

# Assessing Postcollege Earnings of Career and Technical Education Students in Iowa Community Colleges

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## ***Abstract***

*Career and technical education (CTE) programs are a key link to career paths for many students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between educational attainment, individual characteristics, and postcollege earnings for students enrolled in Iowa community colleges. Analysis for all students by gender, age, and Pell grant status is presented. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice, policy, and research.*

Approximately two thirds of individuals in the United States complete high school but do not receive a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2005). This group of individuals has been referred to as "the neglected majority" (Parnell, 1985; Stone, 2005). Many of these individuals are served by community colleges, and over half of all community college students and about 30% of all postsecondary students are enrolled in occupational programs, defined as programs at the prebaccalaureate level intended to lead directly to employment (Bailey, Leinbach, Scott, Alfonso, Kienzl, & Kennedy, 2004). In addition, jobs requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree are becoming an increasing portion of the job market (NCES, 2000). In light of the size of

this segment of the labor market and its rapid growth, it has not received the attention that it deserves from researchers and policymakers (Grubb, 1996).

A common focus of legislators, policymakers, educators, and researchers has been the improvement of bachelor's degree completion rates. However, there may be other outcomes that demonstrate success for individuals who participate in postsecondary education but decide not to complete a bachelor's degree. One such outcome for community college students who chose not to transfer is enrollment in career and technical education (CTE), and the subsequent earnings realized. Using other statewide studies as methodological frameworks (Pfeffer, 1998; Sanchez, Laanan, & Wiseley, 1999; Seppanen, 2000), this study examines the feasibility of using administrative databases maintained by the Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Workforce Development, and the National Student Clearinghouse to investigate former Iowa community college students' postcollege earnings.

Iowa's 15 community colleges play a major role in educating the workforce of the state through credit and noncredit CTE programs (Laanan, Compton, & Friedel, 2006). Arguably, these programs provide educational pathways for thousands of students to pursue a certificate, diploma, or associate degree in preparation for employment. The future enrollment projections of CTE in Iowa will be tested due to the increasing immigration population in the state. The boom among this population—specifically the Latino/a group—will have implications for the future of CTE in Iowa. The community college sector is positioned to educate and train a diverse population for employment in high-skill, high-wage occupational areas.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent of the relationship between educational attainment, individual characteristics, and postcollege earnings for students who were enrolled in Iowa community colleges. Additionally, the goal is to inform state and federal stakeholders about CTE students' progress as measured by postcollege earnings. With the growth of accountability demands (Laanan, 2001), Iowa community colleges are positioned to utilize this data to demonstrate their effectiveness and human capital contributions to the state.