For the past half-century, the earnings of Americans with less than a four-year college degree have been stagnated or fallen. Despite higher than ever returns to traditional college education and widespread increases in postsecondary participation, the fraction of Americans completing traditional college degrees has not risen substantially in decades, and is actually declining somewhat for minority groups. Although many efforts have focused on increasing educational attainment, it is clear that encouraging traditional college enrollments in academic pathways is not sufficient. Important demographic changes and changes in the labor market have demanded a more skilled workforce with increased postsecondary training. National efforts to increase college attainment and to address the nation’s skills gap have focused heavily on community colleges. The Obama Administration identified community colleges as key drivers in the push to increase the stock of college graduates in the U.S. and to raise the skills of the American workforce.

Growing awareness of the need for post-secondary training beyond traditional academic programs, combined with long-term declines in the real earnings of Americans without college degrees makes it essential to better understand the training potential of career technical (vocational) postsecondary education programs. Although the returns to BA attainment in the labor market have been well documented, there is little research on the payoff to sub-baccalaureate degree receipt, particularly in technical/vocational fields. In this paper we address this gap and investigate the returns to sub-baccalaureate certificates and degrees in career technical (vocational) fields among those enrolled at California community colleges.