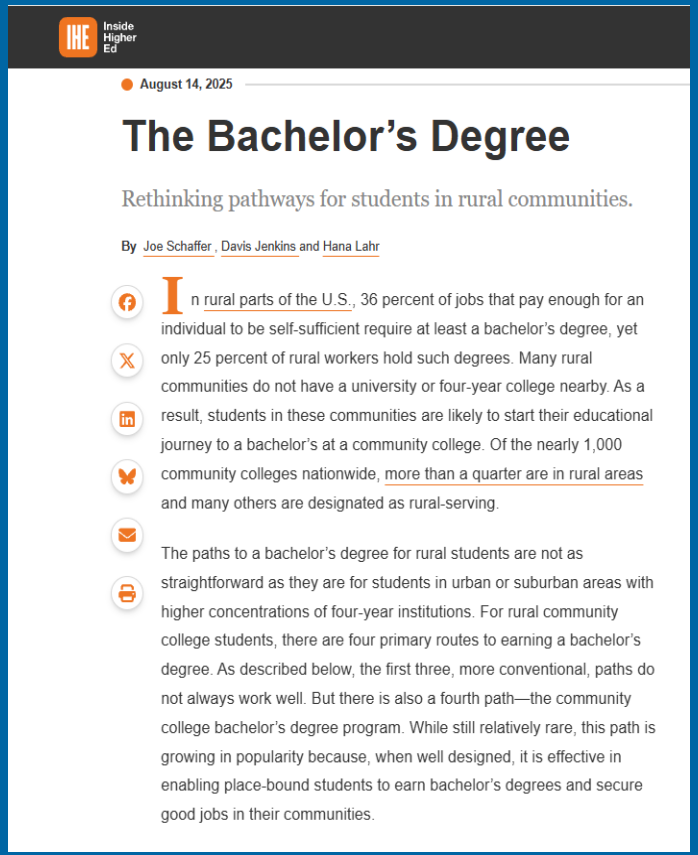
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Teachers College, Columbia University

Rethinking bachelor's pathways for rural community college students

Start with well-paying local jobs and backward map bachelor's pathways

Davis Jenkins, Senior Research Scholar

NCII Rural Pathways Institute Dallas | October 28, 2026



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The Bachelor's Degree

Rethinking pathways for students in rural communities.

By Joe Schaffer , Davis Jenkins and Hana Lahr

In rural parts of the U.S., 36 percent of jobs that pay enough for an individual to be self-sufficient require at least a bachelor's degree, yet only 25 percent of rural workers hold such degrees. Many rural communities do not have a university or four-year college nearby. As a result, students in these communities are likely to start their educational journey to a bachelor's at a community college. Of the nearly 1,000 community colleges nationwide, more than a quarter are in rural areas and many others are designated as rural-serving.

The paths to a bachelor's degree for rural students are not as straightforward as they are for students in urban or suburban areas with higher concentrations of four-year institutions. For rural community college students, there are four primary routes to earning a bachelor's degree. As described below, the first three, more conventional, paths do not always work well. But there is also a fourth path—the community college bachelor's degree program. While still relatively rare, this path is growing in popularity because, when well designed, it is effective in enabling place-bound students to earn bachelor's degrees and secure good jobs in their communities.

Pathways to a Bachelors For Rural CC Students

1) Transfer to a 4-Year
2) Fully online bachelor's
3) CC-based university center
4) CC bachelor's

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CC bachelors are workforce degrees.

Community College Bachelor's Degrees by Field: 2023-24

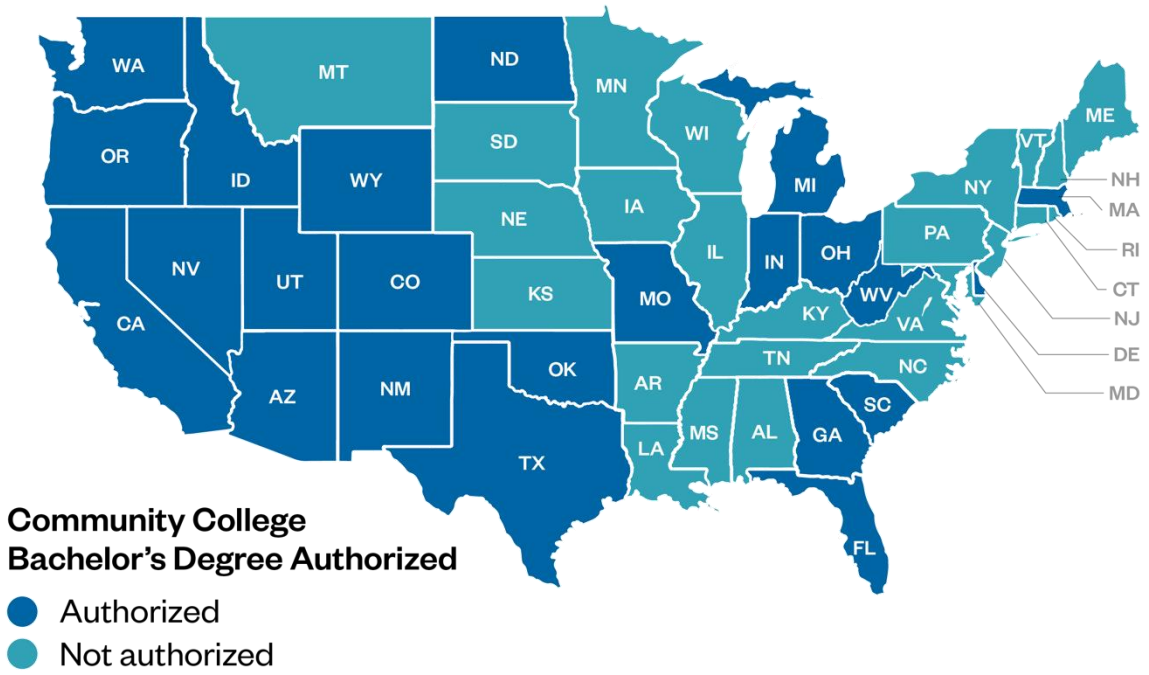
Program Area	Number of Degrees	Share %
Business	5,918	37%
Nursing	2,776	17%
Computer/Info. Science & Tech	1,964	12%
Allied Health	1,396	9%
Education & Child Care	1,149	7%
Comms, Commercial Art & Design	984	6%
Public Safety	484	3%
Industrial Technology & Trades	345	2%
Public Admin & Human Services	319	2%
Arts, Humanities & Social Science	262	2%
Science & Science Tech	216	1%
Engineering & Engineering Tech	189	1%
Agriculture & Natural Resources	135	1%
TOTAL	**16,137**	**100%**

Source: IPEDS award data

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Only 24 states authorize community college bachelor's degrees.

States Authorizing Community College Bachelor's Degrees

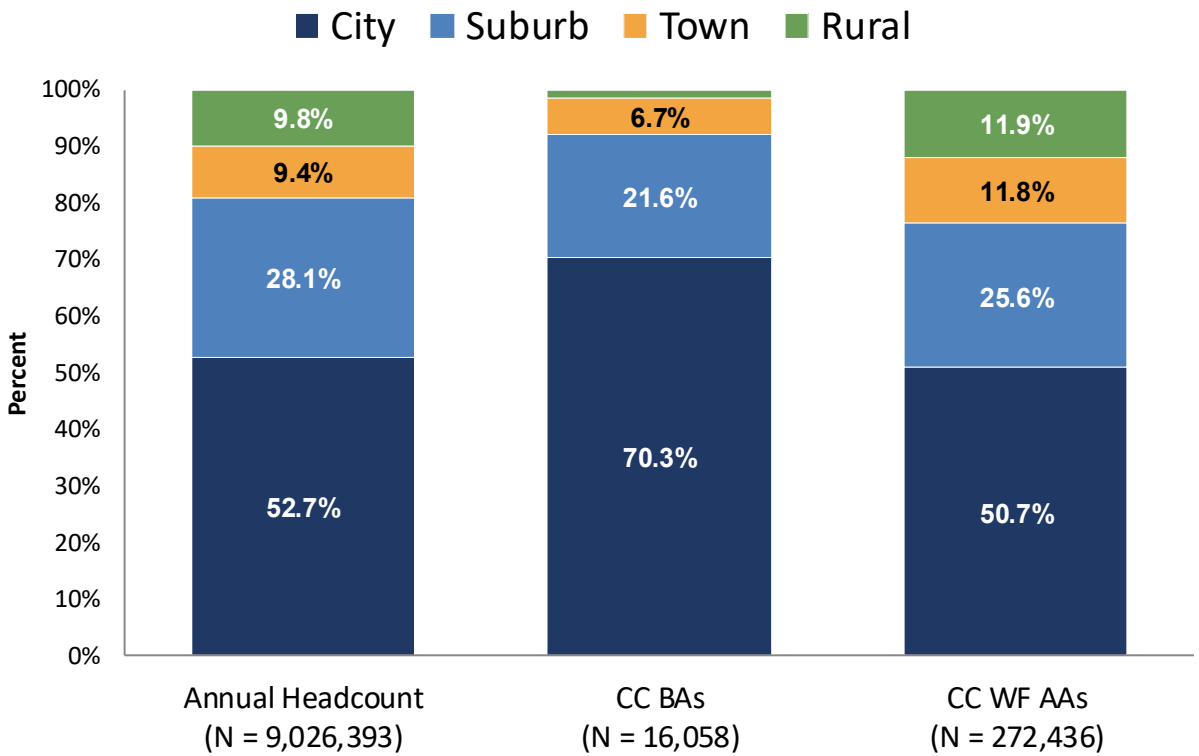


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Rural and small town community colleges account for:

- 19% of cc enrollments
- 8% of cc BAs
- 24% of AASs

Community College Enrollment, Bachelor's WF AAs by College Locale: 2023-24



Source: IPEDS award data

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Bachelor's pathways rural students can complete while working

- Prepare graduates for specific, well-paying jobs in the region.
- Build on relevant associate coursework and prior learning.
- Offer predictable schedules, guaranteed course availability and to enable working adults to complete in a reasonable timeframe.
- Combine online and local instruction with accessible clinical or field experiences.
- Offer proactive advising and planning, financial aid, and support for employment and career advancement.

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Steps to strengthen bachelor's pathways for rural students

1. Map pathways to regional high-wage, high-value BA jobs, building on relevant AAS programs.
2. Choose partners that will align programs to target jobs, apply cc credits toward the degree, provide supports your students need.
3. Introduce all students—including dual enrollment and noncredit workforce—to local careers requiring a bachelor's degree and help them plan pathways to those jobs.
4. Track completion and employment outcomes and use the findings to improve pathways.

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Why Center Economic Mobility

- Students attend college to secure good jobs
- A liberal arts education remains essential for students to build the durable skills they need to succeed at work and in life
- Expanding access to economic mobility is especially important for students at the lower end of the income spectrum



National Center for Inquiry & Improvement

But…

- Sheesh there are a lot of sources of labor market data out there…

- One set of tools are **"forward-looking"** from a college's programs:
  - **Examples:** CCRC Program Mapper, ATD/OACC Workforce Dashboard, CredLens, Credential Engine, Credential Lab
  - These explore the outcomes of your programs and how the students/graduates **perform in the labor market** (in the case of the Workforce Dashboard and CredLens for 1/3/5 years post-completion)

National Center for Inquiry & Improvement

And…

- **A second set of tools focuses on the labor market data first:**
  - **Examples:** OhioMeansJobs, Michigan Center for Data & Analytics, US DOL Reports, Fieth Manufacturing Report, NCII's Labor Market Data Framework for College Improvement
  - These look at the **job market** – number of jobs, openings, wages, etc.
  - In the case of the NCII Framework (and to an extent the Fieth Report), it then identifies "good jobs" and is "**backward-looking**" as to how colleges can align paths to those jobs through a combination of educational experiences and building on existing worker experience

- **Both approaches are valuable and optimally used in support of each other**

What NCII's Labor Market Data Framework for College Improvement Includes

- Lens 1. Grounding Change in Post-Graduation Success: Regional Labor Market Overview
- Lens 2. Starting with the End in Mind: Good Jobs in the Region
- Lens 3. Exploring Occupational Clusters in the Region: Jobs and Salaries in Top Clusters
- Lens 4. Mapping Occupational Pathways: Advancement from Entry-Level to Good Jobs in the Region
- Lens 5. Connecting College Programs to Career Opportunities



Lens 4. Mapping Occupational Pathways: Advancement from Entry-Level to Good Jobs

Issues Addressed

- Identifying specific pathways for entry-level workers to advance into good jobs within this occupational cluster.
- Highlighting top employers and job titles that offer next-step opportunities within this occupational cluster and region.
- Comparing the skills required for entry-level and next-step jobs to identify potential gaps within this occupational cluster.

Lens 5. Connecting College Programs to Career Opportunities

Issues Addressed

For select community college programs…

- Identifying the top related jobs and reviewing their education requirements and key labor market data, such as jobs, wages, and openings.
- Zeroing in on select good jobs to identify top employers in the region, the job titles they are hiring for, and the skills they are seeking.
- Exploring the competition from other educational institutions in the region to determine if starting or expanding a program is warranted.