

Golden Returns

A Regional Look at the ROI of California's Community and Career Colleges

KEY FACTS AND FINDINGS



At College Futures Foundation, we believe postsecondary education must deliver real value, especially for learners navigating the greatest barriers to opportunity. Our latest analysis, *Golden Returns: A Regional Look at the Return on Investment (ROI) of California's Community and Career Colleges*, produced in partnership with Michael Itzkowitz of the [HEA Group](#), examines the economic return for students attending 327 community or certificate-granting colleges across 12 economic regions. To determine how long it takes students to recoup their educational costs, we use a Price-to-Earnings Premium (PEP) metric that examines two key factors: net costs and earnings premiums.¹ In total, this analysis includes 1.2 million undergraduate learners.

This work reflects our broader commitment to transparency and alignment between postsecondary education and economic mobility. It builds on earlier analyses and offers a more nuanced, regional view of postsecondary ROI to provide learners, institutions, and systems with information they need to drive improvement.

“The value of this analysis lies not only in the stories it reveals about which institutions are driving economic mobility and which are falling short, but also in how those findings are used. As accountability takes center stage under the new federal framework, colleges must absorb this data and act on it to improve outcomes and deliver real return on investment for the learners they serve.”

—Eloy Ortiz Oakley, President & CEO, College Futures Foundation



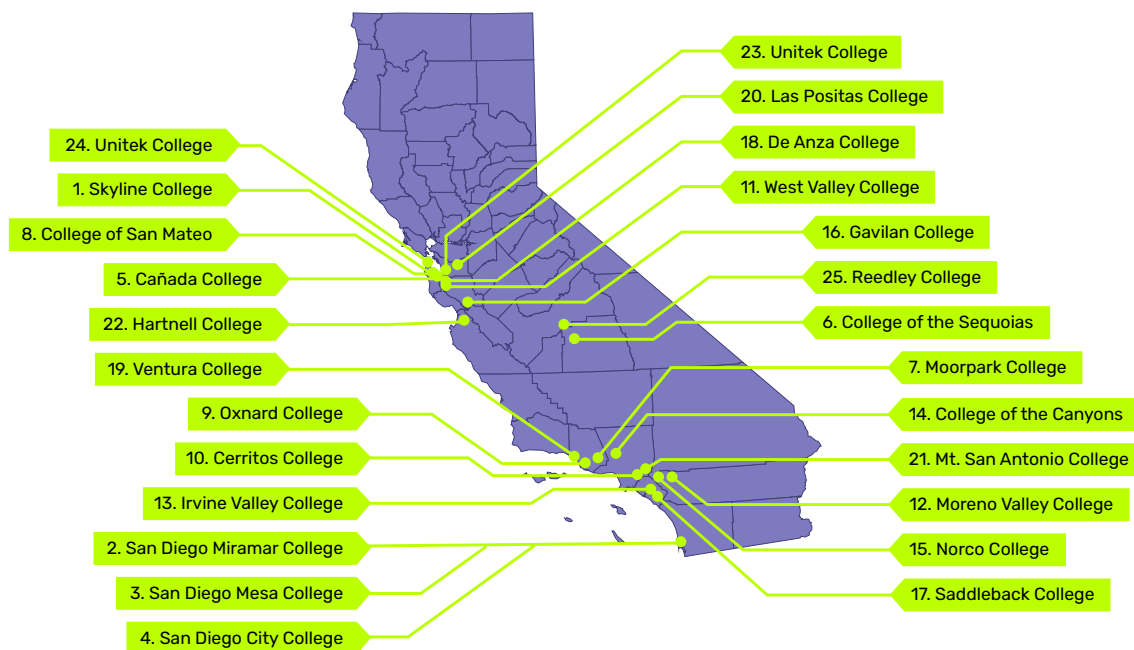
¹ The original Price-to-Earnings Premium was developed by the HEA Group with and for [Thirdway.org](#).

Top Performers Deliver Real and Rapid Returns

The top 25 performing institutions span seven of the 12 economic regions in California where community and certificate-granting colleges are located. At each of these colleges, the typical student is able to recoup their out-of-pocket costs within six months of earning their credential—a clear indicator of strong economic outcomes. Many of these institutions overwhelmingly serve learners from low-income backgrounds, charge less than \$5,000 annually, and show typical earnings of at least \$10,000 more than a high school graduate within the state.

Note: Our analysis identifies the top 25 institutions by quickest ROI. Many others beyond the top 25 also provide strong economic outcomes for learners.

Golden Returns: Top 25 Community and Career Colleges Delivering ROI



“Each and every one of these institutions in our top 25 shows the majority of students able to recoup their educational costs within six months or less.”

—Michael Itzkowitz, Founder and President, HEA Group

ROI Differs Dramatically by Region

Most learners, especially those enrolled in community and certificate-granting colleges, attend institutions close to home. By examining 12 California economic regions separately, we provide insights tailored to where learners actually live and work. A learner-centered strategy demands that we understand not only how institutions perform, but where meaningful options exist—or don't. The findings show that geography can shape access to opportunity in profound ways.

The number of postsecondary options varies dramatically across California. While the Los Angeles region has 87 institutions, others—like the Central Sierra and Imperial regions—have far fewer. And even within regions, ROI outcomes can vary widely. In the Bay Area, 17 of 45 institutions (38%) allow students to recoup their costs in under a year. In the Inland Empire, just three of 47 institutions (6%) show that outcome, and 34% provide no economic ROI at all.

“In some regions of California, it’s a coin toss whether a student ends up at a college that delivers economic return or one that doesn’t. That’s unacceptable—and it speaks to how urgently we need to improve options and outcomes in every part of the state.”

—Amanda DeLaRosa, Director of Program & Strategy,
College Futures Foundation

DELIVERING ROI WITHIN A YEAR

38%

of Bay Area community
and career colleges

6%

of Inland Empire community
and career colleges

40%

of public community
and career colleges

5%

of private non-profit or for-profit
community and career colleges



Sector Differences: Public, Private, and For-Profit

Public institutions remain California's strongest ROI performers. For example, 48 out of the 121 public community or career colleges (40%) within the state show their students recouping their costs within 12 months. Comparatively, only 11 out of 206 (5%) private non-profit or for-profit institutions show the same result, while 92 (45%) show no economic ROI whatsoever.

What This Means for California

While the data is promising in many respects, it also signals the need for systemic improvement. Postsecondary education should be a vehicle for economic mobility. Yet in too many parts of the state, learners are navigating costly, low-value options. This is not just a matter of individual outcomes—it's a matter of public responsibility.

We need every sector and every institution to do more. The colleges delivering strong ROI—those meeting learners where they are and helping them build toward where they want to go—are setting the bar for the rest.



LEARN MORE

Access additional resources, including the full methodology and data available for download, at <https://collegefutures.org/golden-returns-2-year-ROI>.