

BRIEF 4: SOME COLLEGE, NO DEGREE OUTCOMES

Completing some college without earning a degree leads to lower wages and limited industry access.

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 analysis examines employment outcomes for **DC public high school graduates who enroll in college but do not complete a postsecondary degree** – a group that included 35,515 individuals in DC under age 65 in 2024 based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center – tracking median annual wages through six years after expected high school graduation, compared to both postsecondary degree attainers and direct-to-career peers. Note that "some college, no degree" does not include students who are still in college.

Key Finding 1

Students who start but don't finish college out-earn direct-to-career peers, but continue to lag behind those who complete a degree.

Six years after high school graduation, students who start college but do not earn a degree earn **\$38,140**, out-earning direct-to-career peers by approximately **\$9,000 a year**.

However, they earn less than postsecondary degree attainers – about **\$3,000 less** annually than associate's degree holders, and about **\$8,500 less** than bachelor's degree holders.

That gap is wider for economically disadvantaged students: The earnings gap between "some college, no degree" and a bachelor's degree is **almost \$10,000** among this subgroup.

These wage comparisons do not account for student debt. A 2025 ETEP survey of DC alumni finds that graduates who leave college before completing a degree – while carrying debt without a postsecondary degree to show for it – report feeling less financially stable than alumni who hold only a high school diploma.

Key Finding 2

Access to higher wage industries is **stronger for degree completers** over those who start but don't finish college.

Students with some college but no degree are concentrated in lower-wage industries at a similar rate to high school diploma holders – **45%** work in Administrative & Support, Waste Management & Remediation Services, or Accommodation & Food Services.

By contrast, their peers with postsecondary degrees are primarily concentrated in higher wage industries like health care and public administration – at **45%** for associate's degrees and **37%** for bachelor's degrees.

Additional Context



[DC Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey](#): To understand the post-high school experience of young people who graduate from the District's public and public charter school system, ETEP conducted the Alumni Early Career Outcomes Survey, which asked questions about education, employment, and quality-of-life outcomes for recent alumni. The survey focused specifically on alumni five to seven years after high school graduation, meaning they graduated in the classes of 2017-2019.



The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center [reported that in 2024](#), DC's overall population of individuals with some college, no degree under the age of 65 (a proxy for working age) was 35,515 – not all of whom are captured in this analysis's dataset.



Definitions of industries in this analysis:

- Retail Trade: Sale of goods and services directly to consumers.
 - Examples: Clothing stores, electronics retailers, grocery stores
- Administrative & Support, Waste Management, & Remediation Services: Routine support activities for the day-to-day operations of other organizations.
 - Examples: Employment agencies, janitorial services, waste collection
- Accommodation & Food Services: Provision of lodging and/or meals, snacks, and beverages for immediate consumption.
 - Examples: Hotels, restaurants, cafes

Explore the Dashboard

Use the interactive dashboards to explore these findings.

Key Finding 1:

Median Annual Wages Among
Those Who Pursue
Postsecondary Education

[LINK](#)

Key Finding 2:

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

[LINK](#)

Employed Individuals by
Education Level 6 Years After
High School Graduation

[LINK](#)