship. We’d meet and talk about it and have specific things that we had to do in the internship every week. I worked at it long enough that—and built a good enough rapport with the other employees that—the day it ended, they actually came to me with a job offer.”

– Student

Using career counseling services

Unsurprisingly, students who reported more frequently using career counseling services were also more likely to say that the college had helped them learn about the **average earnings for their chosen career path**.

How often have you used career counseling services?



Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path
 Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

INTERNSHIPS

As demonstrated throughout this report, students who had participated in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment were consistently more likely to report that their coursework had provided them information about the skills they would need in their chosen career path, that their experience at the college had provided them information about the types of jobs most in demand in their local area, and that their college had helped them learn about the average earnings for their chosen career path. Yet only 19% of 2023 *CCSSE* Cohort respondents reported having participated in an internship-like experience. And when looking at hundreds of thousands of student responses to *CCSSE* from 2018 to 2023, participation in these experiences has held steady at about one in five students—illustrating that there is not a growing trend of more students having these potentially impactful experiences. Furthermore, certain student groups, such as part-time students and those taking classes online, are even less likely than their peers to participate.

Where Are Students Receiving Guidance About Career Pathways?

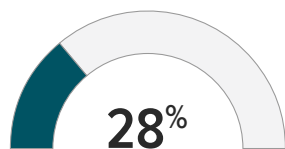
Almost a third of students rely most on advisors or counselors for information about their chosen career path, and nearly the same amount depend on their instructors for this guidance. Yet 29% of respondents reported that they were most likely to rely on friends or family for this information. Because of this, some students may be making decisions about their future careers based on incomplete, inaccurate, or outdated information. Friends and family may not be aware of all available career options that align with students' interests. They also may not be considering transfer and additional educational options that can lead to career advancement and a higher salary.

Of the following, which do you rely on the most for information about your chosen career path?

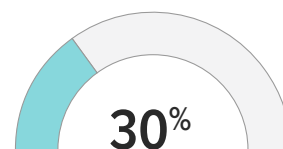
N=62,421



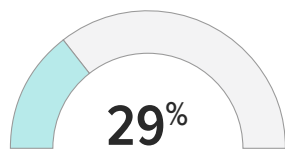
Instructors



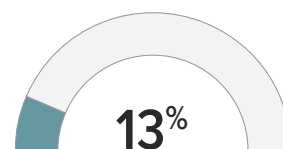
Advisors/Counselors



Friends or family



Current employer



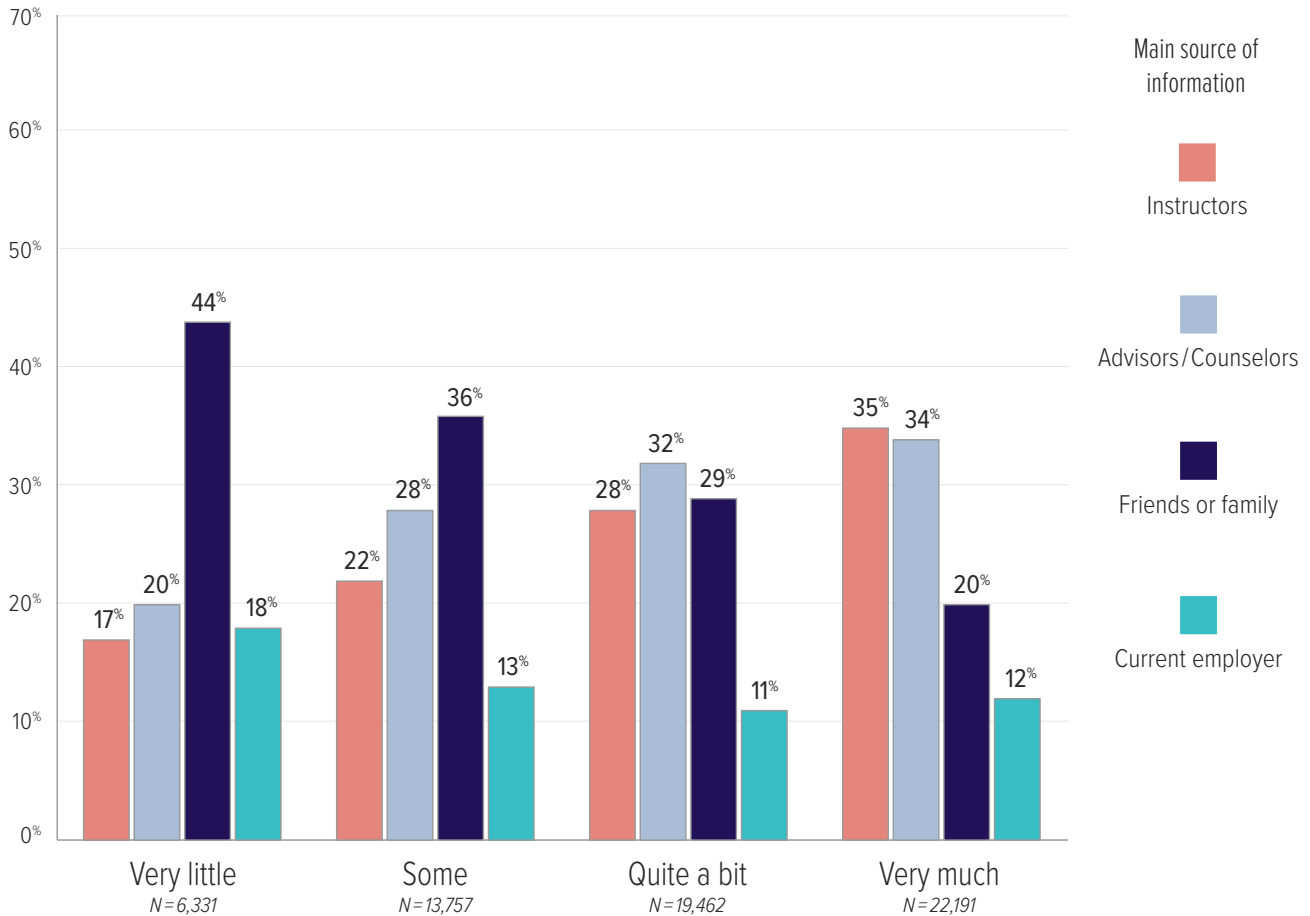
Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path

“I didn’t know. I went initially for just basic business. Then I talked to my advisor some and figured out accounting was for me.”

– Student

Students who said that their experience at the college helped them develop clearer career goals *quite a bit* or *very much* were more likely to rely on instructors or advisors/counselors as their main source of information about their chosen career path.

How much has your experience at this college contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in developing clearer career goals?



Limited to students who reported having chosen a career path
 Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

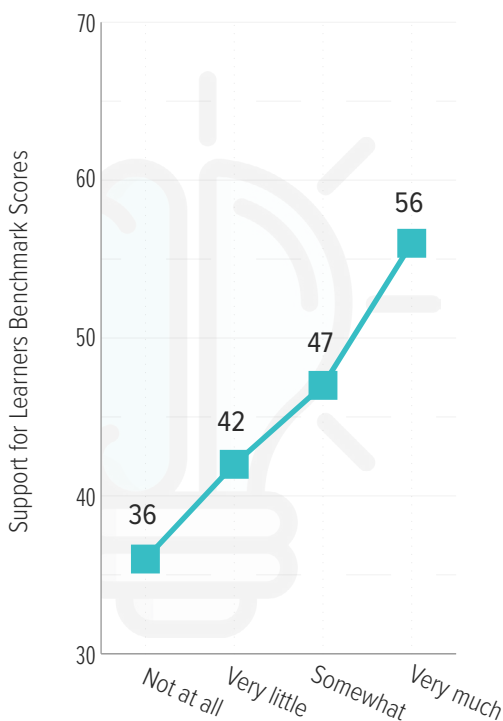


The Engagement Impact

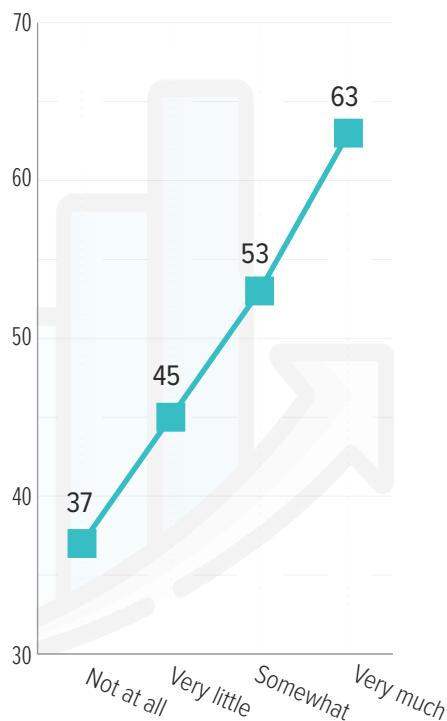
Across all five CCSSE benchmark areas of engagement (Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, Student Effort, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Support for Learners), higher benchmark scores were associated with student responses that indicated that the college had provided more guidance around career pathways. The Support for Learners benchmark scores for four of the Guided Career Pathways items are displayed on this and the next page.

Support for Learners Benchmark Scores

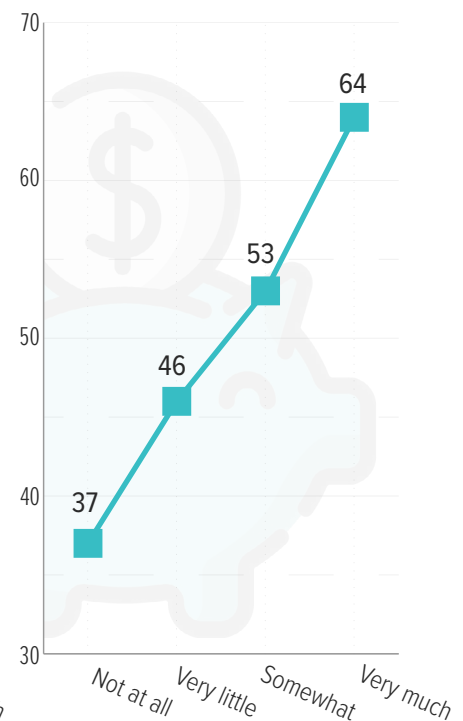
How much has your coursework at this college provided information about the **skills you will need** in your chosen career path?



How much has your experience at this college contributed to your knowledge about which jobs are **most in demand** in your local labor market or area?



How much has this college helped you learn about the **average earnings** for your chosen career path?

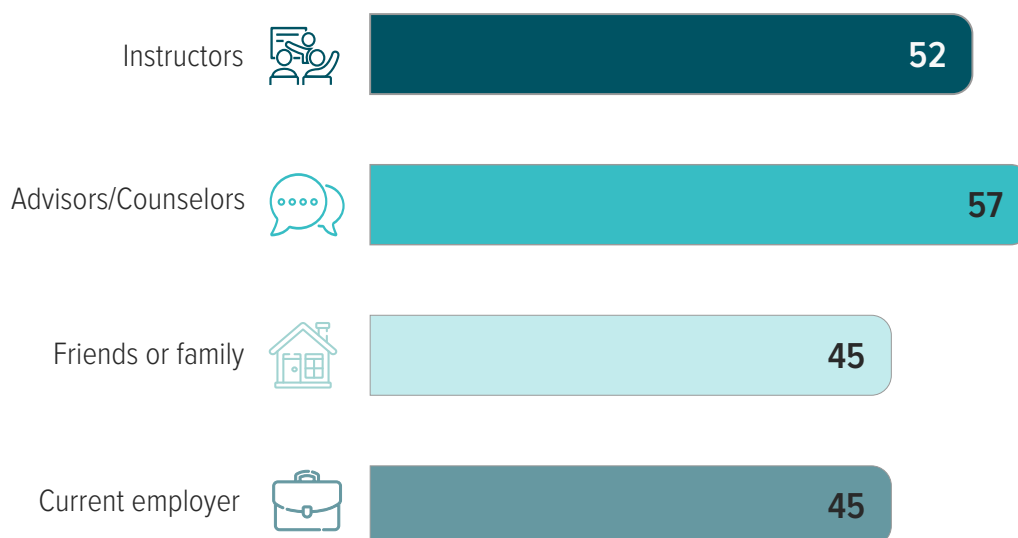


Read more about [CCSSE benchmarks](#).

Note: Benchmark scores have a mean of 50.

Of the following, which do you rely on the most for information about your chosen career path?

Support for Learners Benchmark Scores



Read more about [CCSSE benchmarks](#).

Note: Benchmark scores have a mean of 50.

A recent study found that "by 2031, 72 percent of all jobs nationally will require postsecondary education and/or training" (Carnevale et al., 2023, p. 2). Community colleges have an opportunity to help prepare students to meet this need. And when students obtain a postsecondary degree, their life is better for it: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate that earnings improve with every level of education completed, and the likelihood of unemployment decreases (2023). Not only will obtaining a postsecondary credential and finding a job with value in the labor market help community college students climb the income ladder—doing so will also contribute to and benefit the national economy.

The data in this report highlight information and practices that can help students become more knowledgeable about their career path options—knowledge that can help them make good decisions for themselves and their families and knowledge that can help them persist and attain their goals.

Resources and Supporting Materials

On the [companion webpage](#) for this report are the following supporting materials to help colleges use this information to the fullest:

- » **Questions for Consideration** (also provided on the next page)
- » **A Note From Jobs for the Future** (also provided on [page 19](#))
- » **CCCSE Survey Items Related to Guided Career Pathways**
If a college has administered *CCSSE* or *SENSE*, this table can be used to easily locate data related to guided career pathways.
- » **Focus Group Videos Related to Guided Career Pathways**
As national thought leaders and colleges continue to refine the implementation of guided pathways, it is essential to understand the entire student experience more fully. One of the ways to do this is through listening to students, faculty, and staff. To enhance their work around guided career pathways, colleges can review these video clips focused on specific areas like career advising and planning.
- » **Focus Group Questions Related to Guided Career Pathways**
CCCSE data deliver the “what” about the student experience, but through focus groups, colleges can also learn the “why.” Colleges can use these focus group questions to explore their student, faculty, and staff perceptions about guided career pathways and the related supports the college provides.



QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The work of guided career pathways takes time and coordinated effort among presidents, senior leaders, staff, faculty, and trustees. Colleges interested in furthering their efforts in this area can have campus conversations to shed light on needs, expand understanding, and inspire people to act and continue this challenging work. The following questions can be used to spur such conversations.

For Presidents and Senior Leaders

- » How does your college define and prioritize career exploration and guidance?
- » If your college is in the process of implementing guided pathways, how can you capitalize on the experience of students who are already working in the same field as their program area?
- » How do you collaborate with local industries and employers to ensure that your career pathways align with workforce needs?
- » How do you assess the effectiveness of your career pathways in terms of student outcomes, such as completion rates and employability?
- » What plans do you have for future enhancements or expansions of your career pathways model?
- » How do you involve faculty and staff in the development and implementation of career pathways?
- » How do you incorporate industry-recognized credentials or certifications into your career pathways to increase students' employability?
- » How do you address the evolving needs of the job market and adapt your career pathways accordingly?
- » What steps are being taken to ensure that career guidance and preparation are integrated seamlessly into the student experience, from enrollment through graduation and beyond?

For Advisors, Counselors, and Other Staff

- » How do students at your college develop a plan and pathway for achieving their goals?
- » What kinds of career exploration does your college offer students?
- » Do all students at your college participate in career exploration, even those already working in the field of their program area?
- » How do those who lead career exploration at your college talk to students about their current jobs and the soft skills and transferable skills they are gaining through them?

- » Is your college advising students with equity in mind? Is the college giving all students information about programs of study that can increase their economic mobility?
- » If students are not using career advising and planning services, how can your college encourage them to utilize these services early in their college careers?
- » How do students at your college become aware of the types of jobs and corresponding salaries to which their program areas will lead?
- » What career planning services does your college offer that connect students with jobs within their program areas, both while they are in college and after they graduate?
- » How does your college connect students with local employers for internships and other applied learning experiences?

For Faculty

- » How do you see your role as a faculty member in supporting students' exploration and pursuit of career pathways?
- » Do you invite career services personnel into your classes to discuss how career services at the college can benefit students?
- » Do you require a career-focused activity in your courses to encourage use of career advising and planning?
- » How do you integrate career preparation and experiential learning opportunities into academic coursework?
- » How do you collaborate with other faculty members or departments to ensure that students receive comprehensive career guidance and support across their academic journey?
- » In what ways do you stay informed about current trends and developments in the industries relevant to your field, and how does this inform your approach to discussing potential careers with students?

For Trustees

- » How do you see the role of the board of trustees in fostering partnerships with local industries and employers to enhance career opportunities for students?
- » What measures are being taken at the governance level to ensure that career pathways remain a priority and receive adequate support and resources?
- » What strategies are in place to communicate the value and importance of career pathways to the broader community and stakeholders, including potential donors and partners?
- » What steps is the board taking to advocate for policies that support the implementation and sustainability of career pathways in community colleges?



A NOTE FROM JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. To align with this mission, JFF's Student Success Center Network (SSCN) engages community colleges across 17 states, serving nearly half of all U.S. community colleges, to research and scale best practices that support student access, success, and equitable economic advancement.

In partnership with CCCSE, JFF developed the special-focus survey items explored throughout this report to better understand students' experiences with career exploration, the development of career skills, earning credit for prior learning, and participating in work-based learning. These questions were selected to examine the student experience across the pillars of JFF's Guided Career Pathways framework, which recommends that institutions embed early and regular career exploration, work-based learning opportunities, and options for credit for prior learning—strategies that can enhance learner success, and increase retention and completion.

Developed in partnership with the SSCN, the Guided Career Pathways framework evolves guided pathways to include an explicit focus on equitable economic mobility and post-graduation outcomes. The framework provides examples and strategies to help colleges design pathways that enhance regional workforce alignment, including the following:

- » improving college and career advising throughout the student journey
- » implementing work-based programs
- » creating credit for prior learning opportunities
- » developing partnerships with business and industry
- » improving data collection and reporting on post-graduate outcomes including wages and job placement

While many institutions have evolved student pathways to improve advising practices, establish meta-majors, and revise academic plans to include career outcomes, Guided Career Pathways suggests that further enhancements must be made to improve access to early and consistent career navigation and ensure all students have work-based learning opportunities. In addition, as colleges enroll more adults, they must provide customized career advising for adult learners by providing career guidance that considers their existing skills and access to credit for prior learning options.

Demonstrating promising strides in making these adjustments, several states across the Student Success Center Network are collaborating with businesses and industry to center the role of community colleges in meeting workforce and industry demands. New Jersey, Texas, and Ohio offer examples of state-supported initiatives aimed at reskilling and upskilling their workforce in partnership with community colleges. All three states aim to address the evolving needs of varied industries by sharing curricula, providing industry knowledge, and implementing work-based learning programs. Thus, they serve as timely examples of how to structure these collaborations at scale.

JFF, in partnership with CCCSE, hopes that this research will provide valuable insights to institutional leaders regarding how students make decisions about their program and career paths. Insights from students, such as those gathered through JFF's partnership with CCCSE, highlight the immediate need for community colleges to provide additional opportunities for career development, work-based learning, and embedded industry skills.

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CCCSE is a service and research initiative of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience based on insights that matter, CCCSE assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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