

Which Short-Term Credentials Climb, and Which Stay Flat

Sources, scope, and interpretive notes for opportunitydata.org/credentials-that-climb.html

Graduate earnings (PSEO)

Certificate-completer trajectories come from the U.S. Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (lehd.ces.census.gov/data/pseo_experimental.html), all-institutions release. Rows are taken at aggregation level 42 (institution × 4-digit CIP × credential level, pooled graduation cohorts), industry-all, credential level 01 (sub-associate certificate) only. Each reported figure is the national median of institution-level median earnings at years 1, 5, and 10 after exit. Coverage is limited to the roughly 25 states with Census data-sharing agreements; California is absent. Across the twelve fields shown, the estimates rest on 250,452 graduates with observed year-1 earnings at roughly 1,100 institution-field cells in 21 distinct states; 76,118 graduates are observed at year 10. Per-field graduate, institution, and state counts are printed in the coverage table on the page.

Occupation wages (OEWS)

Occupation medians and national employment are from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (bls.gov/oes), May 2025 national cross-industry release, retrieved through the BLS Public Data API in June 2026. OEWS annual wages are hourly wages annualized to a 2,080-hour full-time year; PSEO records actual annual earnings, including part-time and partial-year work. The two are not directly comparable in level.

Openings and completions

Projected occupational openings and the projected employment base are from the BLS Employment Projections program, 2024-2034 annual averages, as republished per occupation by [O*NET OnLine](#) (each field name in the page table links to the corresponding O*NET summary). Openings combine growth and replacement needs; the page reports openings divided by projected employment as a rough churn measure. The EP employment base includes self-employment and therefore exceeds the OEWS wage-and-salary counts for occupations such as childcare and cosmetology. Certificate completions are from IPEDS Completions (C2023, revised file, academic year 2022-23), first majors only, sub-associate award levels (less than 12 weeks, 12 weeks to under 1 year, 1 to under 2 years, and 2 to under 4 years), summed nationally by 4-digit CIP. IPEDS covers Title IV institutions only, which materially undercounts fields trained outside them; commercial driving is the clearest case, since most CDL schools are not Title IV.

Field-to-occupation mapping

Each 4-digit CIP family is paired with one principal SOC occupation for reference. The pairing is judgmental: 4-digit CIPs contain multiple programs and completers disperse across multiple occupations. It is shown for context, not as a claim that all completers work in the paired occupation.

FIELD	CIP (CERT LEVEL 01)	PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION (SOC)
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Plumbing	46.05	47-2152 Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters
Electrical	46.03	47-2111 Electricians
Criminal Justice	43.01	33-3012 Correctional Officers and Jailers
Welding	48.05	51-4121 Welders, Cutters, Solderers, and Brazers
HVAC	47.02	49-9021 HVAC Mechanics and Installers
Paralegal	22.03	23-2011 Paralegals and Legal Assistants
Vehicle Maintenance	47.06	49-3023 Automotive Service Technicians and Mechanics
CDL / Truck Driving	49.02	53-3032 Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers
Medical Assisting	51.08	31-9092 Medical Assistants
Dental Assisting	51.06	31-9091 Dental Assistants
Cosmetology	12.04	39-5012 Hairdressers, Hairstylists, and Cosmetologists
Childcare	19.07	39-9011 Childcare Workers

Dollar units

PSEO earnings are inflation-adjusted: per the [PSEO data notices](#), graduate earnings in each release are adjusted to a reference year using the CPI-U, and the release used here is expressed in 2023 dollars. Growth between year 1 and year 10 is therefore real growth, not nominal. OEWS figures are nominal May 2025 dollars, roughly two years newer than the PSEO reference year, so small level differences between the two sources partly reflect the unit gap.

Caveats

Thin cells. Year-10 medians rest on few institutions in several fields: plumbing (5), dental assisting (15), electrical (18), CDL (25). Treat those point estimates as indicative. **CIP rollups.** 4-digit families mix programs: 43.01 includes corrections and police academies; 12.04 includes barbering and aesthetics; 49.02 includes non-CDL transportation programs. **Workforce Pell fit.** Not every field shown is Workforce Pell-eligible as typically delivered: most cosmetology programs exceed the 599-clock-hour cap, and many accredited medical and dental assisting programs do as well. They are included because they are standard reference points in the short-term credential debate. **Selection.** Certificate completers are not a random draw of occupation incumbents, and trajectories mix wage growth with occupation switching, hours changes, and attrition from the field.

The Workforce Pell earnings test

Characterizations of the federal test follow the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Public Law 119-21) and the U.S. Department of Education's final rule ([Federal Register, May 19, 2026](#)), effective July 1, 2026: completers' median earnings, less 150 percent of the federal poverty guideline, must exceed the program's tuition and fees. The 150 percent reference shown on the charts uses the 2026 guideline for a one-person household in the 48 contiguous states (\$23,940). The test is evaluated at a point in time; no provision evaluates subsequent earnings growth.

Citation

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