

Conclusion

Postsecondary education pays off in the labor market. With each additional level of education, workers typically earn more throughout their lifetimes. However, not all workers with higher levels of education earn more than all workers with less education. Other factors—from field of study and occupation to gender, race and ethnicity, and location—drive differences in earnings. The more reliable route to a high-paying career now requires mixing postsecondary education with the right combination of those factors, plus skills and experience. In other words, postsecondary education has become more valuable in the workforce, but its value is also part of a complex equation.

The simple advice to high school students to “go to college” no longer suffices. The number of postsecondary programs, colleges and universities, and occupations has grown significantly in the past few decades, creating countless potential combinations of pathways through education and careers. Students would benefit from professional guidance that helps them make sense of the myriad academic and career options available to them and

alerts them to the differences in lifetime earnings associated with their choices of academic major and occupation.⁷

One promising response to the growing complexity would be an expansion and improvement of the career counseling system. Ideally, career counselors would help students navigate the relationship between education and labor market outcomes. However, counselors are in short supply in most public schools, and colleges often separate academic and career counseling, which means that students’ academic programs may not be aligned with their career plans or with employment opportunities. Students should begin interacting with career counselors by middle school and continue interacting with them as they maneuver through the secondary and postsecondary education systems toward their careers. A comprehensive career counseling system would empower students by giving them the information and support they need to make informed decisions about their education and occupation that ultimately influence their lifelong earnings and well-being.