

Rural Graduate Retention and State Workforce Contributions in South Carolina

Findings from Postsecondary Employment
Outcomes (PSEO) Data

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The Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) Coalition

The Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) Program, a part of the US Census Bureau's Center for Economic Studies, provides public information on employers and employees. As part of that program, the Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data provide earnings and employment outcomes for college graduates by degree level, major, and institution. As of May 2025, the PSEO Coalition included more than 35 states and 1,000 institutions nationwide.

The PSEO Coalition collaborates with LEHD at the US Census to link postsecondary education data with national unemployment insurance wage data and supports its members and the larger postsecondary community in using these data for decision making.



Executive summary

This analysis uses Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data to examine how the earnings, employment locations, and contributions to South Carolina's workforce differ for graduates of rural- and urban-serving institutions in the state. By comparing outcomes for associate and bachelor's degree graduates, the analysis highlights how the urbanicity of where students study shapes both individual economic trajectories and the extent to which graduates remain employed in South Carolina.

Key findings

- **Urban graduates typically earn more:** Across disciplines, graduates of urban institutions in South Carolina earn more than graduates of rural institutions. Ten years after completing, bachelor's degree graduates of urban institutions earn approximately \$62,200, compared with \$55,000 for their peers from rural institutions. The gap is even larger among associate degree holders: 10 years after graduation, urban graduates earn roughly \$55,600 and graduates of rural institutions earn \$46,900. Overall earnings differences may be influenced by variation in the types of disciplines offered and degrees earned at urban and rural institutions.
- **Rural graduates are more likely to work in South Carolina:** Graduates from rural institutions, with both associate and bachelor's degrees, are more likely than graduates from urban institutions to remain employed in South Carolina. Ten years after completing, 58 percent of bachelor's degree graduates from rural institutions (n=19,166) are working in the state, compared with 51 percent of their peers from urban institutions (n=68,186). Associate degree graduates have higher in-state employment rates than bachelor's degree graduates across all time points, with associate degree graduates from rural institutions showing the strongest retention overall.
- **Industry varies by geography:** Graduates of rural institutions, at both associate and bachelor's degree levels, are more likely to work in education, health care, public administration, and manufacturing—sectors that play a central role in many local

economies across South Carolina. Graduates from urban institutions are more likely to enter professional and technical services, although substantial shares also work in education and health care. These differences in industry pathways may help explain observed geographic differences in earnings.

Implications

These findings underscore the distinct and complementary roles that rural- and urban-serving institutions play in South Carolina’s workforce. Rural institutions, particularly those primarily awarding associate degrees, serve as critical anchors for the state’s labor supply, retaining graduates in high-need sectors that are less likely to attract out-of-state talent. While graduates of rural institutions earn less on average, their concentration in essential industries highlights a form of public value that is not fully captured by earnings alone.

For policymakers, this analysis suggests the importance of aligning postsecondary investments with both economic returns and workforce retention goals. Strategies to strengthen South Carolina’s long-term workforce may benefit from recognizing the workforce-stabilizing role of rural institutions, supporting pathways that connect rural and urban institutions, and expanding in-state employment opportunities in higher-paying sectors. These insights are directly relevant to efforts under the South Carolina Statewide Education and Workforce Development Act (Act 67) to address obstacles unique to rural communities and to ensure that postsecondary education contributes to sustained economic opportunity across the state.¹

¹ See Chapter 30, “Employment and Workforce - Workforce Development,” Article 1 General Provisions, https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess125_2023-2024/bills/3726.htm.

Introduction

Ensuring a strong and resilient workforce is a central priority for South Carolina’s economic future, particularly as the state seeks to address persistent regional disparities and strengthen opportunities in rural communities.² Colleges and universities play a critical role in this effort—not only by preparing students for employment, but also by influencing where graduates live, work, and contribute over the long term. Yet discussions of postsecondary value often emphasize earnings alone, overlooking the importance of workforce retention and the distinct roles that rural- and urban-serving institutions play in sustaining the state’s labor force.

This report examines how the geographic location of an institution relates to graduates’ economic outcomes and workforce contributions in South Carolina. Using Postsecondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) data, we analyze differences in earnings, in-state retention, and industry of employment for associate and bachelor’s degree graduates of rural- and urban-serving institutions. In doing so, we ask a central question: *How do graduates’ earnings, industries of employment, and migration patterns differ by the geographic location of their institution?*

Exploring earnings data alongside measures of in-state employment and industry participation provides a more complete picture of the public value institutions generate by anchoring talent in the state. The findings highlight the essential role rural institutions play in supplying and retaining workers in high-need sectors such as education, health care, public administration, and manufacturing, even as their graduates earn less on average than peers from urban institutions.

Taken together, these patterns offer important insights for policymakers, state agencies, and institutional leaders working to align higher education with workforce development goals. Understanding the complementary roles and varying outcomes of rural- and urban-serving institutions can inform strategies to strengthen South Carolina’s talent pipeline, support rural communities, and ensure that public investments in higher

² See Chapter 30, “Employment and Workforce - Workforce Development,” Article 1 General Provisions, https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess125_2023-2024/bills/3726.htm.

education advance both economic opportunity and long-term workforce stability.

Methodology and limitations

PSEO data contain information on graduates' earnings and migration patterns. This analysis combines these data with institutional geographic classifications from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to examine how urban and rural institutions uniquely contribute to South Carolina's workforce.³ We use IPEDS locale codes to classify institutions, where areas classified as rural, distant or remote towns are "rural" and areas classified as city, suburban, or fringe towns are "urban."⁴

Using these classifications, we assign each institution a binary rural or urban designation and merge this indicator with South Carolina PSEO data to analyze earnings, industry, and migration patterns by institutional urbanicity. We recognize that substantial variation exists within rural regions in South Carolina and that alternative definitions of rurality are possible.⁵ A complete list of institutions by urbanicity is provided in Appendix A.⁶

In South Carolina's PSEO data, we classify 42 institutions as urban and 22 as rural. In both groups, institutions are evenly split by degree level: among urban institutions, 21 primarily award bachelor's degrees and 21 award associate degrees; among rural institutions, 11 primarily award bachelor's degrees and 11 award associate degrees.

³ See data documentation and downloads on the IPEDS website at <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>.

⁴ Specifically, we employ the NCES Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) Locale Framework to classify IPEDS locale codes, available at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/NCES_Locale_Framework.pdf.

⁵ For one robust analysis of geographic classifications in higher education research, see "Rural Definitions and Public Institutions," National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, <https://nchems.org/rural-definitions-and-public-institutions/>.

⁶ Complete data are unavailable for Southern Methodist College; accordingly, the institution is omitted from this analysis.

Results are pooled across all available graduation cohorts in South Carolina's PSEO data rather than reflecting a single graduating class. Across programs, graduates completed their degrees from as early as 2001 through 2019. The specific cohort years contributing to each program's estimates may vary depending on when degrees were awarded and whether the number of graduates meets the Census Bureau's disclosure thresholds.

The PSEO data includes some outcomes at the program level for each college and university and others at the institution level. Program-level outcomes are reported at either the two-digit CIP level or the four-digit CIP level. Two-digit CIP codes represent broad fields of study (e.g., "engineering" or "health professions"), which may encompass multiple majors or degree tracks, while four-digit CIP codes provide more detailed classifications (e.g., mechanical engineering or nursing). Because this analysis examines outcomes reported at different levels of granularity, we present all program-level results using two-digit CIP codes.

As a result, findings should be interpreted as reflecting general patterns across disciplines rather than specific programs or majors. Results are reported statewide and do not adjust for institutional differences or student characteristics. While South Carolina's PSEO data provides relatively broad coverage, capturing approximately 86 percent of graduates, the results are not fully representative of all graduates statewide. Further, the PSEO data provide numbers and rates of total employment and in-state employment, but not unemployment. All figures related to employment reflect the share of employed graduates and do not factor in unemployment totals or trends.

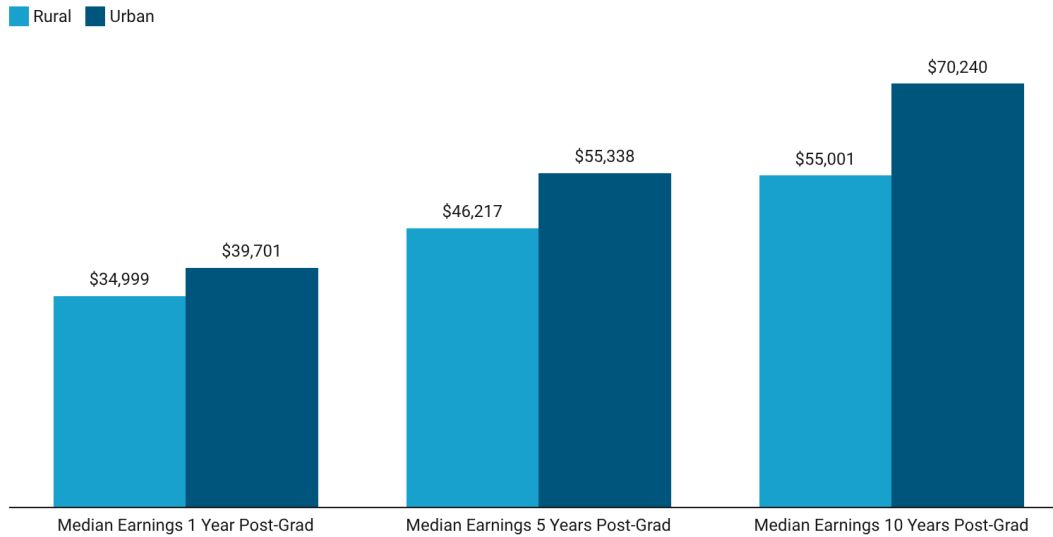
Key questions and findings

Do earnings outcomes differ by the urbanicity of institution attended?

At one, five, and 10 years post-graduation, graduates of urban institutions earn more, on average, than graduates of rural institutions with the same level of degree. Figure 1 presents median earnings for bachelor's degree

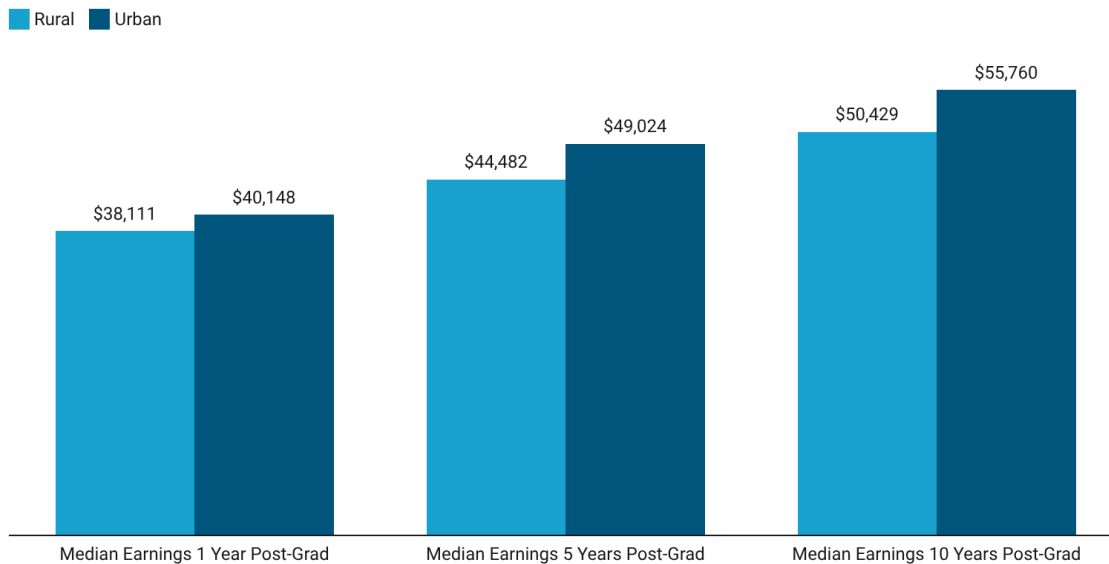
graduates by institutional urbanicity, and Figure 2 presents median earnings for associate degree graduates by institutional urbanicity.

Figure 1. Median bachelor's degree earnings by urbanicity



Note: Earnings weighted by number of graduates.
Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).
Chart: Ithaka S+R • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Median associate degree earnings by urbanicity



Note: Earnings weighted by number of graduates.
Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).
Chart: Ithaka S+R • Created with Datawrapper

Across degree levels, graduates of urban institutions realize a clear annual

earnings premium relative to graduates of rural institutions. Bachelor's degree graduates who attended urban institutions in South Carolina earn \$4,702 more per year one year after graduation and \$15,239 per year more 10 years after graduation than their peers from rural institutions. This pattern is less pronounced for associate degree graduates: those from urban institutions earn \$2,037 more annually one year after graduation and \$5,331 more 10 years after graduation than their peers from rural institutions.

These data also allow us to compare annual earnings differences for bachelor's and associate degree graduates within similar geographies.

Among graduates of rural institutions, associate degree graduates initially earn more than bachelor's degree graduates. One year after graduation, associate graduates earn \$3,112 more than bachelor's graduates. This pattern reverses within five years, and by 10 years after graduation, bachelor's graduates earn \$4,572 more per year than associate graduates, an earnings premium of nearly 9 percent.

Earnings differences are smaller among graduates of urban institutions early in their careers. One year after graduation, associate degree graduates earn \$477 more than bachelor's degree graduates, on average. Over time, however, bachelor's graduates pull ahead substantially, earning \$14,480, or 23 percent, more per year by 10 years after graduation.

At one and five years after graduation, associate degree graduates from urban institutions earn more than bachelor's degree graduates from rural institutions. By 10 years after graduation, earnings for these two groups converge and are broadly similar. This comparison underscores the importance of geography, program selection, and early labor market access in shaping short- and mid-term earnings, sometimes outweighing differences in degree level.

Several factors may contribute to earnings differences observed between graduates of rural and urban institutions. Graduates of urban institutions may be more likely to reside in higher wage areas and more competitive labor markets, both within South Carolina and beyond. Urban graduates, on average, may also be concentrated in fields associated with higher earnings. While PSEO data allows us to distinguish between in-state and out-of-state employment and earnings by program, they do not capture sub-state geographic variation, limiting our ability to assess how local labor markets shape outcomes. In addition, earnings outcomes vary

substantially across institutions within each urbanicity category, as shown in Appendices B and C, suggesting that institutional context and program mix also play an important role.

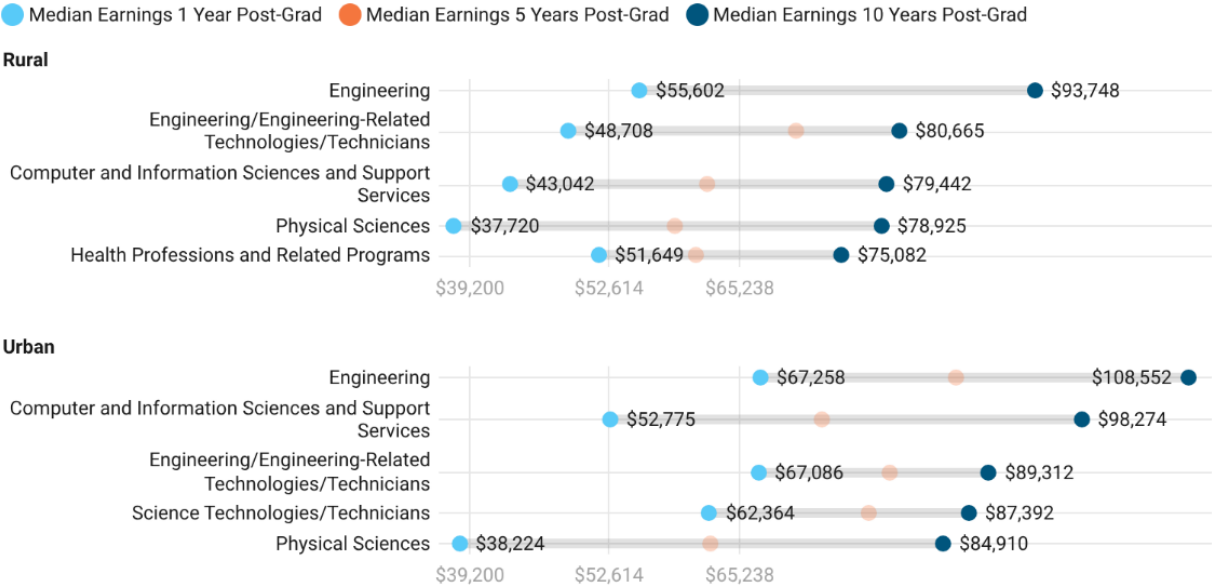
From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of taking a longer-term view when assessing economic returns to higher education. Early-career earnings alone can obscure longer-term trajectories, particularly for bachelor's degree holders, whose earnings premiums often emerge several years after graduation. At the same time, the results suggest that associate degrees, especially those earned at urban institutions, can provide strong early economic returns, and in some cases, rival bachelor's-level earnings for much of the first decade after graduation. Together, these patterns warrant closer examination of program-level outcomes, differences in fields of study, and the institutional and labor market factors that shape graduates' earnings trajectories over time.

Do earnings by program of study differ for graduates from rural and urban institutions?⁷

When it comes to the highest earning programs, slight differences emerge between graduates from rural and urban institutions. Table 1 presents the top five highest paying bachelor's degrees for students who attended rural and urban institutions, sorted by 10-year earnings and geography. Table 2 displays the same information for the top five highest paying associate degrees for rural and urban institutions. Missing data appear as dashes, but do not impact the rankings.

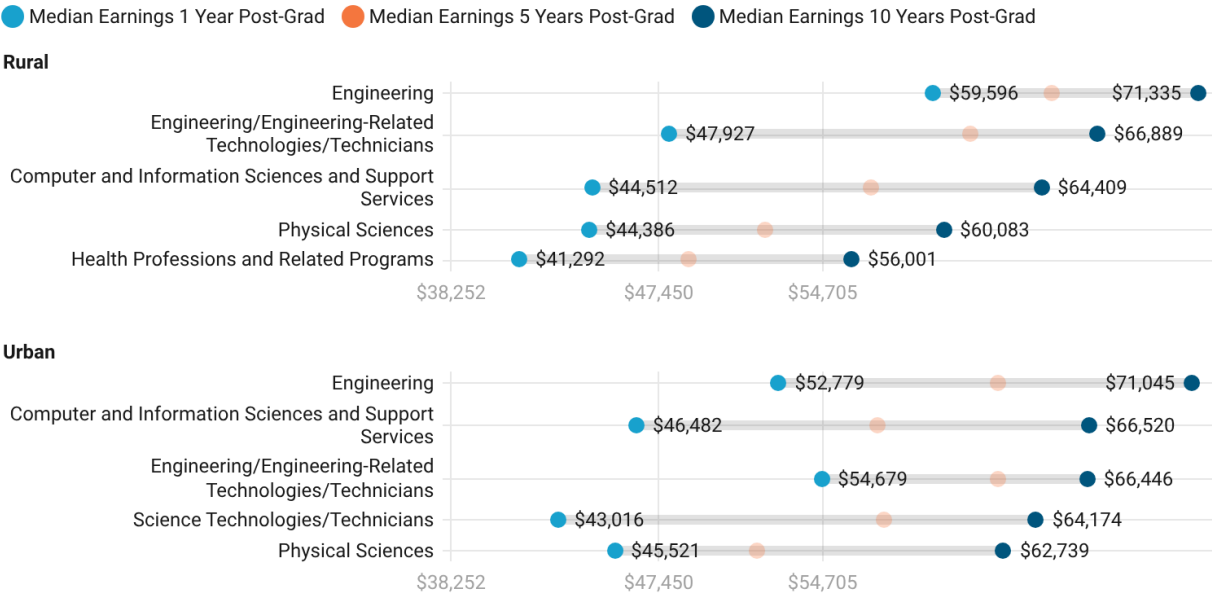
⁷ PSEO program-level analyses rely on two-digit CIP codes, which represent broad academic disciplines. These categories may encompass multiple specific majors or subfields. For example, multi/interdisciplinary studies includes programs as varied as historic preservation, neuroscience, and mathematics and computer science. These internal differences are not visible in the public PSEO data, which limits conclusions about individual majors.

Figure 3. Median earnings for top bachelor's degrees by urbanicity



Note: Median South Carolina bachelor's weighted degree earnings at one-, five-, and 10-years marked on chart.
Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).
Created with Datawrapper

Figure 4. Median earnings for top associate degrees by urbanicity



Note: Median South Carolina bachelor's weighted degree earnings at one-, five-, and 10-years marked on chart.
Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).
Chart: Ithaka S+R • Created with Datawrapper

For bachelor's degrees, the highest earning fields are largely consistent across rural and urban institutions. Engineering, computer and information sciences, and physical sciences all rank among the top five programs for earnings, regardless of institutional location. A similar pattern appears among associate degree graduates, where engineering, health professions, and mechanic and repair technologies consistently emerge as top-earning programs for both rural and urban graduates.

Despite these similarities, the tables reveal substantial earnings differences by institutional urbanicity. Engineering is the top-paying bachelor's-level field for both urban and rural graduates, but urban graduates earn nearly \$12,000 more per year than rural graduates one year after graduation and nearly \$15,000 more per year 10 years later, indicating an early earnings advantage that persists over time. In other fields, like physical sciences, earnings differences are smaller early on but widen as graduates' careers progress.

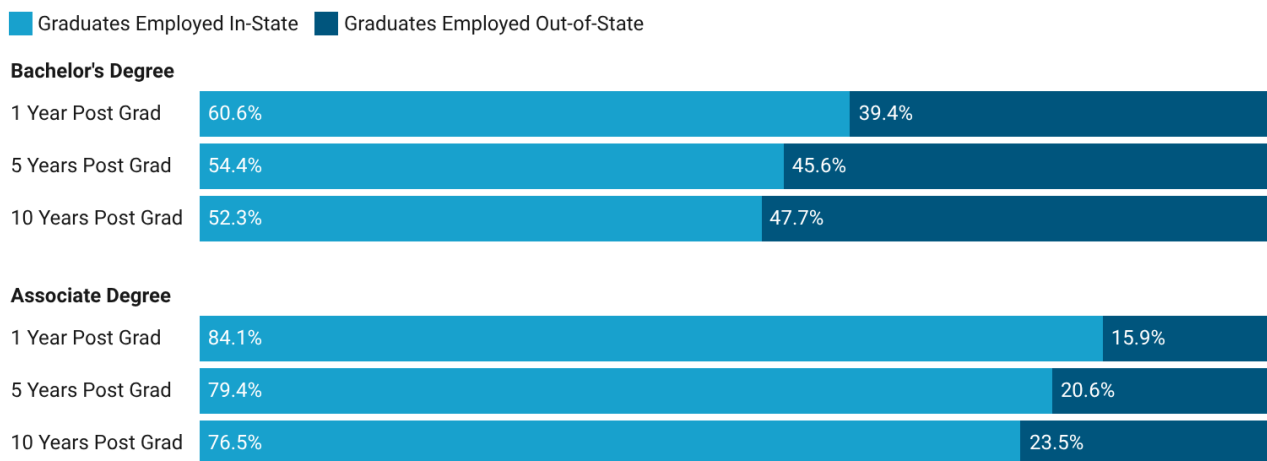
At the associate degree level, outcomes are more mixed. In some fields, rural graduates earn as much as, or more than, their urban counterparts. For example, rural associate degree graduates in the health professions earn nearly \$5,000 more per year than urban graduates both one and 10 years after graduation, potentially reflecting strong regional demand and investments in rural health care infrastructure. In contrast, other fields, such as engineering-related technologies, show little differences in earnings by institutional location.

Taken together, these findings highlight how institutional urbanicity interacts with students' field of study and level of degree to shape earnings outcomes. They suggest that while program choice matters, geography also plays a meaningful role in determining economic returns. From a policy perspective this points to opportunities to strengthen educational pathways that better connect rural and urban institutions—such as transfer agreements and coordinated workforce partnerships—to support alignment with local, regional, and statewide workforce needs.

Does institution type influence whether graduates remain employed in South Carolina?

In South Carolina, associate degree graduates are more likely than bachelor's degree graduates to remain employed in the state in the short- and medium-terms. Figure 3 shows the share of associate and bachelor's degree graduates employed in South Carolina and outside of South Carolina at one, five, and 10 years after graduation. For both degree levels, in-state employment is highest one year after graduation and declines over time.

Figure 5. In-state labor force participation by degree type



Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).

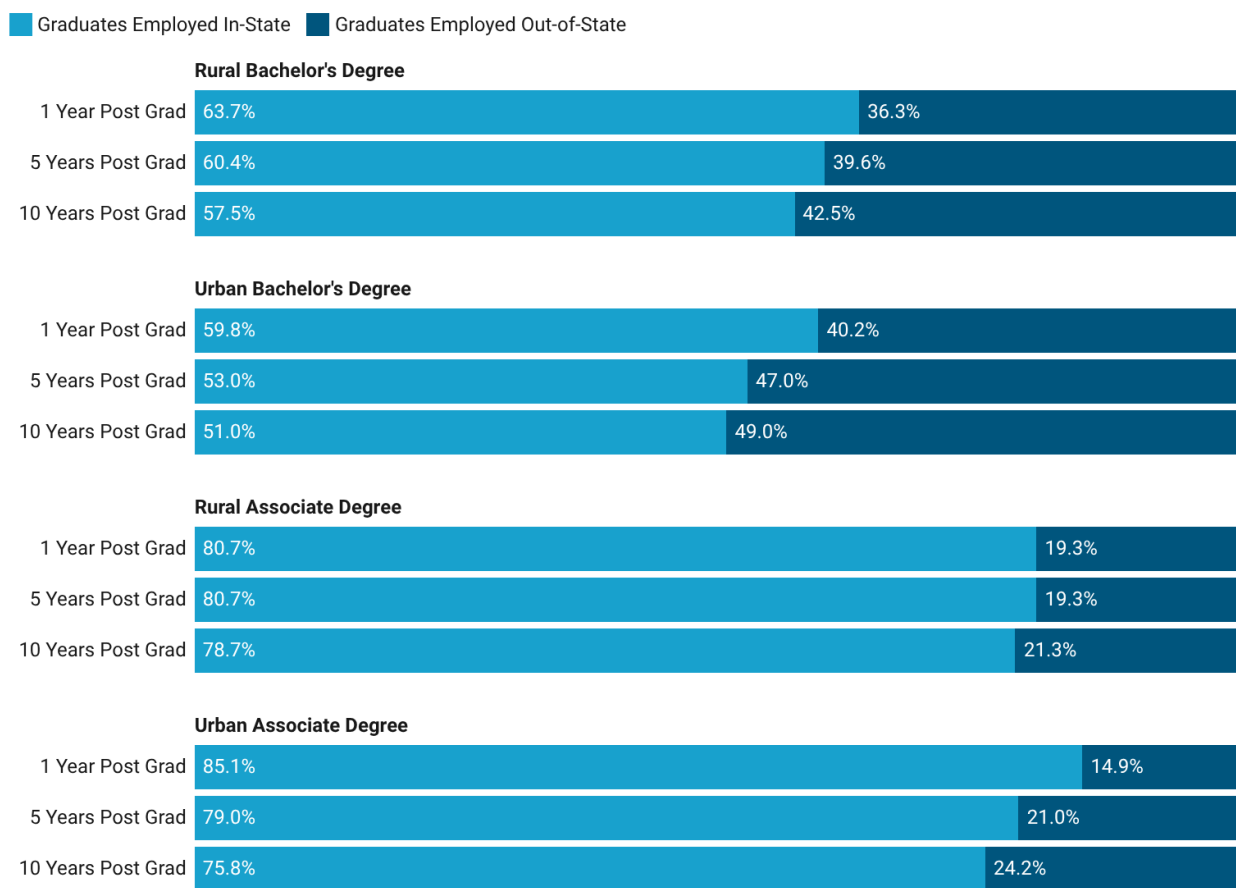
Chart: Ithaka S+R • Created with Datawrapper

Overall, bachelor's degree graduates are more geographically mobile than associate degree graduates and, as their careers progress, are more likely to work out of state. Both groups show increasing out-of-state employment over time, which suggests that lifestyle factors as well as employment factors could be at play. Further analysis of the characteristics and industries of graduates who leave the state shortly after graduation could yield valuable insights for workforce alignment and retention strategies aimed at encouraging graduates to remain in South Carolina. Additional comparisons to migration patterns in other states, as well as exploring institution-level variation within South Carolina, would further contextualize these findings.

Does institution urbanicity influence in-state retention?

The urbanicity of the institution attended is closely related to graduates' likelihood of remaining employed in South Carolina. Figure 4 shows in-state retention rates at one, five, and 10 years after graduation by both degree level and institutional urbanicity. Across all time points, associate degree graduates are more likely than bachelor's degree graduates to remain in state, regardless of whether they attended an urban or rural institution. Among bachelor's degree graduates, those who attended rural institutions are consistently more likely to be employed in South Carolina than their peers from urban institutions, though in-state retention declines over time for both groups.

Figure 6. In-state labor force participation by degree and institution urbanicity



Source: US Census Bureau Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO).

Chart: Ithaka S+R • Created with Datawrapper

A notable exception to the broader patterns of increasing out-of-state employment over time appears among associate degree graduates from rural institutions. Unlike other groups, rural associate degree graduates are nearly as likely to remain in state 10 years after graduation as they are one year after graduation. This stability contrasts with the pattern observed among associate degree graduates at urban institutions, whose likelihood of working out of state increases over time and more closely resembles that of bachelor's degree graduates.

Taken together, these findings show that associate degree graduates from rural institutions are the most likely to remain in South Carolina throughout their careers. In contrast, bachelor's degree graduates—regardless of institutional location—are substantially more likely to leave the state at every time point. From a policy perspective, strategies aimed

at strengthening in-state workforce retention may therefore have the greatest impact if they focus on bachelor's degree graduates and associate degree graduates from urban institutions, where out-of-state migration is more pronounced.

Which industries are graduates who stay in South Carolina working in?

Previously we examined which fields of study are associated with the highest median earnings by degree level and institutional geography. We now turn to a related question: Which industries are most likely to employ graduates who remain working in South Carolina, particularly those who attended rural institutions?

To answer this question, we examine the distribution of graduates working in South Carolina across industries, using North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) sector codes available in the PSEO data.⁸ For each industry, we calculate the share of employed graduates working in South Carolina out of all graduates employed in that sector. We focus on outcomes five years after graduation, allowing graduates time to transition to their longer-term fields of employment. Table 1 displays the five industries employing the largest number of in-state bachelor's degree graduates five years after graduation, for both rural and urban institutions. The table is sorted by the total employment in the industry, whether those employed in South Carolina or elsewhere.

⁸ According to the US Census Bureau, "The North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) is the standard used by Federal statistical agencies in classifying business establishments for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, and publishing statistical data related to the US business economy. It was developed to allow for a high level of comparability in business statistics among the three North American countries." See "Economic Census: NAICS Codes & Understanding Industry Classification Systems," <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/economic-census/year/2022/guidance/understanding-naics.html>.

Table 1. In-state employment for bachelor's degree graduates after five years

Urbanicity	Industry	Number of Graduates Employed in Industry In-State	Percentage of Graduates Employed In-State (out of total employed in sector)	Total Employment (5 Years Post-Grad)
Rural	Educational Services	6,415	70.4%	9,112
Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	4,731	64.4%	7,342
Rural	Public Administration	2,947	70.0%	4,210
Rural	Manufacturing	1,900	60.0%	3,167
Rural	Finance and Insurance	1,873	64.9%	2,885
Urban	Educational Services	19,916	65.3%	30,482
Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	14,943	56.2%	26,609
Urban	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	9,675	42.2%	22,941
Urban	Public Administration	7,597	66.8%	11,367
Urban	Manufacturing	6,369	53.3%	11,939

At the bachelor's level, educational services employ the largest share of in-state graduates, followed closely by health care and social assistance. Public administration and manufacturing industries in South Carolina also employ substantial shares of graduates, particularly among those who attended rural institutions. Only 42 percent of graduates working in professional, scientific, and technical services are employed in South Carolina five years after graduation, but this still represents over 9,600 graduates. These patterns underscore the importance of public-service-oriented career pathways in South Carolina and suggest that higher education pipelines into education, health care, and government are relatively strong, produce a relatively high volume of workers, and are effective at retaining graduates in the state.

A similar pattern emerges for associate degree graduates. Table 2 shows the five most industries employing the largest number of in-state associate degree graduates five years after graduation.⁹

⁹ For more detail, Appendix D lists in- and out-of-state employment by sector for all sectors, broken down by degree type and urbanicity.

Table 2. In-state employment for associate degree graduates after five years

Urbanicity	Industry	Number of Graduates Employed in Industry In-State	Percentage of Graduates Employed In-State (out of total employed in sector)	Total Employment (5 Years Post-Grad)
Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	6,132	85.7%	7,159
Rural	Manufacturing	2,679	85.8%	3,123
Rural	Public Administration	1,468	84.9%	1,729
Rural	Educational Services	1,443	83.3%	1,732
Rural	Retail Trade	1,122	72.8%	1,542
Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	19,984	81.6%	24,483
Urban	Manufacturing	6,055	81.8%	7,400
Urban	Public Administration	4,115	84.2%	4,887
Urban	Educational Services	4,054	81.2%	4,993
Urban	Retail Trade	3,780	73.9%	5,115

Healthcare and social assistance employ the most associate degree graduates in South Carolina, regardless of institutional urbanicity. Manufacturing, public administration, educational services, and retail trade also employ large numbers of associate degree graduates from both urban and rural institutions. Notably, the top five industries are identical for rural and urban associate degree graduates, and in-state employment rates within these sectors are consistently high.

Taken together, these findings suggest that associate degree graduates, from both rural and urban institutions, are earning degrees in fields closely aligned with South Carolina's core workforce needs. The similarity in industry employment patterns across institutional geography indicates that associate degree programs play an essential and consistent role in supplying workers to key sectors of the state economy, particularly health care and manufacturing.

Which industries are graduates who leave South Carolina working in?

Which industries draw the largest numbers of South Carolina's college graduates out of state? Tables 3 and 4 summarize the industries employing the greatest numbers of bachelor's and associate degree graduates working outside South Carolina five years after graduation.¹⁰

Five years after graduation, 40 percent of bachelor's degree graduates who attended rural institutions are employed outside of South Carolina, compared with 47 percent of bachelor's degree graduates from urban institutions. Table 6 shows that out-of-state employment among bachelor's degree graduates is concentrated in a small number of industries, though the dominant sectors slightly differ by institutional urbanicity.

Table 3. Out-of-state employment for bachelor's degree graduates after five years

Urbanicity	Industry	Number of Graduates Employed in Industry out-of-state	Percentage of Graduates Employed out-of-state (out of total employed in sector)	Total Employment (5 Years Post-Grad)
Rural	Educational Services	2,697	29.6%	9,112
Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	2,611	35.6%	7,342
Rural	Retail Trade	1,525	51.5%	2,960
Rural	Manufacturing	1,267	40.0%	3,167
Rural	Public Administration	1,263	30.0%	4,210
Urban	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	13,266	57.8%	22,941
Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	11,666	43.8%	26,609

¹⁰ Complete versions of these tables are available in Appendix D.

Urbanicity	Industry	Number of Graduates Employed in Industry out-of-state	Percentage of Graduates Employed out-of-state (out of total employed in sector)	Total Employment (5 Years Post-Grad)
Urban	Educational Services	10,566	34.7%	30,482
Urban	Finance and Insurance	6,531	50.9%	12,827
Urban	Manufacturing	5,570	46.7%	11,939

Among bachelor's degree graduates from urban institutions, professional, scientific, and technical services account for the largest share of out-of-state employment, with nearly 13,300 graduates (more than half of total employed graduates in the field) working in this sector outside South Carolina. Health care and educational services also employ substantial numbers of urban bachelor's graduates out of state. Competition from nearby science and technology hubs, such as North Carolina's Research Triangle, may help explain the out-migration of graduates in professional and technical fields. These patterns suggest that attracting or expanding employers in these sectors could help South Carolina better retain this segment of its workforce.

For bachelor's degree graduates from rural institutions, out-of-state employment is more evenly distributed across education, health care, retail trade, manufacturing, and public administration. Overall, smaller shares of graduates from rural institutions seek employment out of state compared with their peers from urban institutions, though a meaningful portion still pursue opportunities elsewhere, particularly in retail trade and manufacturing.

Out-of-state employment is less common among associate degree graduates compared to bachelor's degree graduates. Table 4 shows the industries employing the largest numbers of associate degree graduates working outside South Carolina. The rates of out-of-state employment across institutional urbanicity for associate degree graduates are more similar than bachelor's degree graduates. Five years after graduation, 19 percent of associate degree graduates from rural institutions are employed out of state, compared with 21 percent of associate degree graduates from urban institutions.

Table 4. Out-of-state employment for associate degree graduates after five years

Urbanicity	Industry	Number of Graduates Employed in Industry out-of-state	Percentage of Graduates Employed out-of-state (out of total employed in sector)	Total Employment (5 Years Post-Grad)
Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	1,027	14.4%	7,159
Rural	Manufacturing	444	14.2%	3,123
Rural	Retail Trade	420	27.2%	1,542
Rural	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	325	28.0%	1,162
Rural	Educational Services	289	16.7%	1,732
Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	4,499	18.4%	24,483
Urban	Manufacturing	1,345	18.2%	7,400
Urban	Retail Trade	1,335	26.1%	5,115
Urban	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1,117	25.2%	4,439
Urban	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	1,080	28.0%	3,851

As with bachelor's degree graduates, health care and social assistance and manufacturing are the leading out-of-state industries for associate degree graduates, regardless of institutional urbanicity. Retail trade also appears prominently, particularly among rural associate degree graduates working out of state. The presence of retail trade among top out-of-state industries may indicate weaker alignment between some associate degree programs and available in-state opportunities, with graduates leaving the state for work but remaining in lower-wage or less stable employment.

Notably, many of the same industries appear among both in-state and out-of-state employment destinations. Health care and social assistance is the largest employer of associate degree graduates both within and outside

South Carolina, and manufacturing shows a similar pattern, though to a lesser extent. Among bachelor's degree graduates, particularly those from rural institutions, educational services also feature prominently in both in-state and out-of-state employment. These patterns suggest that while South Carolina's educational pipelines into key sectors are strong, the availability of in-state employment opportunities may not be sufficient to absorb all graduates. Expanding educational pathways without corresponding growth in in-state employment risks investing in a workforce that ultimately contributes to economic activity elsewhere.

Next steps for additional analyses

This analysis highlights several opportunities to deepen understanding of how South Carolina's higher education system aligns with workforce needs across geographic contexts. Future work could build on these findings in ways that provide more actionable insights for policymakers and institutional leaders.

First, disaggregating outcomes by graduation cohort would allow for analysis of changes over time, including whether urban–rural differences in earnings, migration, or industry alignment are widening or narrowing for more recent graduates. Such trend analyses could help assess how shifts in the state's economy, labor market, or higher education policies are influencing graduate outcomes.

Second, institutional characteristics such as size, sector, and mission may mediate some of the relationships observed here. Future research could explore whether differences attributed to urbanicity are partly explained by institutional scale or by the concentration of programs offered at larger, urban institutions versus smaller, rural colleges.

Third, this analysis could be extended using additional data to examine outcomes for short-term credentials and graduate programs. Understanding how certificate and advanced degree pathways contribute to in-state retention and workforce alignment would offer a more comprehensive view of the state's talent pipeline.

Finally, placing South Carolina's results in a broader context through comparisons with other states participating in PSEO would help distinguish state-specific dynamics from more general patterns. Cross-state comparisons could inform whether South Carolina's rural institutions are uniquely effective at retaining graduates or whether similar patterns emerge elsewhere, providing additional guidance for workforce and higher education policy.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that rural-serving institutions play a distinct and essential role in South Carolina's workforce ecosystem, one that is not fully captured by earnings measures alone. While graduates of urban institutions earn more on average, graduates of rural institutions are more likely to remain employed in South Carolina over time, particularly in sectors that are foundational to the state's economic and civic life, including education, health care, public administration, and manufacturing. These patterns underscore the importance of considering both individual economic outcomes and collective workforce contributions when evaluating postsecondary value.

The findings also highlight meaningful differences by degree level. Associate degree graduates—many of whom attend rural institutions—exhibit the strongest in-state retention across all time horizons and are closely aligned with South Carolina's core workforce needs. Bachelor's degree graduates, by contrast, are more geographically mobile, especially those from urban institutions, and are more likely to leave the state for employment in professional and technical fields. This mobility suggests that South Carolina faces a dual challenge: retaining highly educated talent while also sustaining the pipelines that supply workers to essential public-service and production-oriented sectors.

Taken together, these results suggest that rural- and urban-serving institutions play complementary roles in advancing the state's workforce goals. Rural institutions help anchor talent locally and sustain high-need industries, while urban institutions contribute to higher-earning pathways that may require stronger in-state employer demand to retain graduates. For policymakers, these findings point to the need for differentiated

strategies that recognize the workforce-stabilizing role of rural colleges, strengthen transfer and career pathways across institutions, and align postsecondary investments with the geographic distribution of employment opportunities.

More broadly, this analysis illustrates the value of PSEO data in informing workforce and higher education policy. By linking earnings, migration, and industry outcomes, PSEO data provide a more complete picture of how postsecondary education contributes to both economic opportunity and workforce stability. Leveraging these insights can help South Carolina design policies that not only prepare students for work, but also ensure that public investments in higher education translate into durable benefits for communities across the state, particularly in rural regions where talent retention is most critical.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. South Carolina PSEO institutions by urbanicity

Institution Name	Urbanicity	Degree Awarded
Aiken Technical College	Urban	Associates
Allen University	Urban	Bachelor's
Central Carolina Technical College	Urban	Associates
Charleston Southern University	Urban	Associates
Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina	Rural	Bachelor's
Claflin University	Urban	Bachelor's
Clemson University	Urban	Bachelor's
Coastal Carolina University	Rural	Bachelor's
Coker University	Urban	Bachelor's
College of Charleston	Urban	Bachelor's
Columbia College of South Carolina	Urban	Bachelor's
Columbia International University	Urban	Associates
Converse College	Rural	Bachelor's
Denmark Technical College	Urban	Associates
Erskine College	Rural	Bachelor's
Florence - Darlington Technical College	Rural	Bachelor's
Francis Marion University	Urban	Associates
Furman University	Rural	Bachelor's
Greenville Technical College	Rural	Associates
Horry Georgetown Technical College	Rural	Bachelor's
Lander University	Rural	Bachelor's
Limestone University	Urban	Associates
Midlands Technical College - Airport Campus	Urban	Bachelor's
Morris College	Urban	Associates
Newberry College	Urban	Bachelor's
North Greenville University	Urban	Associates
Northeastern Technical College	Rural	Bachelor's
Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College	Rural	Associates
Piedmont Technical College	Rural	Bachelor's
Presbyterian College	Urban	Bachelor's
Sherman College of Straight Chiropractic	Urban	Associates
South Carolina State University	Rural	Bachelor's
South University - Columbia	Urban	Associates
Southern Wesleyan University	Rural	Associates

Institution Name	Urbanicity	Degree Awarded
Spartanburg Community College	Urban	Associates
Spartanburg Methodist College	Urban	Bachelor's
Technical College of the Lowcountry - Beaufort Campus	Urban	Bachelor's
Tri-County Technical College	Urban	Associates
Trident Technical College	Urban	Bachelor's
University of South Carolina - Aiken	Urban	Associates
University of South Carolina - Beaufort	Urban	Bachelor's
University of South Carolina - Columbia	Rural	Associates
University of South Carolina - Lancaster	Rural	Associates
University of South Carolina - Salkehatchie	Rural	Bachelor's
University of South Carolina - Sumter	Urban	Associates
University of South Carolina - Union	Rural	Associates
University of South Carolina Upstate	Rural	Associates
Voorhees College	Rural	Associates
Williamsburg Technical College	Urban	Bachelor's
Winthrop University	Urban	Associates
Wofford College	Urban	Bachelor's
York Technical College	Urban	Associates

Appendix B: Median bachelor's earnings by urbanicity and institution

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post-Grad
Rural	Claflin University	\$ 33,112	\$ 42,694	\$ 50,003
Rural	Coker University	\$ 33,946	\$ 43,028	\$ 50,306
Rural	Erskine College	\$ 33,321	\$ 49,074	\$ 60,935
Rural	Francis Marion University	\$ 34,877	\$ 46,091	\$ 55,500
Rural	Lander University	\$ 35,467	\$ 46,912	\$ 55,152
Rural	Limestone University	\$ 40,541	\$ 48,994	\$ 55,835
Rural	Newberry College	\$ 36,031	\$ 46,900	\$ 56,020
Rural	North Greenville University	\$ 31,727	\$ 43,341	\$ 53,081
Rural	Presbyterian College	\$ 37,552	\$ 52,525	\$ 66,687
Rural	South Carolina State University	\$ 31,209	\$ 44,747	\$ 53,677
Rural	Voorhees College	\$ 32,887	\$ 41,032	\$ 46,824
Urban	Allen University	\$ 28,416	\$ 36,057	\$ 42,949
Urban	Charleston Southern University	\$ 38,440	\$ 48,110	\$ 58,461

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post- Grad
Urban	Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina	\$ 47,641	\$ 64,371	\$ 85,734
Urban	Clemson University	\$ 46,082	\$ 64,496	\$ 84,288
Urban	Coastal Carolina University	\$ 32,545	\$ 49,480	\$ 60,601
Urban	College of Charleston	\$ 35,149	\$ 52,390	\$ 67,706
Urban	Columbia College of South Carolina	\$ 38,414	\$ 44,277	\$ 53,310
Urban	Columbia International University	\$ 29,544	\$ 39,597	\$ 49,528
Urban	Converse College	\$ 34,310	\$ 44,204	\$ 54,173
Urban	Furman University	\$ 39,004	\$ 59,072	\$ 79,271
Urban	Greenville Technical College	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Urban	Morris College	\$ 29,495	\$ 37,311	\$ 42,220
Urban	South University - Columbia	\$ 43,680	\$ 50,208	\$ 53,310
Urban	Southern Wesleyan University	\$ 44,834	\$ 54,117	\$ 61,407
Urban	Spartanburg Methodist College	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Urban	University of South Carolina - Aiken	\$ 38,146	\$ 48,742	\$ 58,954

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post- Grad
Urban	University of South Carolina - Beaufort	\$ 37,250	\$ 50,004	\$ 58,042
Urban	University of South Carolina - Columbia	\$ 40,065	\$ 56,273	\$ 71,293
Urban	University of South Carolina Upstate	\$ 40,825	\$ 50,262	\$ 59,342
Urban	Winthrop University	\$ 34,941	\$ 47,748	\$ 57,521

Appendix C: Median associate earnings by urbanicity and institution

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post-Grad
Rural	Denmark Technical College	\$ 26,972	\$ 30,495	\$ 34,454
Rural	Florence - Darlington Technical College	\$ 43,227	\$ 50,418	\$ 57,922
Rural	Limestone University	\$ 43,296	\$ 47,791	\$ 54,809
Rural	North Greenville University	\$ 30,352	\$ 36,569	\$ 40,415
Rural	Northeastern Technical College	\$ 37,887	\$ 42,716	\$ 50,063
Rural	Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College	\$ 44,942	\$ 49,953	\$ 53,581
Rural	Piedmont Technical College	\$ 37,706	\$ 44,147	\$ 49,952
Rural	University of South Carolina - Lancaster	\$ 31,032	\$ 43,240	\$ 50,941
Rural	University of South Carolina - Salkehatchie	\$ 25,680	\$ 36,819	\$ 43,679
Rural	University of South Carolina - Union	\$ 25,603	\$ 37,404	\$ 45,035

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post-Grad
Rural	Williamsburg Technical College	\$ 27,583	\$ 30,341	\$ 34,661
Urban	Aiken Technical College	\$ 42,184	\$ 50,301	\$ 54,162
Urban	Central Carolina Technical College	\$ 43,027	\$ 47,739	\$ 54,445
Urban	Charleston Southern University	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Urban	Columbia College of South Carolina	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Urban	Columbia International University	\$ -	\$ 32,928	\$ -
Urban	Greenville Technical College	\$ 43,611	\$ 52,361	\$ 58,956
Urban	Horry Georgetown Technical College	\$ 35,603	\$ 45,466	\$ 52,994
Urban	Midlands Technical College - Airport Campus	\$ 40,067	\$ 48,322	\$ 55,551
Urban	South University - Columbia	\$ 31,837	\$ 37,117	\$ 39,087
Urban	Southern Wesleyan University	\$ 50,797	\$ 55,542	\$ 62,657
Urban	Spartanburg Community College	\$ 38,939	\$ 46,529	\$ 52,576

Urbanicity	Institution	Median Earnings 1 Year Post-Grad	Median Earnings 5 Years Post-Grad	Median Earnings 10 Years Post-Grad
Urban	Spartanburg Methodist College	\$ 23,057	\$ 36,788	\$ 47,377
Urban	Technical College of the Lowcountry - Beaufort Campus	\$ 45,374	\$ 49,791	\$ 54,658
Urban	Tri-County Technical College	\$ 41,300	\$ 49,875	\$ 55,400
Urban	Trident Technical College	\$ 41,656	\$ 51,107	\$ 58,598
Urban	University of South Carolina - Aiken	\$ 59,482	\$ 71,612	\$ 76,951
Urban	University of South Carolina - Beaufort	\$ 31,424	\$ 48,983	\$ 55,788
Urban	University of South Carolina - Columbia	\$ -	\$ 52,420	\$ 52,865
Urban	University of South Carolina - Sumter	\$ 27,699	\$ 41,300	\$ 48,492
Urban	University of South Carolina Upstate	\$ 58,501	\$ 68,691	\$ 65,618
Urban	York Technical College	\$ 39,010	\$ 47,897	\$ 53,993

Appendix D: In-state and out-of-state workforce retention after five years

Degree	Urban-icity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Bachelor's	Rural	Educational Services	9,112	6,415	70.4%	2,697	29.6%
Bachelor's	Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	7,342	4,731	64.4%	2,611	35.6%
Bachelor's	Rural	Retail Trade	2,960	1,435	48.5%	1,525	51.5%
Bachelor's	Rural	Manufacturing	3,167	1,900	60.0%	1,267	40.0%
Bachelor's	Rural	Public Administration	4,210	2,947	70.0%	1,263	30.0%
Bachelor's	Rural	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	2,513	1,283	51.1%	1,230	48.9%
Bachelor's	Rural	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and remediation Services	2,300	1,218	53.0%	1,082	47.0%
Bachelor's	Rural	Finance and Insurance	2,885	1,873	64.9%	1,012	35.1%
Bachelor's	Rural	Accommodation and Food Services	1,394	543	39.0%	851	61.0%

Degree	Urbanicity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Bachelor's	Rural	Wholesale Trade	1,141	599	52.5%	542	47.5%
Bachelor's	Rural	Transportation and Warehousing	896	361	40.3%	535	59.7%
Bachelor's	Rural	Construction	878	404	46.0%	474	54.0%
Bachelor's	Rural	Information	916	514	56.1%	402	43.9%
Bachelor's	Rural	Other Services (except Public Administration)	663	304	45.9%	359	54.1%
Bachelor's	Rural	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	559	291	52.1%	268	47.9%
Bachelor's	Rural	Management of Companies and Enterprises	456	244	53.5%	212	46.5%
Bachelor's	Rural	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	354	150	42.4%	204	57.6%
Bachelor's	Rural	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	183	75	41.0%	108	59.0%
Bachelor's	Rural	Utilities	386	288	74.6%	98	25.4%
Bachelor's	Rural	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	51	19	37.3%	32	62.7%
Bachelor's	Urban	Professional, Scientific, and	22,941	9,675	42.2%	13,266	57.8%

		Technical Services					
Degree	Urban-icity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Bachelor's	Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	26,609	14,943	56.2%	11,666	43.8%
Bachelor's	Urban	Educational Services	30,482	19,916	65.3%	10,566	34.7%
Bachelor's	Urban	Finance and Insurance	12,827	6,296	49.1%	6,531	50.9%
Bachelor's	Urban	Manufacturing	11,939	6,369	53.3%	5,570	46.7%
Bachelor's	Urban	Retail Trade	10,876	5,378	49.4%	5,498	50.6%
Bachelor's	Urban	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	8,475	3,966	46.8%	4,509	53.2%
Bachelor's	Urban	Accommodation and Food Services	8,310	3,955	47.6%	4,355	52.4%
Bachelor's	Urban	Wholesale Trade	7,547	3,468	46.0%	4,079	54.0%
Bachelor's	Urban	Public Administration	11,367	7,597	66.8%	3,770	33.2%
Bachelor's	Urban	Information	5,137	2,269	44.2%	2,868	55.8%
Bachelor's	Urban	Construction	4,768	2,429	50.9%	2,339	49.1%
Bachelor's	Urban	Other Services (except Public Administration)	3,330	1,489	44.7%	1,841	55.3%

Degree	Urbanicity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Bachelor's	Urban	Management of Companies and Enterprises	2,932	1,216	41.5%	1,716	58.5%
Bachelor's	Urban	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	2,732	1,097	40.2%	1,635	59.8%
Bachelor's	Urban	Transportation and Warehousing	2,942	1,366	46.4%	1,576	53.6%
Bachelor's	Urban	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	2,860	1,582	55.3%	1,278	44.7%
Bachelor's	Urban	Utilities	1,200	962	80.2%	238	19.8%

Bachelor's	Urban	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	413	226	54.7%	187	45.3%
Bachelor's	Urban	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	136	34	25.0%	102	75.0%
Associates	Rural	Health Care and Social Assistance	7,159	6,132	85.7%	1,027	14.3%
Associates	Rural	Manufacturing	3,123	2,679	85.8%	444	14.2%
Associates	Rural	Retail Trade	1,542	1,122	72.8%	420	27.2%
Associates	Rural	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and	1,162	837	72.0%	325	28.0%

		Remediation Services					
Degree	Urbanicity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Associates	Rural	Educational Services	1,732	1,443	83.3%	289	16.7%
Associates	Rural	Public Administration	1,729	1,468	84.9%	261	15.1%
Associates	Rural	Wholesale Trade	530	309	58.3%	221	41.7%
Associates	Rural	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	691	476	68.9%	215	31.1%
Associates	Rural	Finance and Insurance	998	794	79.6%	204	20.4%
Associates	Rural	Accommodation and Food Services	504	329	65.3%	175	34.7%
Associates	Rural	Construction	396	281	71.0%	115	29.0%
Associates	Rural	Transportation and Warehousing	281	192	68.3%	89	31.7%
Associates	Rural	Other Services (except Public Administration)	385	300	77.9%	85	22.1%
Associates	Rural	Information	213	152	71.4%	61	28.6%
Associates	Rural	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	131	88	67.2%	43	32.8%
Associates	Rural	Management of Companies and Enterprises	188	148	78.7%	40	21.3%

Degree	Urbanicity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Associates	Rural	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	74	39	52.7%	35	47.3%
Associates	Rural	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	42	27	64.3%	15	35.7%
Associates	Rural	Utilities	211	201	95.3%	10	4.7%
Associates	Rural	Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	7	3	42.9%	4	57.1%
Associates	Urban	Health Care and Social Assistance	24,483	19,984	81.6%	4,499	18.4%
Associates	Urban	Manufacturing	7,400	6,055	81.8%	1,345	18.2%
Associates	Urban	Retail Trade	5,115	3,780	73.9%	1,335	26.1%
Associates	Urban	Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	4,439	3,322	74.8%	1,117	25.2%
Associates	Urban	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	3,851	2,771	72.0%	1,080	28.0%
Associates	Urban	Educational Services	4,993	4,054	81.2%	939	18.8%
Associates	Urban	Accommodation and Food Services	2,847	2,029	71.3%	818	28.7%

Degree	Urbanicity	NAICS Industry	Total Employed 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed In-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	Total Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation	% Employed Out-of-State 5 Years Post-Graduation
Associates	Urban	Public Administration	4,887	4,115	84.2%	772	15.8%
Associates	Urban	Finance and Insurance	2,925	2,275	77.8%	650	22.2%
Associates	Urban	Construction	1,833	1,322	72.1%	511	27.9%
Associates	Urban	Wholesale Trade	1,716	1,248	72.7%	468	27.3%
Associates	Urban	Transportation and Warehousing	1,229	919	74.8%	310	25.2%
Associates	Urban	Information	1,294	1,010	78.1%	284	21.9%
Associates	Urban	Other Services (except Public Administration)	984	759	77.1%	225	22.9%
Associates	Urban	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	497	308	62.0%	189	38.0%
Associates	Urban	Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	656	518	79.0%	138	21.0%
Associates	Urban	Management of Companies and Enterprises	779	657	84.3%	122	15.7%
Associates	Urban	Utilities	721	681	94.5%	40	5.5%
Associates	Urban	Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	89	65	73.0%	24	27.0%
Associates	Urban	Mining, Quarrying,	22	9	40.9%	13	59.1%

		and Oil and Gas Extraction					
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