



ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Outcomes | Innovation | Improvement

Leveraging Program-Level Data to Strengthen Student Outcomes: A Framework for ACCJC Institutions

A White Paper for College Leaders

January 2026

Introduction

In 2025, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) advanced its commitment to institutional transparency and student success by incorporating a Return on Investment (ROI) measurement into its [Student Achievement Dashboards](#). This metric provides a valuable, high-level understanding of the relationship between educational investment and student earnings outcomes. However, institutional-level ROI data alone doesn't capture the full story. Programmatic-level post-completion outcomes data that reflect results at the level of individual fields of study offer a more detailed and actionable view of how specific academic programs contribute to student success.

Program-level data supports decision-making, empowers practitioners to innovate curriculum and services that address students' desired outcome of financial security, and serves to better align programs with the evolving economic environment. Drawing on federal data and informed by the [requirements of the 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act](#),¹ this paper outlines the benefits, uses, and recommended strategies for leveraging these available data sources.

Connecting College to Career

The [primary motivation](#)² for students to pursue higher education remains economic opportunity. Yet the upfront economic costs of pursuing a postsecondary education also create the most significant barrier to accessing it. This creates a troubling paradox: students recognize the economic necessity of a college credential, yet affordability concerns prevent many from enrolling or completing their programs. With over [70 percent of jobs](#)³ requiring some sort of postsecondary education over the next five years, this also threatens communities' abilities to fill the jobs necessary to fuel the future economy.



Community and career colleges play a particularly important role in preparing students for these essential careers while also providing accessible pathways to technical and vocational fields that strengthen local economies. However, regardless of the field of study students pursue, each and every graduate deserves a livable wage after completing their postsecondary education.”

■ ACCJC President Mac Powell

ACCJC and college practitioners alike acknowledge and celebrate that college isn't exclusively about earnings. Higher education offers many other non-financial benefits including intellectual growth, critical thinking skills, civic engagement, personal development, expanded social networks, and exposure to diverse perspectives.

- 1 Caldwell, T., Matsudaira, J., & McCann, C. (2025, October). How do college programs measure up against the one big beautiful bill act's new Accountability Standard? <https://www.american.edu/spa/peer/one-big-beautiful-bill-acts-new-accountability-standard.cfm>
- 2 Freeman, A., Nguyen, N., & Seidel, K. (2024, September 30). Factors affecting first-year students' college choices: Insights from the 2023 CIRP Freshman Survey. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/HERI-TFS-Brief.pdf>
- 3 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2023, November). Executive summary: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Projections2031-ES.pdf>

The Value of Program-Level Data

While institutional averages summarize overall performance, they can mask meaningful differences across programs. Two colleges with identical institutional ROI scores might have very different underlying realities: one with broadly strong program performance, another buoyed by a few high-earning programs while others struggle. Program-level data enables leaders to see the full spectrum of performance and target interventions effectively.



“At Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, we continue to learn and grow in our pursuit of student success. Our Aspen Prize recognition reminds us that excellence is a journey, not a destination—and program-level data is one of the most powerful tools we have to guide that journey. By looking beyond institutional averages, we uncover opportunities to strengthen every program and ensure all students have the support they need to achieve their goals.”

■ *Southwest Wisconsin Technical College Chief Academic Officer Cynde Larsen*

Federal Context and Accountability

The federal policy environment is evolving quickly toward outcomes-based accountability. Under the 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act, all undergraduate degree programs that receive federal aid must demonstrate that the majority of their graduates earn at least as much as the median high school graduate in the state where the institution is located. Programs that consistently fall short of these earnings thresholds risk losing access to federal student loans. And, without the ability of students to afford and fund their educational pursuits, these programs may be forced to close entirely.

This new landscape makes proactive program analysis not only a best practice but a necessity. By monitoring and improving program-level earning outcomes, colleges can ensure compliance, protect federal aid eligibility, and, most importantly, enhance the long-term success of their students.

Supporting Students Across All Fields of Study

While many community college students seek degrees in human-services professions such as social work, counseling, early childhood education, and K-12 teaching, these careers often yield lower average wages than technical or business fields. This reality underscores the importance of strong programmatic ROI: if students will continue to pursue essential but lower-paid service roles, institutions have a responsibility to ensure high-quality preparation, intentional advising, and smooth transitions into stable employment so they can maximize earnings and long-term career progression.

Regardless of field of study and career path, it's also critical to align with student expectations. According to Strada Educational Foundation, nearly 7 in 10 students identify career and financial objectives such as supporting a family (69%), advancing a career (69%), and making more money (69%) as primary motivations for attending college. For students to fully recognize the added value of such human-services programs, institutions must also ensure financial stability after completion.

Workforce Alignment and Employability

Strong earnings outcomes reflect how well a program prepares graduates for jobs that employers need to fill. When program completers earn above-threshold wages, it typically indicates that:

- **Labor market demand is strong:** Employers are competing for graduates with these skills, driving up compensation
- **Skills are relevant and current:** The curriculum aligns with industry standards and emerging technologies
- **Career pathways are clear:** Graduates can transition smoothly from education to employment in their field
- **Regional economic development is supported:** Local employers can fill critical positions without recruiting from outside the area

Conversely, programs with persistently low earnings outcomes or lack of direction into the workforce may indicate oversupply relative to local demand, curriculum that has fallen behind industry needs, or insufficient employer partnerships to facilitate job placement.

Sourcing Data

Federal resources, particularly the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, provide detailed data on student outcomes by program. These include median earnings and debt levels for students who have earned a credential within a specific field of study. The Education Department's data, which is linked to verified IRS earnings records, allows colleges to understand the economic impact of their educational programs and to benchmark performance against geographically-aligned and nationwide peers. Understanding program-level earnings outcomes becomes truly actionable when institutions connect these data to regional labor market dynamics.

Many institutions already integrate workforce data alongside program earnings outcomes to create a comprehensive picture. Key data sources often include:

- **State and regional labor market projections:** Employment growth forecasts, occupational demand, and wage trends by industry sector
- **Employer advisory board feedback:** Direct input on skill gaps, hiring needs, and curriculum relevance
- **Job posting analytics:** Real-time data on open positions, required credentials, and offered wages in the service area
- **Graduate employment surveys:** Information on where completers work, whether employment is in-field, and career satisfaction

Institutions can also draw insights from external analyses such as [the HEA Group's and College Futures'](#) program-level ROI framework, which assesses program-level ROI by comparing typical costs and earnings outcomes. Such models provide replicable frameworks that ACCJC member institutions can adapt to their own data environments.

Strategic Response

By comparing program earnings data with labor market indicators, colleges can identify strategic opportunities. When program outcomes align well with workforce needs, institutions can consider investing in growth to expand capacity, strengthen employer partnerships, and promote programs to prospective students. When programs show weak alignment, leaders face more complex choices: curriculum redesign to better match employer needs, program consolidation, or strategic redirection of resources to high-demand fields.

Program-level data analysis empowers institutional leaders to make evidence-based decisions that directly affect student success and institutional sustainability. In action, these metrics and their applications can transform an institution's impact on both regional economic benefits and student return on investment.

Focus Area	Key Metrics	Potential Uses
Earnings Outcomes	Median graduate earnings; earnings at 3, 4, and 5 years after completion	Evaluate program ROI; identify strong labor market alignment
Local Employment Needs	Job openings and requirements for employers	Regularly assess and incorporate necessary skills into program curriculum
Access and Economic Mobility	Demographics of program participants	Address gaps in opportunity and representation

Benefits to Institutions, Students, and Community

When used effectively, program-level data offers multiple benefits for colleges, students, and communities. It supports continuous improvement, enhances transparency, and ensures that each program contributes meaningfully to students' career and economic mobility. Institutional leaders can identify strategic priorities and allocate resources based on concrete, data-driven evidence. Faculty and program chairs are able to access actionable insights to help guide curriculum improvement. Students and families can make informed choices about programs with strong outcomes and employability. Lastly, employers can establish strong connections and partnerships with two-year institutions to ensure future job applicants are equipped with the skills necessary for success.

Recommendations for Action

To take full advantage of available data and ensure readiness for the new federal accountability framework, community and career college leaders should consider the following steps:

- **Build Data Capacity:** If possible, designate a lead for program-level data analysis; integrate available graduate earnings with local data sources on employment needs.
- **Conduct Program Assessments:** Identify high-ROI and at-risk programs; review student employment outcomes and alignment with regional labor market demand.
- **Engage Faculty, Career Resource Center, and Employers:** Collaborate on curriculum redesigns; embed workforce readiness into core coursework, work-based learning and social capital building opportunities, and continuous improvement strategies.
- **Enhance Transparency:** Share program-level outcomes on institutional dashboards and in student advising materials.

Conclusion

The integration of institutional ROI metrics into ACCJC dashboards represents a substantial advancement in higher education transparency. However, program-level data unlocks the next level of precision and impact—enabling institutions to understand which programs are delivering economic value to students. By adopting structured analysis, engaging stakeholders, and proactively aligning programs with workforce demand, ACCJC’s member institutions can continue to lead the nation in demonstrating the enduring value of postsecondary education.