

In a tough economy, new focus on job-oriented certificates

Posted By [Joanne Jacobs](#) On January 18, 2011 @ 10:32 am In [Baccalaureate,Community College,News,Policy & Reform,Stages,Topics](#) | [1 Comment](#)

[2]PALO ALTO, Calif. — Omid Khorasani wants to be a pharmacist — without taking on huge student loans.

So the 35-year-old is paying about \$1,700 for a nine-month course at nearby Foothill College that leads to a pharmacy technician certificate and a chance to earn a solid middle-class wage of up to \$60,000 a year as he works his way through pharmacy school.

"It's short, it's fast and it's cheap," says Khorasani, who earned an engineering degree in Iran but now works at a carpet store.

Labor economists and some educators believe career-driven degrees should become an increasingly common choice and are advising students to pursue skills-oriented fields of study they feel offer better job opportunities. Fueling the trend is the worst economic decline in more than 70 years and a slowly falling unemployment rate of 9.4 percent. Add to that the staggering total of \$830 billion in student debt nationally.

"The recession has brought in clear focus the value of a career versus a job," said Willis Holcombe, chancellor of Florida's fast-growing community college system. A new report based on the state's employment data shows that students who earn certificates or associate of science degrees make more money in their first year out of college than four-year graduates of Florida's university system.

The unemployment numbers are "a powerful case for some postsecondary credential, not just going to classes, but completing a credential," Holcombe said. "If you want to insulate yourself against unemployment, you need a career."

The national unemployment rate for four-year college graduates is 4.8 percent, compared to 9.8 percent for those with only a high school diploma.

President Barack Obama wants the U.S. to lead the world in college degrees by 2020, with all Americans completing at least one year of postsecondary education, which is seen as the dividing line between living in poverty and a shot at a middle-class lifestyle.

[3]Nationally, 27 percent of people with licenses and certificates also earn more than the average bachelor's degree recipient, according to Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Carnevale's newest data show that at least half of all anticipated job opportunities in the next seven years will be open to "middle-skill" workers like pharmacy technicians — what Khorasani will be after he passes a certification exam. Training for such jobs is offered at both community colleges and for-profit career and trade schools.

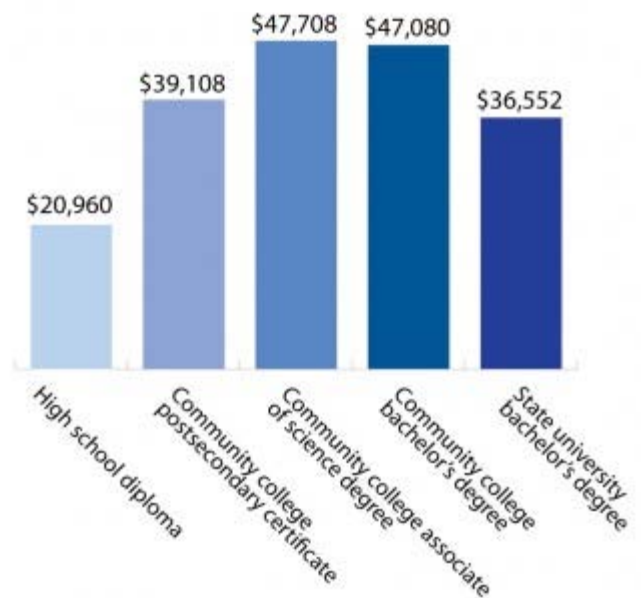
Middle-skills jobs require more than a high school diploma but less than a college degree, along with significant education and training — and they make up roughly half of all U.S. jobs, according to the Urban Institute, a nonprofit policy research organization based in Washington, D.C.



[1]

Bronx Community College

Average earnings for 2008-09 Florida graduates



Source: Florida State Board of Education

Carnevale says higher education needs to shift its focus to producing workers with degrees and certificates that the workforce needs, although he acknowledges that ultimately, "the higher your education level, the more you'll earn."

By 2018, the U.S. will need 22 million new employees with postsecondary degrees of some kind.

Middle-skill workers in demand will likely include plumbers, electricians, healthcare workers, legal assistants, machinists and police officers. Such jobs require strong math, communications and science knowledge, in addition to "soft skills" like the ability to solve problems in teams. They do not necessarily require a four-year, or even a two-year, college degree.

Students "are choosing lower-level alternatives that may have a high yield in the workforce," said Julian Alssid, founder and executive director of Workforce Strategy Center, a nonprofit think tank that works to develop effective education and employment policies. "People can get good jobs with targeted training. Targeted credentials are as good as broader, generalized degrees, especially at the entry level."

And nationally, enrollments have surged 17 percent since last year at community colleges, which charge far less than most four-year institutions, showing that more students are aware of the risks of incurring debt, said Alssid.

Certificates aligned with specific skills can take a year or less. They can also be "trajectory-changing" for average and below-average students, said Brian Bosworth, president of FutureWorks, a consulting and policy development firm based in Seattle, and author of the 2010 report "Certificates Count."

Bosworth said completion rates for certificates are twice or even three times as high as graduation rates for two-year degrees.

"I would not advise a student to go to a four-year college if they're not confident about their skills and the family is under economic pressure," he said.

Some community college students are finding out their degrees are in high demand.

At Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, Calif., students who complete a two-year associate of science degree in the Power Pathways program can qualify for a job as an apprentice electrician at Pacific Gas & Electric, starting at \$64,418 per year.

Recruiters descended upon the class that graduated on Dec. 20, said Katie Romans, a spokesperson for PG&E.

Change is already under way in some areas. At Tennessee's technical colleges, all students work to earn certificates rather than associate degrees, and 75 percent go on to middle-skills jobs, Bosworth said. All programs prepare students for immediate employment.

"Quick-win certificates can be the first step on a degree ladder to associate and bachelor's degrees," said James Rosenbaum, a professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University in Chicago.

It should be no surprise that certificate-holders can earn as much or more than those with bachelor's

degrees, said Richard Vedder, an economist and founder of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, a nonprofit research center in Washington, D.C.

"These certificates are targeted to vocations, usually in demand," he said. "The huge earning-gains people associate with four-year degrees are dissipating."

Nursing, medical technology and other healthcare jobs are growing rapidly, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Even in Michigan, where the unemployment rate is 12.4 percent — tied with California for the second-highest nationally — those with associate degrees in nursing and allied health fields can find jobs, said James Jacobs, president of Macomb Community College in Warren, Mich.



Carnevale of Georgetown notes that while "plastics" was the word for jobs of the future in the 1967 film *The Graduate*, today's equivalent term is "health care," including nursing, medical technology, dental hygiene and other healthcare support jobs.

An associate degree in nursing, at a time when Baby Boomers are retiring, is now "the closest thing there is to a sure thing," Carnevale said.

Advanced manufacturing and engineering technicians with a certificate or associate of applied science degree are in demand too, said Alssid of the Workforce Strategy Center. And middle-skill workers also are finding jobs in high-tech manufacturing, construction and the energy industry, says Rachel Unruh of the National Skills Coalition, based in Washington, D.C.

But hurdles to degree and certificate completion remain.

Some two thirds of community-college students aren't ready for college-level courses, and 69 percent of those placed in remedial math never move beyond it, according to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. The three-year graduation rate is just 28 percent for community-college students, data from the National Center for Education Statistics show.

"Huge numbers of people who go to community college get nothing out of it," said Bosworth of FutureWorks. Students are far more likely to succeed if they start by earning a certificate and then return for more training when they're ready, Bosworth said.

A vocational certificate is a more realistic goal than a bachelor's degree for students with mediocre grades, advises Rosenbaum of Northwestern. In one research study, just 19 percent of high school seniors with a C average or below went on to earn a postsecondary credential of any kind.

"They've been told everybody can go to college," said Rosenbaum. "But not everybody can take college classes when they get there."

Vedder agrees. While A students should go for a bachelor's degree, "most C students won't make it through to a four-year degree but they probably could make it through a one-year or two-year course" that would lead to a decent job, he said.

Liz Willen contributed to this story.
