

## College degrees linked with higher earnings, lower unemployment rates

Bernie Patterson, for USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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With unemployment at historic lows, who needs a college degree?

Many of us do, if we want higher earnings and a stronger local economy.

The future of our economy in north central Wisconsin depends, in large measure, on having an educated workforce.

In Portage County, 32.6 percent of residents ages 25 to 64 have a bachelor's or higher degree. This is above the state average of 30.3 percent. Yet in our five-county region (Adams, Marathon, Portage, Taylor and Wood), only 25 percent have a bachelor's or higher degree.

The link between education and income is strong. For example, in Minnesota, the percentage of residents ages 25 to 64 with an associate, bachelor's or higher degree is 6 to 7 points greater than in Wisconsin. Minnesotans' average income exceeds the Wisconsin average by 10 percent.

Wisconsin's per capita income of \$46,762 lags that of Minnesota (\$52,038) and the nation (\$49,246). Why would we be content with 90 percent of the earnings of our neighbors to the west?

If Wisconsin matched Minnesota's degree attainment rate, 200,000 more Wisconsinites would have a college degree.

The state — and north central Wisconsin in particular — has a choice: Do we want a service-based economy with low-paying jobs, or a strong, knowledge-based economy built on good-paying jobs?

Higher education is a clear pathway for higher earnings and stronger economies with growth potential. A college degree prepares graduates for today's workforce and gives them the skills to adapt to jobs that do not yet exist.

Virtually all job growth in the nation since the 2008 recession — 9 million jobs — has required some postsecondary education. In that time frame, 6.3 million jobs requiring a high school diploma have been eliminated.

The fastest growing job sectors require at least a bachelor's degree.

Nationally, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects significant growth for positions in the science, technology, engineering, math and health care industries from 2014 to 2024. University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point confers more degrees in STEM and health science fields than any other UW campus outside the research-focused institutions of Madison and Milwaukee.



Fast-growing careers that require bachelor's or higher degrees include audiologist, biomedical engineer, operations research analyst, nurse practitioner, personal financial adviser, physical therapist and physician assistant.

In Wisconsin, the top 25 growth occupations listed by the state Department of Workforce Development include operations research analyst, computer systems analyst, financial adviser, web developer, biochemist and biophysicist, market research analyst, software developer, nurse practitioner and actuary.

College-educated individuals are and will be crucial to the north central Wisconsin economy. Consider:

- Earnings are higher: The median 12-month earnings in Portage County are \$42,009 for those with a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to \$31,413 for those with a high school diploma. In Marathon County, median earnings are \$44,887 annually for those with a bachelor's degree and \$30,984 for high school graduates.
- The unemployment rate for those with only a high school diploma is more than double the rate for those with a bachelor's degree, 5.4 percent compared to 2.2 percent for the five-county central region.
- Six out of 10 Wisconsin job openings through 2020 will require postsecondary education, according to the Center on Education and Workforce at Georgetown University.

A gap is looming in the percentage of Americans with education beyond high school. Based on current graduation rates, an estimated 19.8 million more college degree holders are needed nationwide through 2020, according to a report from Lumina Foundation.

Leaders in Wisconsin are already concerned the state will not have enough workers to meet job demand. The population under age 18 continues to decline. By 2040, nearly 95 percent of total population growth in the state will be age 65 or older. Only 1 percent of population growth will be ages 18-64.

UW-Stevens Point is a major player in workforce development, graduating more than 2,000 students each year, many of whom begin their careers in central Wisconsin. We applaud efforts to advance the regional economy with good-paying jobs and vibrant communities that attract and retain employees who may otherwise go to the Fox Valley, southeastern Wisconsin or Minnesota. Together, we can create a strong future.

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<https://www.stevenspointjournal.com/story/opinion/columnists/2018/02/05/uwsp-chancellor-college-degrees-linked-higher-earnings-lower-unemployment-rates/303363002/>