Postsecondary education provides a pathway to decent living salaries. Annual median earnings for individuals with less than a high school diploma is $27,000, compared to $47,000 for individuals with an associate degree. While median earnings increase with higher levels of education, studies show there is significant variance based on the discipline of the credential. As a result, median earnings for some associate degree and certificate programs are higher than some baccalaureate fields. As shown in the figure above, median earnings for individuals with associate degrees in STEM are $60,000 and $48,000 for individuals with a certificate in STEM, compared to $53,000 for bachelor’s-degree earners in humanities and $46,000 for a bachelor’s degree in education. Community colleges provide a pathway for certificates and associate degrees to prepare for work or to transfer to four-year degrees. Community colleges also provide credentials for adults who desire to retrain or boost their skills for labor market needs.

For more information, contact Kent Phillippe, associate vice president for research and student success at the American Association of Community Colleges, at 202-416-4505 or kphillippe@aacc.nche.edu, or Rahel Tekle, AACC’s research associate, at 202-416-4508 or rtleke@aacc.nche.edu