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For more information, contact:

Tom Weko: 202-502-7643

Tracy Dell'Angela: 202-219-1412 (for background and author availability)

## **Students earn more associate's degrees and vocational certificates; up 25 percent in 5 years**

*Largest jumps for Black and Hispanic women; seen in health care, proprietary schools*

The number of associate's degrees and vocational certificates awarded by postsecondary institutions has reached almost 1.5 million, according to a new report from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Most of this growth was driven by women seeking credentials in health care fields—in particular, Black and Hispanic women. Health care accounted for 31 percent of all certificates and associate degrees awarded in 2007 and increased 68 percent over the decade studied.

The report, “Changes in Postsecondary Awards Below the Bachelor's Degree: 1997-2007,” comes at a time when the labor market demand is growing for jobs requiring these types of credentials. Tom Weko, associate commissioner for the postsecondary division at NCES, said the increase is driven by both labor demands and a demographic bubble of people entering college-age years.

“Increasingly, these credentials have become a central feature of our nation's job training and skill development after high school,” Weko said. “For women, and especially women of color, these credentials are an important point of entry into the work force.”

Projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that six of the top ten fastest-growing occupations between 2004 and 2014 require education or training below the bachelor degree level. Five of the six occupations are in the health care industry. The federal government spent about \$14 billion in 2007-08 on Pell grants and loans for students in vocational or occupationally oriented certificate and associate degree programs at postsecondary institutions, according to a separate NCES analysis. This includes about \$6.8 billion for health-related professions and \$1.4 billion for cosmetology, culinary and personal services.

From 1997 to 2007, the number of these credentials increased 28 percent, almost the same growth seen for the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in this time period. However, most of the growth occurred in the second half of the decade and surpassed the rate of increase in bachelor's degrees during that time from 2002 to 2007.

Like community colleges, for-profit institutions -- or “proprietary schools”-- provide students with credentials that take anywhere from a few months to two years or more to complete. Community colleges still award the majority of below-bachelor’s credentials, but the number of credentials awarded by these institutions increased by just 26 percent over the decade—only half the increase seen by the for-profit institutions, which increased 54 percent.

This study covers a range of postsecondary awards. Associate’s degrees typically have either an academic or an occupational focus-- occupational associate’s are for fields such as nursing, business and computer science; academic associate’s degrees in liberal arts and humanities are typically sought by students transferring into a bachelor’s program.

Certificates are generally focused on occupational skills and are concentrated in the health care industry. These could range from emergency medical technicians and nurse’s assistants to pharmacy technicians and massage therapists. These certificate programs are divided into short-term (those requiring less than 12 months to complete), moderate-term (requires 12 up to 24 months to complete) and long-term (requires 24 months or more to complete).

Other key findings include:

- Academic associate’s degrees sought by transfer students increased by about 40 percent over the decade, while certificates in science- and technology-related fields dropped by 32 percent or more. This could be attributed to a decline in data entry and computer operation jobs.
- Women earn a majority of associate’s degrees and certificates -- 62 percent in 2007-- and the increase was larger over the decade for women, at 31 percent, compared to men, at 24 percent. The gender difference was largest for Black students, among whom women earned 68 percent of awards, followed by Hispanics, at 65 percent.
- In 2007, Hispanic students earned 74 percent more awards overall and 88 percent more associate’s than they did in 1997. Some 57 percent of postsecondary awards earned by Hispanic students in 2007 are below a bachelor’s degree, a higher percentage than any other racial/ethnic group.
- While Hispanic and Black students increasingly sought these awards, they are also most likely to pursue programs requiring the shortest amount of time to complete. Of the 385,530 short-term certificates completed in 2007, Black and Hispanic students earned 35 percent of them. This compares with 23 percent of the 745,183 associate’s degrees.
- Community colleges and private for-profit institutions offer students very different options with respect to cost and attendance flexibility. In 2007–08, the average tuition and fees charged to full-time, full-year students enrolled in for-profit institutions was \$11,900, and \$2,400 for those enrolled in community colleges. Some 59 percent of community college students attend exclusively part time, while 69 percent of for-profit students attend exclusively full time.

The National Center for Education Statistics is the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing and reporting data related to education in the United States and other nations. For more information, please visit the website [nces.ed.gov](http://nces.ed.gov).