



# Doc H's Blog

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## A 4-year degree isn't the only path to success

I ran across an interesting [report](#) this week with evidence that associate degrees and certificates can be a viable path to the middle-class. The report has significant implications for Kentucky as we begin to reform our Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. We anticipate significant recommendations and budget requests focused on CTE reforms during the 2016 session of the General Assembly. The Colorado report could provide a goal and key measures for this legislation – an increase in associate degrees and certificates that are linked to key industry sectors in Kentucky and provide the opportunity to earn a living wage.

Here are a couple of the findings:

- While Colorado, like Kentucky, offers many pathways for postsecondary degrees, the fastest growing sector is the associate degree.
- Short-term certificates that take less than one year to complete and have a significant payoff within 5-10 years after earning the certificate. With certain certificates, average earnings exceed \$50,000 compared with bachelor's degree earnings of \$55,000.
- An associate degree in applied science has far more value than an associate degree in art or science. An associate degree in applied science has essentially the same average earnings after 5-10 years as a bachelor's degree. The most popular applied science areas and those identified as being in industry sectors that have significant job openings are registered nursing, allied health diagnostics and fire protection.

Possible next steps for Kentucky that should be integrated into legislation include:

- Identify industry sectors that have significant numbers of job openings.
- Within these industry sectors identify certificates and associate degrees that enable students to compete for available jobs.
- All certificate and associate programs should utilize business and industry to regularly identify and refresh the skills and competencies needed in available jobs.
- High schools and community colleges should work closely to align career pathways to ensure students have a seamless experience.
- Every career pathway should lead to an industry-recognized certificate and/or appropriate associate degree.
- Heavy emphasis should be placed on dual credit opportunities to reduce the cost of postsecondary education as a student works toward an industry certification and/or associate degree.

Reforming career and technical education in Kentucky should not be based on anecdotal information. We must move forward based on hard data from industry and economic development sources. Preparing a workforce for the future will be the best economic development tool for Kentucky as we recruit business and industry to our state and local communities.

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