

BRIEF 10: SERIES SUMMARY

Postsecondary degree attainment and on-time high school completion consistently predict stronger, more durable wages.

About This Series

To build a clear picture of the opportunities and supports driving economic mobility, the Office of Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP) is releasing public-facing dashboards and briefs on education and employment outcomes for DC residents who work in the District, attended DC public schools, and participated in District-funded programs. These outcomes reflect residents whose education records could be matched to employment records – meaning the data does not yet include some residents, such as those working for the federal government or outside the District. This series will help District residents, program providers, policymakers, agency leaders, and educators better understand the impact of education and workforce programs on residents' employment outcomes.

About This Brief

This brief synthesizes findings from nine companion analyses in ETEP 2026 Dashboard Insight Series, examining postsecondary employment outcomes for DC public high school alumni.

Individually, each brief examines a distinct stage of the education-to-employment pipeline – high school completion status, postsecondary degree attainment, direct-to-career entry, students who start but don't finish college, industry of employment, and outcomes specific to University of the District of Columbia (UDC) graduates. **Together, they show a consistent pattern: durable wage and stability advantages accumulate at each stage of completion.**

Key Finding 1

Every additional stage of educational attainment – completing high school on time, then earning a postsecondary degree – is associated with a wage and stability advantage that widens over time.

On-time high school completion alone is worth nearly **\$10,000 more** annually than non-completion by six years after expected graduation (**\$38,922 vs. \$29,678**) (Brief 1).

Earning a postsecondary degree adds a further, larger premium: bachelor's degree holders earn **\$46,828** six years after graduation, compared to **\$29,234** for direct-to-career peers (Brief 5).

Employment stability follows the same pattern – **83%–86%** of associate's and bachelor's degree holders reach stable employment by six years, compared to **73%** of direct-to-career alumni (Briefs 3 and 5).

Key Finding 2

Starting but **not finishing** high school or college represents a **real disadvantage**.

Extended completers (high school graduates who took more than four years) earn **\$26,246**, meaningfully less than on-time completers, who earn **\$38,922** six years after graduation (Brief 1).

Similarly, students who start college but don't earn a degree lag **\$3,000 behind** associate's degree holders and **\$8,500 behind** bachelor's degree holders (Brief 4).

Key Finding 3

Industry of employment can shape the **return on education** as much as the postsecondary degree itself – the same degree can carry a strong premium or none at all, **depending on the industry** in which a graduate works.

In Health Care & Social Assistance, Public Administration, and Educational Services, wages rise sharply and consistently with postsecondary degree attainment – Public Administration bachelor's degree holders earn **\$60,400**, nearly **\$5,000 more** than associate's degree holders in the same industry (Brief 7).

In Administrative & Support, Waste Management, & Remediation Services and Accommodation & Food Services, wages are flat or even inverse to postsecondary degree level – bachelor's degree holders in Administrative & Support, Waste Management, & Remediation Services earn **\$29,294**, less than high school diploma holders in the same industry (**\$37,568**) (Brief 8).

High school non-completers, direct-to-career alumni, and those with some college but no degree are all disproportionately concentrated in these same flat-wage industries – roughly **45%–75%** of each group works in Administrative & Support, Waste Management, & Remediation Services; Accommodation & Food Services; or Retail Trade (Briefs 1, 3, 4, and 8).

Key Finding 4

UDC serves as a significant local pipeline into the postsecondary degree-and-industry pattern seen across these briefs, converting degree attainment into durable local wage growth and placement in high-need public-sector industries.

UDC bachelor's degree holders see **44% wage growth** over six years post-completion – more than **double** the growth rate of associate's degree holders (**17%**) – and meet or exceed DC's living wage within two years, across all degree types (Brief 6).

Wage premiums between UDC postsecondary degree levels are large and durable: bachelor's degree holders out-earn associate's degree holders by about **\$8,000** annually, and post-baccalaureate holders out-earn bachelor's holders by about **\$25,000**. Both wage premiums persist through six years, with each group's wages rising at a similar pace. (Brief 6).

UDC graduates are concentrated in **wage-responsive**, high-need industries – Health Care & Social Assistance, Public Administration, and Educational Services – rather than the flat-wage industries. (Briefs 6, 7, and 8).

Additional Context



Brief 6's PSEO/Postsecondary Value Commission comparison is drawn from a separate DME analysis, "Earnings and Return on Investment of a University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Bachelor's Degree," December 2025.



Key Finding 4 Data Note: This analysis includes all UDC graduates in the dataset, including those who did not attend DC public schools. Other analyses in this two-pager are limited to former DC public school students.



Across all postsecondary degree types, median wages for college graduates surpass those of direct-to-career peers beginning four years after expected high school graduation, establishing a consistent postsecondary wage premium overall. This premium does not hold uniformly across industries, however – see Brief 8, "Industries where wages remain flat even with additional educational attainment." for an analysis of these industries.



Time and experience in an industry may matter as much as educational attainment, or more. This data reflects wages six years after expected high school graduation, when associate's and bachelor's degree holders have only recently entered the workforce. Their wages may rise within these industries as they gain more time in them. More years of data could help answer this question.



"Employment stability" is defined in this analysis as an individual having earnings across three consecutive quarters, based on data from Unemployment Insurance Records.



"Post-baccalaureate" refers to any degree earned beyond a bachelor's degree, including master's, doctoral, and professional degrees.

Explore the Dashboard

Use the interactive dashboards to explore these findings.

Key Finding 1:

Median Annual Wages by
High School Completion
Status

[LINK](#)

Median Annual Wages
Among Those Who Pursue
Postsecondary Education

[LINK](#)

Stable Employment Rate
Among Those Who Pursue
Postsecondary Education

[LINK](#)

Key Finding 2:

Median Annual Wages by High
School Completion Status

[LINK](#)

Median Annual Wages Among Those
Who Pursue Postsecondary Education

[LINK](#)

Key Finding 3:

Employed Individuals by
Education Level 6 Years
After High School
Graduation

[LINK](#)

Industries of Employment for
Students Served by DC Public &
Public Charter High Schools 6
Years After Expected High
School Graduation

[LINK](#)

Industries of Employment
Among Those Who Pursue
Postsecondary Education 6
Years After Expected High
School Graduation

[LINK](#)

Key Finding 4:

Median Annual Wages Among
UDC Graduates

[LINK](#)

Industries of Employment for Students Served
by The University of The District of Columbia
(UDC) Education 6 Years After Degree
Completion

[LINK](#)