

Study: Cumulative earnings by major field of study, 1991 to 2010

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A new study that followed men and women over two decades found that cumulative earnings varied considerably—both across and within fields of study.

Using longitudinal tax data linked to 1991 Census data, the study tracked individuals from 1991, when they were 26 to 35 years old, to 2010, when they were 45 to 54 years old. Individuals were grouped according to their highest level of completed education and major field of study reported in 1991. The labour market outcomes of bachelor's degree and college certificate graduates were compared both across and within fields of study. The dollar figures are expressed in 2010 constant dollars to account for inflation.

Over the 20-year period, the median cumulative earnings of male bachelor's degree graduates ranged from \$840,000 among fine and applied arts graduates to \$1,800,000 for engineering graduates. Among women with a bachelor's degree, median cumulative earnings ranged from \$650,000 (in fine and applied arts) to \$1,200,000 (in business administration). Similar relative patterns were evident among college certificate holders.

The variation in cumulative earnings was even greater among top earners in each discipline. This was especially true among male bachelor's degree graduates. For example, among men with a bachelor's degree in business administration or mathematics and physical sciences, those who were at the 90th percentile of the earnings distribution (that is, those whose earnings were greater than exactly 90% of this group) earned \$4,000,000 over the 20-year period. In contrast, their counterparts in fine and applied arts and in education earned \$1,700,000 over the same period, while their counterparts in humanities and life sciences earned \$2,000,000.

Cumulative earnings also varied substantially within fields of study. For example, among men with a bachelor's degree in business administration, those at the 25th percentile earned two times less (\$1,200,000) than those at the 75th percentile (\$2,500,000) and three and a half times less than those at the 90th percentile.

Among women with a bachelor's degree in social sciences, those at the 25th percentile earned \$500,000, or two-and-a-half times less than those at the 75th percentile (\$1,200,000) and one-third of those at the 90th percentile (\$1,500,000).

The research article "The Cumulative Earnings of Postsecondary Graduates Over 20 Years: Results by Field of Study," part of the *Economic Insights Series* ([11-626-X](#)), is now available from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website under *Publications*.

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