

Finding Their Next: Career & Transfer Outcomes (2026)

Exploring First Destinations for the Class of 2026

Dallas College Office of Strategic Research, Analytics, and Effectiveness | November 2026

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Want even more data and information about the Class of 2026? Explore the updated First Destination Dashboard as you read this report.

Acknowledgements

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Photos in this report were taken by Dallas College's marketing office and adapted from graduation ceremonies held for the Class of 2026. No images or quotes correspond to specific survey respondents and individual survey responses were kept confidential in generating this report.

Executive Summary

Finding Their Next: Career & Transfer Outcomes (2026) is Dallas College's second annual look at where graduates go after completing a credential. It draws on the First Destination Survey, which asks graduating students about their plans in the months around commencement. This year, 2,501 members of the Class of 2026 responded, a 32% response rate among awarded graduation applicants, giving us our clearest picture yet of graduates' next steps and our first year-over-year comparison. Results from the First Destination Survey and this report are intended to help Dallas College target program improvements, employer partnerships, and career and transfer support.

Key findings include:

- **Most respondents have a next step.** About 84% reported work, education, or service plans: 41% further education, 25% work, 17% both, and less than 1% military or community service. Another 2% selected none of the above and 15% were still seeking or undecided. 203 respondents requested used the survey form to request support from career and transfer pathways teams.
- **Satisfaction remained high.** About 85% to 87% of respondents agreed that an education at Dallas College was worth the cost, prepared them for what is next, and helped them meet their goals. Coursework and faculty relationships were highly valued; internships and work-based learning received fewer value ratings.
- **Dallas College is its own top transfer destination.** Of 1,453 respondents planning further education, most are traditional-age students seeking a bachelor's degree. Nearly one in four plan to re-enroll at Dallas College, and about half of those seek a Dallas College bachelor's degree. Among the 105 bachelor's respondents, 89 plan work; 58% of these reported expected earnings of $60,000 or more, and 67% reported a promotion or raise as a result of their education.
- **Earnings hover at the living wage line.** Graduates working full-time have estimated earnings of about $50,400 on average, just above the $48,485 a single adult needs to cover basic needs in Dallas County. Adult learners (25 and older) averaged about $55,900, while traditional-age graduates averaged $43,000. More than one in four respondents planning full-time work reported holding multiple jobs, suggesting that affordability and economic security remain salient issues for students even as they become graduates.
- **Alignment pays.** Graduates working full-time in jobs mostly or directly related to their program report earnings $9,800 higher than those in slightly related or unrelated jobs.

- **Graduates praise people and flag processes.** More than 600 graduates wrote in with open-ended feedback. Their appreciation praised faculty, success coaches, and hands-on courses; their frustrations flagged financial aid errors, inconsistent coaching, transfer guidance, and technology systems: operational frictions rather than quality of education.

The recommendations that follow build on these findings. Dallas College should:

1. **Turn the First Destination Survey from a snapshot into a system,** further embedding it in the graduation process, linking it to other data sources, and routing every request for help.
2. **Adopt a Dallas County living wage as the College's shared standard** for post-college success, reach consensus on measurement, and track it as a key performance indicator.
3. **Close early-career gaps** by scaling work-based learning, deepening employer partnerships that pay living wages, and growing bachelor's programs where outcomes are strongest.
4. **Fix the frictions graduates named** in financial aid, success coaching, transfer advising, and student-facing systems. Graduates like our people but are often stymied by our processes.

Two years of data now show that Dallas College graduates leave knowing where they are going, satisfied with what they received, and, for many, stepping into work that sustains them. The task ahead is to make that true for more of them so that every graduate can find their next.

"Class of 2026, you are more than graduates, you are the workforce, the leaders, and the change-makers shaping Texas and the world."

- Dr. Justin H. Lonon, Dallas College Chancellor

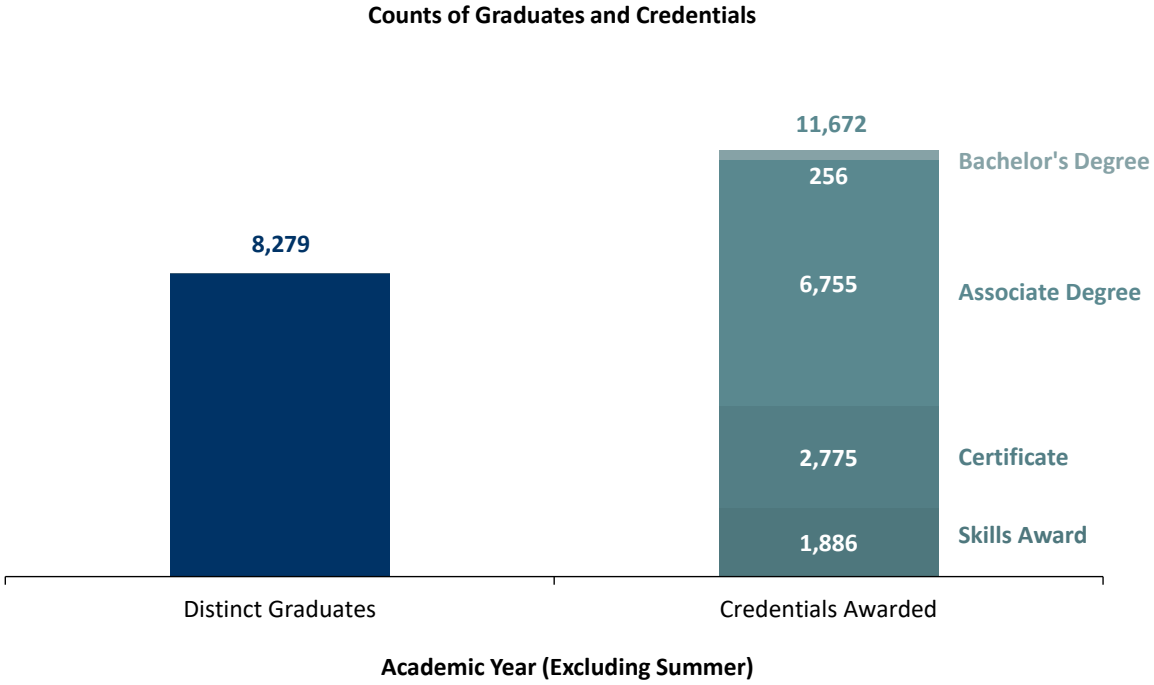


What's Next for the Class of 2026

In Fall 2025 and Spring 2026, more than 8,000 students earned a credential from Dallas College, taking home more than 11,000 degrees, certificates, and skills awards in total (Figure 1). Associate degrees remained the most common credential, with certificates and skills awards reflecting the shorter, stackable pathways many students use to enter or advance in the workforce. More than 250 bachelor's degrees awarded marked Dallas College's largest baccalaureate cohort to date, a sign of how quickly its four-year offerings have taken root. What happens to these graduates after commencement helps us measure whether the College is delivering on its commitment to transform lives and communities, and this report exists to answer that question each year: exploring where graduates go using data from the College's annual First Destination Survey.

Figure 1

Dallas College Class of 2026 Boasts a Mix of Credentials, Largest Bachelor's Cohort Yet



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Count of distinct graduates and credentials awarded reflects data as of October 2026 and only covers Fall 2025 and Spring 2026; Summer 2026 is excluded since graduates were not surveyed. A student may earn multiple awards.

The Class of 2026 is stepping into a Dallas-Fort Worth economy that is growing but reluctant to hire. Texas added jobs at an annualized 1.9% in the first half of 2026, more than triple the national pace according to the Dallas Fed, and the metro gained 54,000 jobs over the year ending July

according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Beneath those numbers is what the Dallas Fed calls a "low-hire, low-fire" market: firms are holding onto existing staff and posting fewer openings, so job seekers outnumber the positions that open. Dallas County's unemployment rate stood at 4.7% in July, higher than Tarrant, Collin, and Denton and above the national rate. It is a challenging time to be a new graduate, one that asks Dallas College's Class of 2026 to summon the full reserves of the resiliency, perseverance, and grit that led them to complete a credential and walk the stage.

Making ends meet in Dallas County is not easy. A single adult working full time in Dallas County needs to earn $23.31 per hour, or $48,485 per year before taxes, to cover basic needs in 2026 according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, up from $23.06 in 2025. The bar rises steeply with dependents: a single parent with one child needs $37.90 per hour, or $78,832 a year, with childcare alone adding $10,755. And these estimates were released before recent energy price hikes, now up 13% since last July. The squeeze is tightest at the bottom rung of the career ladder, with artificial intelligence emerging as part of the reason. A Stanford Digital Economy Lab analysis of payroll records through June 2026 found that employment among 22-to-25-year-olds in occupations most exposed to generative AI ran about 19% below comparable less-exposed work, a gap driven almost entirely by reduced hiring of young workers rather than layoffs of experienced ones. Roughly a quarter of employers surveyed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers in spring 2026 said AI has already reduced the need for tasks entry-level hires once performed, and more than half are weighing which early-career tasks it could take on next.

At the same time, there is reason for hope: the region is depending more heavily on its own residents to fill skilled jobs. North Texas has long grown by importing talent, with net migration driving about 60% of population growth from 2019-2023 according to the Dallas Regional Chamber and newcomers staffing many of the state's health care, technical, and managerial roles, as the Dallas Fed notes. But employers in the Dallas Fed's Texas Business Outlook surveys now report skilled labor shortages even as unemployment climbs, a mismatch between jobs on offer and the credentials the local workforce holds. Dallas College's high-demand programs are built to close exactly this gap by equipping graduates with the skills needed to jumpstart their careers.

Dallas College cannot directly set interest rates, migration policy, or the price of eggs. What it can do is prepare graduates for the jobs the region needs and connect them to the degrees that lead to them. This second edition of *Finding Their Next* measures how well the college did that for the Class of 2026: how graduates fared in the labor market, where they transferred, what experiences made Dallas College valuable to them, and how those results compare to last year's baseline. About 2,500 graduating students responded to this year's First Destination Survey telling us about their next steps, and this report shares their initial outcomes and feedback, in their own words.

About This Year's First Destination Survey

To understand post-graduation outcomes, this report uses data from a First Destination Survey of students who completed a degree, certificate, or skills award in Fall 2025 or Spring 2026. Now in its second annual administration, this survey asks graduating students about their next steps after finishing a credential at Dallas College. Survey respondents indicate whether their plans include further education, employment, both, or that they are still seeking and deciding their next steps. The survey allows Dallas College to better track job and education placement, align programs with workforce demand, improve career services and advising, and share data with its community. The full questionnaire is included as an appendix, and results are also available in a new **dashboard**.



This year, nearly one third of awarded graduation applicants, or about 2,500 graduates, completed the First Destination Survey.

8,279 distinct students were awarded a credential in Fall 2025 or Spring 2026, including 7,833 who submitted a graduation application. This year's survey outreach focused on students who applied to graduate. Of this group, 2,501 students completed the survey, for a 31.9% response rate. Each student was counted once, retaining the latest completed submission when there were multiple attempts. The survey was sent to Fall graduates in December 2025 and to Spring graduates in April 2026, with monthly reminders through July. In addition to email, this year's graduates received text reminders to take the survey. Participation was voluntary, but encouraged as part of the graduation process, with respondents entered into a drawing to receive one of twenty $50 gift cards. The survey closed on September 1, 2026, with the count of responses up by more than 1,000, or 69%, year-over-year. Last year's survey had 1,479 responses and its 13.5% response rate used all awardees, so the response rates themselves are not directly comparable.

While survey coverage improved this year, dual-credit graduates were underrepresented, with women and adult learners overrepresented (Figure 2). These differences should be considered when interpreting the survey results; respondents' experiences may not reflect all awarded applicants equally. Additionally, students' next steps differed by their highest credential earned. For example, about 63% of associate-degree respondents planned further education, including those also planning to work, while 85% of bachelor's respondents reported employment plans.

Figure 2

Who Took This Year's First Destination Survey (Fall 2025 and Spring 2026)

Student Characteristic	All awarded applicants	Survey respondents
All students (N)	**7,833**	**2,501**
Gender		
Female	4,843 (61.8%)	1,714 (68.5%)
Male	2,980 (38.0%)	784 (31.3%)
Nationality, ethnicity, and race		
Asian	419 (5.3%)	132 (5.3%)
Black / African American	1,315 (16.8%)	488 (19.5%)
Hispanic / Latino	4,128 (52.7%)	1,203 (48.1%)
International	583 (7.4%)	231 (9.2%)
Two or more races	167 (2.1%)	51 (2.0%)
White	987 (12.6%)	321 (12.8%)
Age		
Adult learner (25 or older)	2,253 (28.8%)	948 (37.9%)
Traditional age (under 25)	5,579 (71.2%)	1,552 (62.1%)
Dual credit student group	2,691 (34.4%)	273 (10.9%)
Highest credential awarded		
Bachelor's	250 (3.2%)	105 (4.2%)
Associate	6,248 (79.8%)	2,134 (85.3%)
Certificate	1,147 (14.6%)	229 (9.2%)
Skills award	188 (2.4%)	33 (1.3%)
Area of study		
Academic Associate (AA/AS)	4,178 (53.3%)	1,350 (54.0%)
Business, Hospitality, and Global Trade	748 (9.5%)	258 (10.3%)
Creative Arts, Entertainment, and Design	232 (3.0%)	59 (2.4%)
Education	425 (5.4%)	196 (7.8%)
Engineering, Technology, Math and Science	424 (5.4%)	124 (5.0%)
Health Sciences	896 (11.4%)	205 (8.2%)
Law and Public Service	299 (3.8%)	151 (6.0%)
Manufacturing and Industrial Technology	631 (8.1%)	158 (6.3%)

Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.

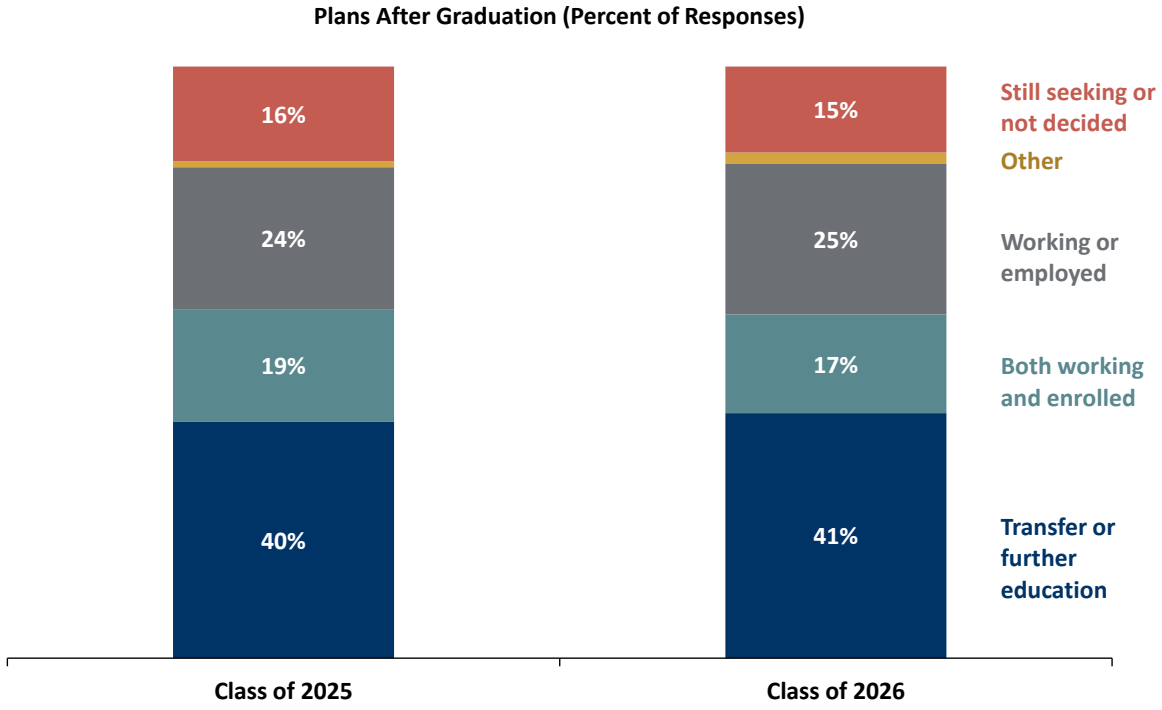
Notes: Age measured as of spring commencement (May 14, 2026). Areas of study reflect highest credential earned.

Overall Outcomes

Overall, around 84% of respondents from the Class of 2026 reported work, further education, or service plans, with 25% planning to work, 41% planning to pursue further education, 17% planning to do both, and fewer than 1% selecting military or community service. Another 2% selected none of the above, while 15% were still seeking or not decided (Figure 3). The broad pattern is similar to last year's published findings. The survey also offered graduates the option to connect with the Career and Transfer Skills Development team to aid in their career or education search, and 203 respondents requested support this way.

Figure 3

Graduates Continue to Pursue a Mix of Education and Employment

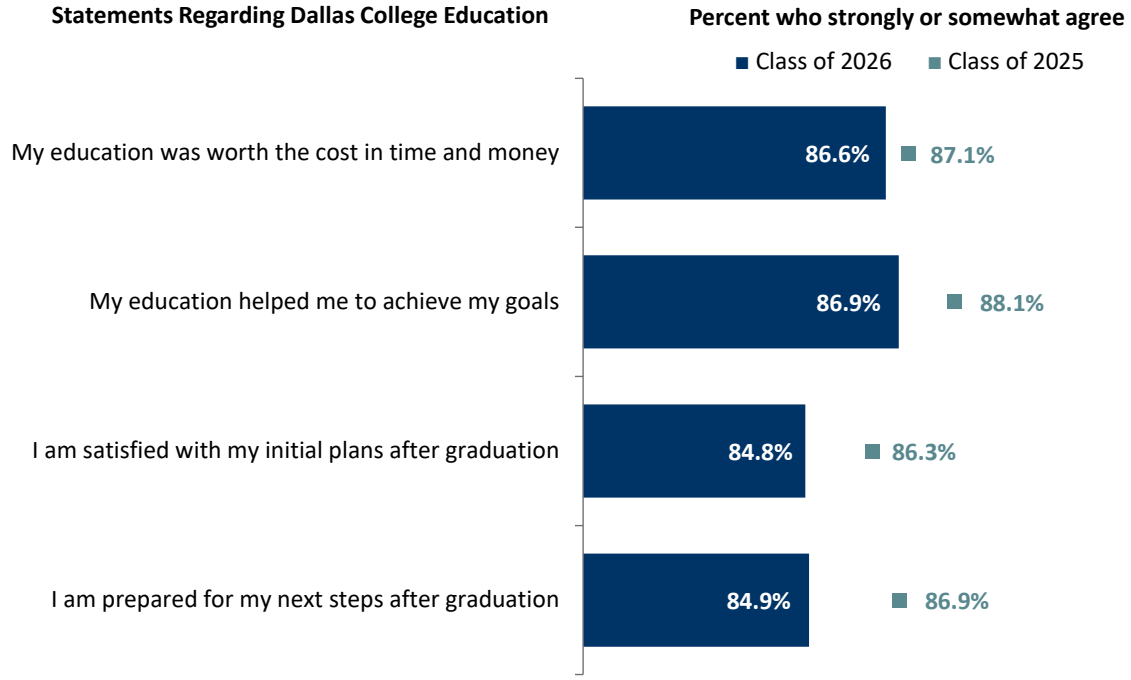


Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Notes: Responses reflect 2,501 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 (Class of 2026) and 1,479 graduates from Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 (Class of 2025) who completed a First Destination Survey. Cohort definitions differ by year.

To capture graduates' perceptions of their next steps, First Destination Survey respondents, no matter their future plans, were also asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with several statements about their Dallas College education, answering on a 5-point scale, where 1 was *strongly disagree* and 5 was *strongly agree*. Most respondents, about 85% to 87%, expressed agreement and positive sentiment (Figure 4), despite a slight downtick from the Class of 2025.

Figure 4

Graduates Report Strong Sense of Value, Preparedness, Satisfaction, and Achievement



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Notes: Responses reflect 2,501 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 (Class of 2026) and 1,479 graduates from Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 (Class of 2025) who completed a First Destination Survey, collapsed into top-2 boxes.

About 85% of respondents felt prepared for their next steps, and 87% thought their education was worth the cost in time and money.

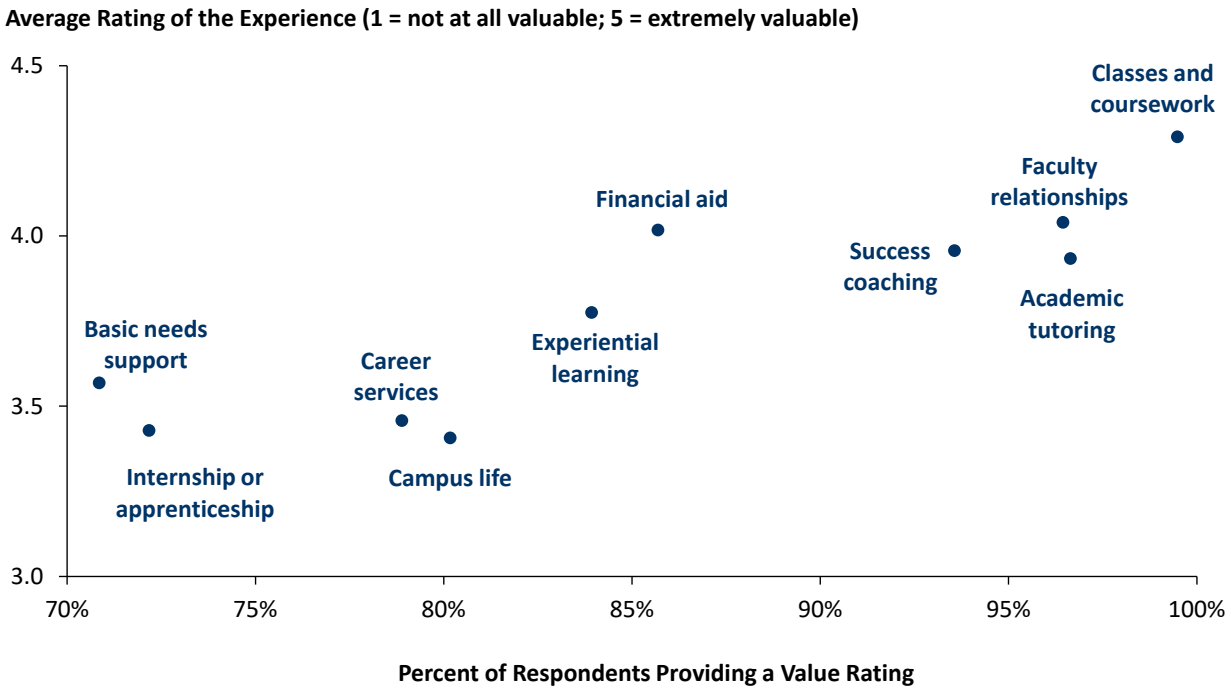
About 85% were satisfied with their initial post-graduation plans, and 87% felt their education helped them achieve their goals.



Graduates were also asked how valuable various experiences, services, and resources were to their overall experience at Dallas College on a 5-point scale, with 1 being *not valuable at all* and 5 being *extremely valuable*. Respondents could also choose *not applicable* if the item did not apply to them. Every item was ranked positively on average (with a score above 3), but coursework and connections – with faculty, success coaches, and academic tutors – were among the highly rated experiences with the broadest response (Figure 5).

Figure 4

Coursework and Connections Receive High Value Ratings



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Data reflect 2,501 graduates (33%) from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey. Means use valid ratings; nonresponse does not esablish service use or lack of access.

Lower-rated items also had fewer students providing a value rating (e.g., internships, basic needs support). This may reflect differences in participation, relevance, or willingness to rate the experience; these responses do not establish how many students used a service or why others did not provide a rating. In future years, updating this question to further distinguish value among those served from service usage itself will allow Dallas College to better understand where gaps exist – awareness and access to services or perceived quality of services received.

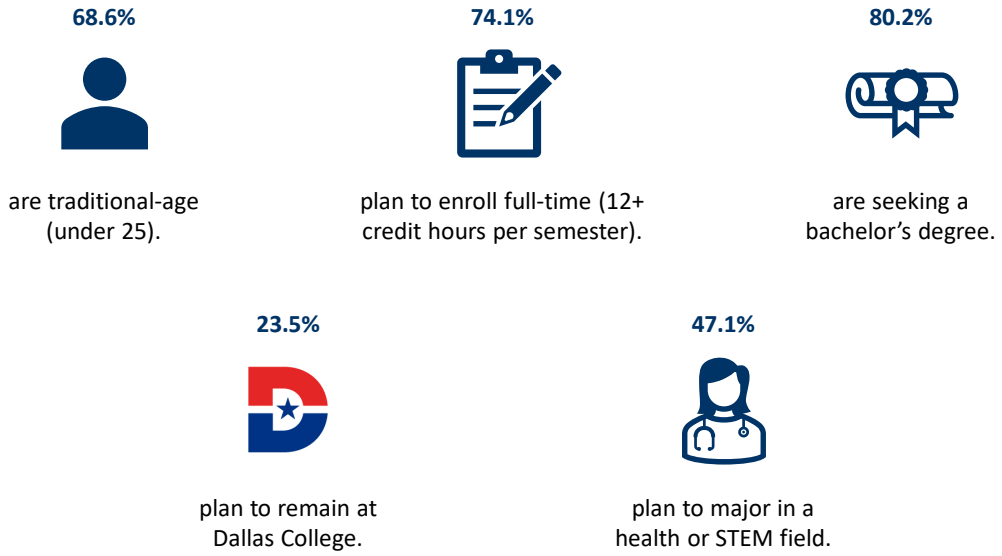
Graduates Pursuing Further Education

After expressing their planned next steps, graduates were asked branching follow-up questions about where they planned to enroll next and what they planned to do for work. A total of 1,453 graduates from the Class of 2026 indicated that they would pursue further education, with most of them traditional age (under 25), planning to enroll full-time, pursuing a bachelor's degree, and choosing a Texas university or Dallas College (Figure 6). Many respondents seeking further education intend to major in a health or STEM field for their next credential, and nearly a quarter plan to re-enroll at Dallas College – a reminder that transfer is not the only pathway to further education.

Figure 6

Most Graduates Seeking Further Study are Under 25, Full-Time, and Bachelor's Bound

Among Dallas College graduates from the Class of 2026 who are pursuing further education as their next step…

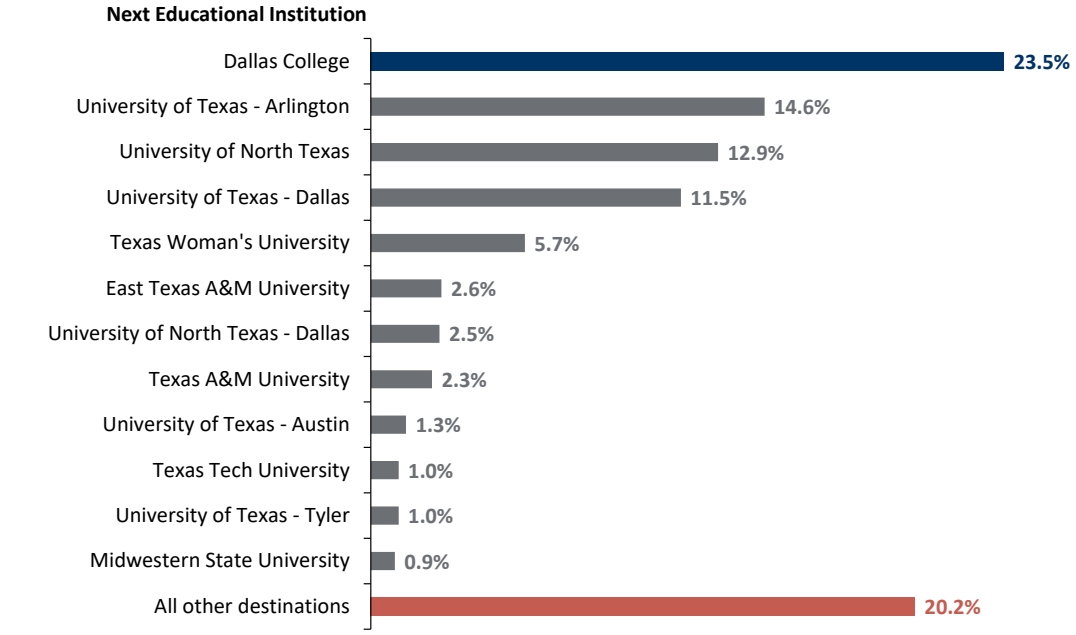


Source: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Responses reflect 1,453 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they plan to pursue further education.

Regional universities continue to appear among graduates' most popular transfer destinations, with Dallas College emerging as the top-ranked choice for the second year in a row (Figure 7). Respondents pursuing further education were asked about their intended majors, grouped into fifteen broad areas. As with the Class of 2025, health, business, STEM, and education categories topped the list, aligned fairly well with overall program enrollment at Dallas College (Figure 8).

Figure 7

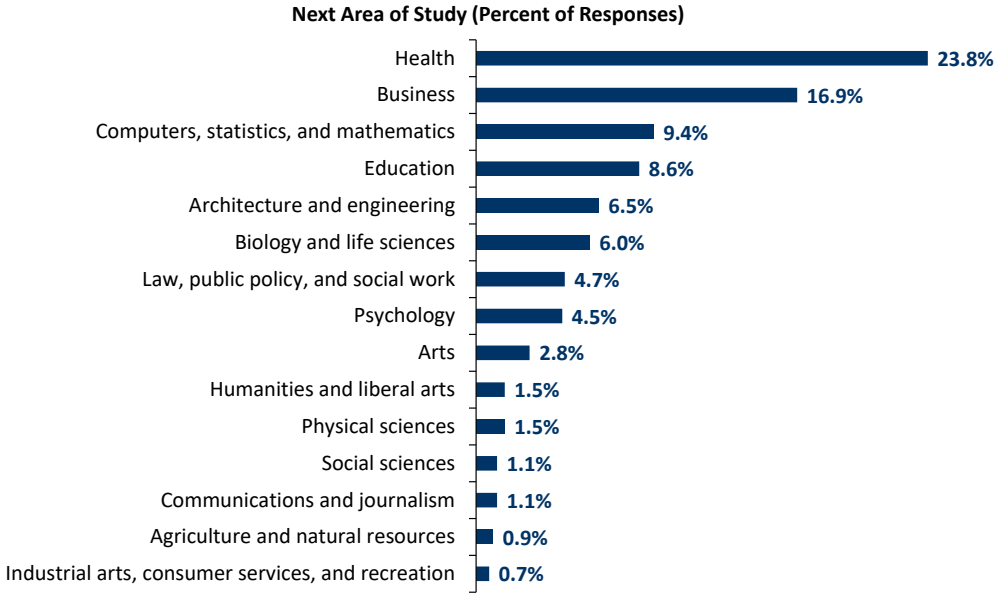
Dallas College and Texas Universities Remain Top Choices for Further Study



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Responses reflect 1,453 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated plans to pursue further education. Top 12 destinations shown; the remainder are grouped together.

Figure 8

Graduates Often Seek Further Study in Health, Business, Education, and Science Fields



Sources: Dallas College; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; Research Institute calculations.
Notes: Responses reflect 1,453 graduates from Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they plan to pursue further education. 10% of respondents chose *Other* or did not respond. Areas of study follow THECB groupings by 2-digit CIP (Classification of Instructional Program) code.

Students who choose to continue their education at Dallas College after graduating may do so for multiple reasons, such as moving from a stackable skills award or certificate to an associate degree, continuing to earn credit after a high school dual credit experience, or remaining enrolled while preparing to earn a professional license or certification. Some respondents who indicate they plan to continue at Dallas College may also have a general desire to continue their education in the future without specific plans. However, 165 of the 341 students who plan to stay at Dallas College (48%) are doing so with the express intention of earning a bachelor's degree, most often in education (39%), health (25%), business (10%), or technology (6%) – fields that align with the College's current baccalaureate offerings. Graduates planning to return for a bachelor's degree are a clear audience for targeted advising on those pathways.

As Dallas College envisions its future slate of bachelor's programs, this year's survey showed not only strong demand, but strong outcomes for graduates. This year, 105 students who took the First Destination Survey were graduates of Dallas College's bachelor's programs in early childhood education and nursing. About 85% planned to work after graduation, including those who also planned further education. Among the 89 with work plans, 58% reported expected earnings of $60,000 or more, and 67% reported a promotion or raise as a result of their education. These students had even stronger positive sentiment about Dallas College than respondents overall, with 93% to 95% agreeing with the four statements about their Dallas College experience. Among those with work plans, 97% described their employment as mostly or directly related to what they studied at Dallas College.



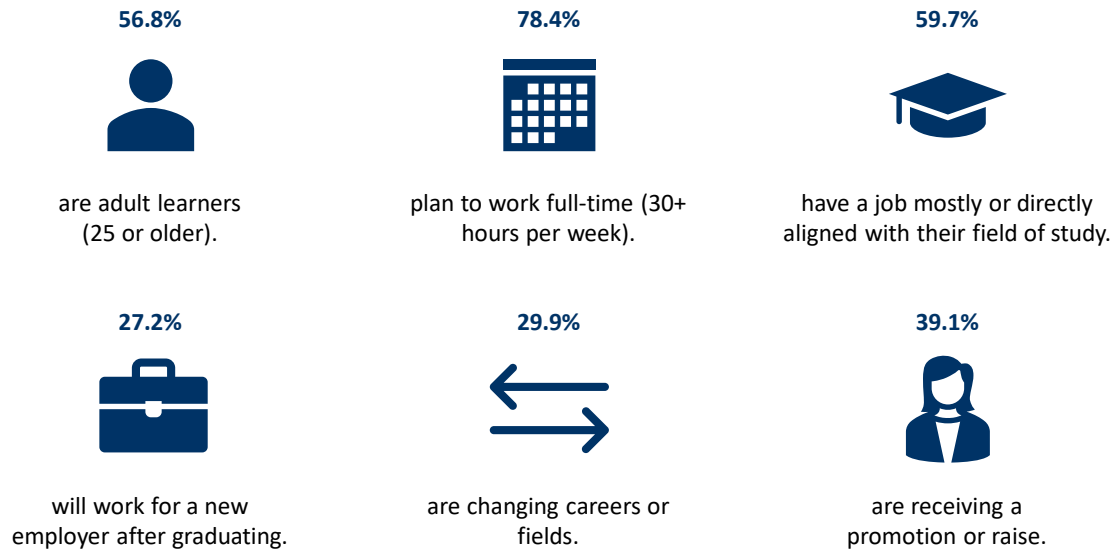
Dallas College awarded more than 250 bachelor's degrees this year across the RN-BSN and BAS in Early Childhood Education and Teaching programs. In future years, these alumni will be joined by BAT in Software Development and BAS in Management graduates.

Graduates Entering the Workforce

On this year's First Destination Survey, 1,053 respondents from the Class of 2026 reported that they plan to continue or begin employment after college, with 78%, or 826 graduates, planning to work full-time (30 or more hours per week). Among all respondents with work plans, 51% were adult learners (25 or older). Among those planning full-time work, 60% indicated their job would be directly or mostly related to their field of study at Dallas College, 39% indicated a promotion or raise as a result of their education, 27% reported work with a new employer, and 30% reported a change in career or field (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Most Graduates Pursuing Full-Time Work are 25 or Older and Employed in their Field



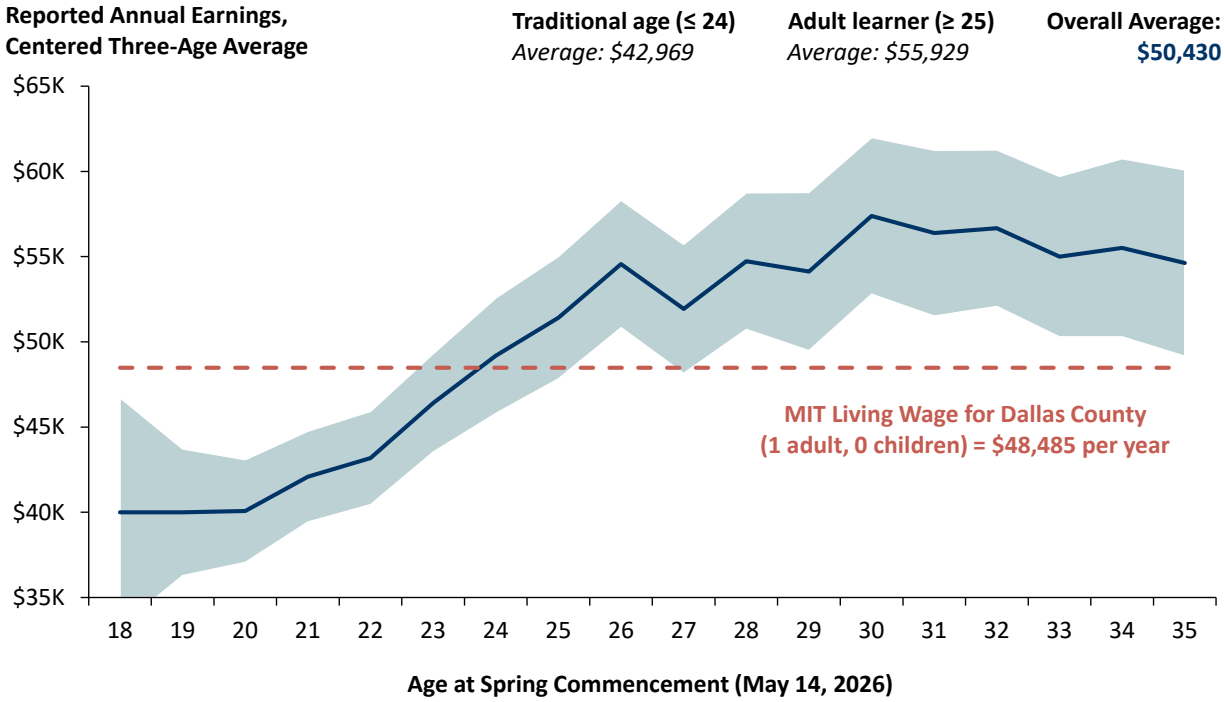
Source: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Responses reflect 826 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they will pursue full-time employment, out of 1,053 total who will pursue any type of employment.

While most graduates were sanguine about their overall Dallas College experience, wages remained a pressure point for the Class of 2026 given the high cost of living in Dallas County. Graduates who were working after graduation self-reported their income range in brackets of $10,000. Using the midpoint of each closed range among respondents planning full-time work, estimated mean earnings were approximately $50,400 per year, narrowly clearing the MIT living wage threshold for Dallas County for a single adult with no children of $48,485 per year. The

estimate includes 766 of the 826 respondents planning full-time work; the 60 responses in open-ended income ranges were excluded. Estimated earnings generally rose with age (Figure 10). For traditional-age students, who are younger than 25, the mean was around $43,000 per year, and for adult learners, 25 and older, the mean was about $55,900. Adult learners accounted for 57% of respondents planning full-time work.

Figure 10

Graduate Wages Climb with Age, with an Overall Average Above the Living Wage Cutoff



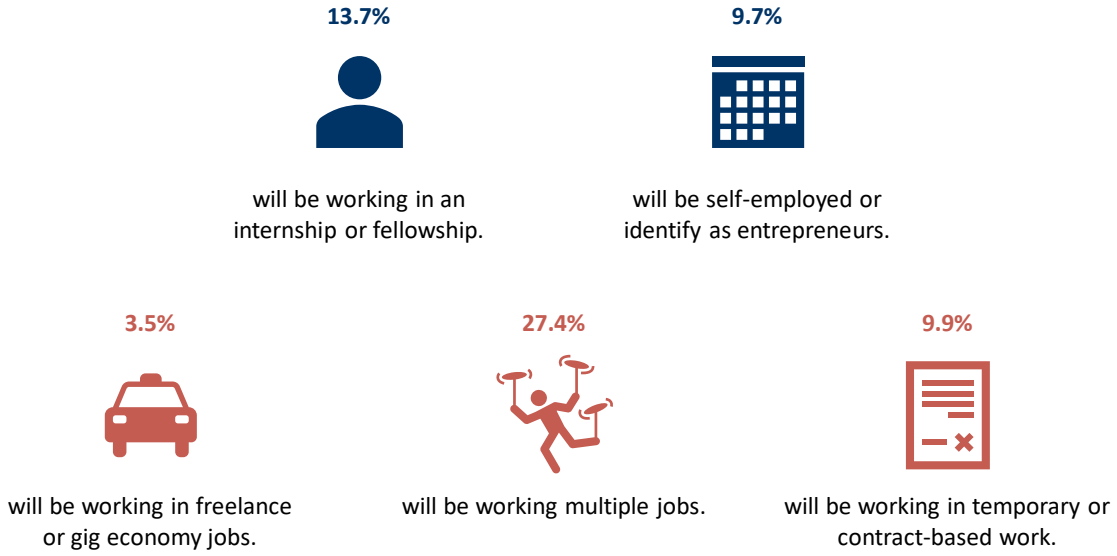
Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations; MIT Living Wage Calculator.
Notes: Responses reflect 826 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they plan to work full-time, with 766 closed-band incomes and open-ended bands excluded. Means and 95% confidence internvals are shown, pooling adjacent ages (e.g., age 25 results pool age 24 to 26 together).

Survey respondents planning full-time work could also select whether one or more of the following applied to their employment: 14% selected an internship or fellowship after graduating, 10% selected self-employment, 10% selected temporary or contract work, 4% selected freelance or gig work, and 27% reported holding multiple jobs (Figure 11). While this statistic partially exemplifies the strong work ethic of the Class of 2026, it also likely stems from economic need and necessity. These plans point to questions about the challenges that many Dallas College students, graduates, and Dallas community members face with affordability, basic needs, and the cost of covering everyday essentials. This topic will be further explored in future editions of the First Destination Survey.

Figure 11

More Than One Quarter of Full-Time Working Graduates Plan to Juggle Multiple Jobs

Among Dallas College graduates from the Class of 2026 who are pursuing full-time employment as their next step…

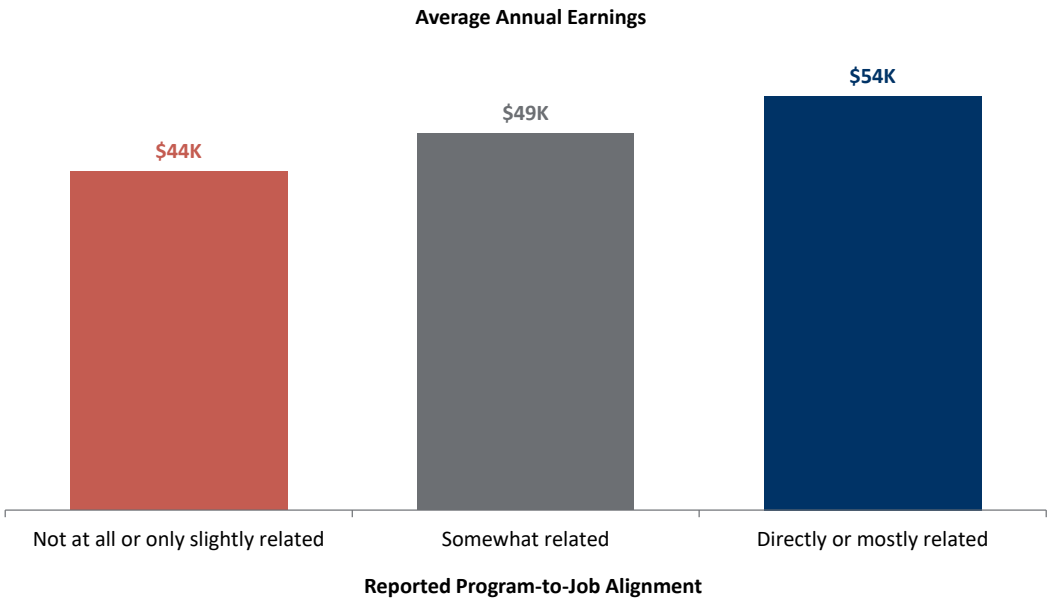


Source: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Note: Responses reflect 826 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they will pursue full-time employment, out of 1,053 total who will pursue any type of employment.

Program of study was one of the factors associated with career and economic outcomes. Program-to-job alignment continued to be associated with higher earnings for the Class of 2026. Graduates working full-time in jobs mostly or directly related to their Dallas College program of study reported estimated mean earnings of about $53,600, roughly $9,800 more than those in jobs that were only slightly or not at all related to their studies (Figure 12). The estimated difference had a 95% confidence interval of $6,600 to $12,900. Earnings and alignment between program and employment also varied by school of instruction, revealing distinct patterns and areas of opportunity (Figure 13). For example, the School of Education had graduates with the highest self-reported alignment between their work and program of study at Dallas College, despite posting average earnings just below the living wage threshold. In contrast, the School of Engineering, Technology, Mathematics, and Sciences had average earnings above the living wage cutoff, but with lower (though still positive, above a score of 3) program-to-job alignment.

Figure 12

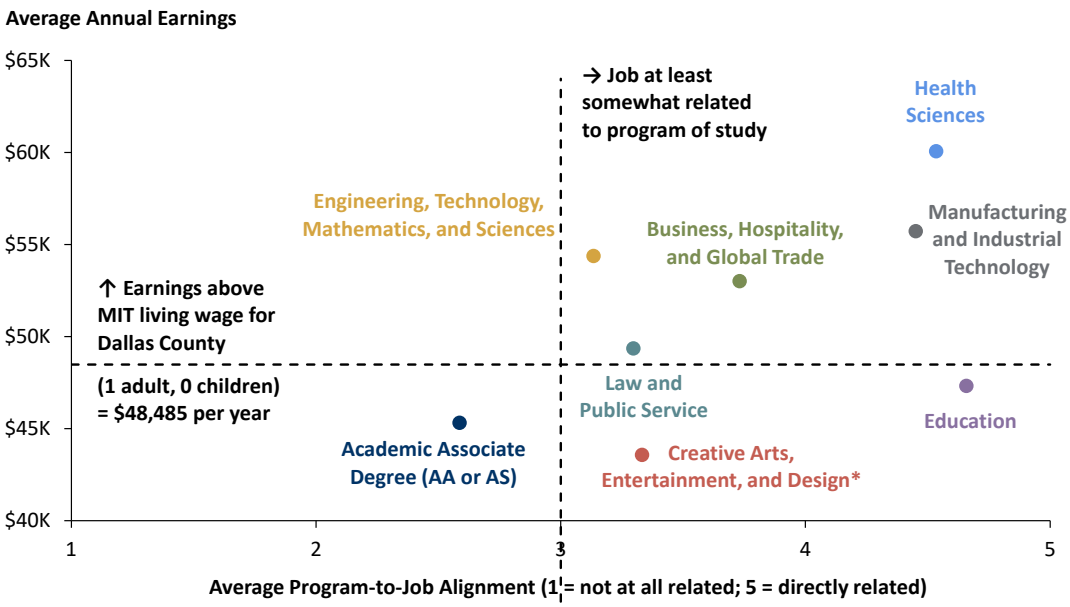
Graduates' Program-to-Job Alignment Corresponds to Higher Earnings



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.
Notes: Responses reflect 826 graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who completed a First Destination Survey and indicated that they plan to work full-time, with program alignment scores collapsed into botom-2 and top-2 boxes.

Figure 13

Earnings and Program-to-Job Alignment Vary by School



Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations; MIT Living Wage Calculator.
Notes: Data reflect 826 full-time-work respondents; alignment uses valid ratings and earnings use 766 closed-band incomes. Open-ended income bands excluded. *CAED results should be read with caution due to small sample size.

Respondents with employment plans also had the option to list their employer and job title. Overall, responses were varied, with numerous firms and organizations hiring small numbers of Dallas College graduates each, but more concentrated hiring in fields with streamlined workforce pipelines involving certification or licensure such as teaching and nursing. Among the 826 respondents planning full-time work, 633 employer names (77%) and 707 job titles (86%) were usable for ranking after cleaning. Top employers for the Class of 2026 included local ISDs and healthcare systems, similar to last year's graduating class; top jobs likewise included teaching, nursing, automotive work, and other entry-level roles (Figure 14).

Figure 14

Graduates Work Across an Array of Sectors, Led by Education and Healthcare

Top Employers

Ranking	Class of 2025	Class of 2026
1	Baylor Scott & White Health (16)	Dallas ISD (36)
2	Dallas ISD (14)	Methodist Health System (20)
3	Methodist Health System (11)	UT Southwestern Medical Center (15)
4	Dallas College (10)	Garland ISD (14)
5	Parkland Health (9)	Baylor Scott & White Health (13)
6	Richardson ISD (9)	Dallas College (13)
7	UT Southwestern Medical Center (7)	Texas Health Resources (11)
8	Amazon (6)	Parkland Health (10)
9	State Farm (6)	Head Start of Greater Dallas (9)
10	J&E Companies (5)	Albertsons Companies (8)

Top Occupations

Ranking	Class of 2025	Class of 2026
1	Teacher (35)	Teacher (94)
2	Registered Nurse (26)	Registered Nurse (37)
3	Paraprofessional/Teacher Assistant (17)	Paraprofessional/Teacher Assistant (27)
4	Veterinary Technician (13)	Automotive Technician/Mechanic (17)
5	Medical Assistant (10)	Nurse (level unspecified) (16)
6	Administrative Assistant (6)	Customer Service Representative (14)
7	Automotive Technician/Mechanic (6)	Sales Associate (14)
8	IT Support/Help Desk (6)	Administrative Assistant (11)
9	Veterinary Assistant (6)	Medical Assistant (10)
10	Welder (6)	IT Support/Help Desk (9)

Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute calculations.

Notes: Current-year results reflect 826 respondents from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 planning full-time work; 633 employer names and 707 job titles were usable after review. Published Class of 2025 results (494 full-time respondents) are retained. Counts are in parentheses; current-year ties are ordered alphabetically.

Feedback from the Class of 2026

Graduates were also invited to share any additional feedback with Dallas College in an open-ended question, and more than 600 wrote in. Their comments were coded into four themes (overall experience, academics and career development, community and belonging, and administration and logistics) and fifteen subthemes, with representative comments shown in Figure 15. Many responses were simply notes of appreciation ("Thank you from the bottom of my heart"; "I would choose this journey again"). Read together, the rest reveal a consistent pattern: graduates reserve their warmest praise for people and coursework, and their sharpest criticism for the processes and systems they had to navigate around them. These themes describe prevalent experiences among graduates who chose to provide written feedback; they do not measure how common each experience was among all graduates.



"I'd love to see Dallas College reach even more people across the community, especially young people…showing them how education can lead to meaningful career opportunities."

- Class of 2026 graduate, First Destination Survey

Coursework and Career Preparation

Graduates who enrolled to advance or change careers largely felt their coursework delivered, describing classes that were "applicable and practical to work life" and certification courses that "directly support and enhance my responsibilities in my position." Many used the question to announce their next credential, whether a nursing cohort, dental hygiene, or a bachelor's program, an indication that the experience earned repeat enrollment. The critiques were specific rather than sweeping. Some graduates found courses heavy on reading and discussion boards and light on hands-on practice ("I gained nothing from those"), and those already working in their field were especially quick to notice when content lagged practice. Transfer-bound graduates split similarly: those in structured pathways like Texas Direct described a "smooth transfer pathway,"

while others wished transfer coaches knew "more about the other universities we would transfer to." Online delivery drew the most divided response, praised by working students for its "financial and scheduling flexibility" and criticized by others, particularly in compressed eight-week formats for courses like Calculus II and Chemistry, as too fast to learn well. The insight was that the format and modality (e.g., online or accelerated courses) must fit the course and the student.

People and Belonging

Faculty were the most frequently named source of graduates' success. Respondents credited professors who "really care about helping the students succeed," who record every lecture, stay to talk after class, and encourage students "in every high and low"; several wrote that they "owe the success of [their] future to these professors and this program." Student organizations, campus programs, and the College's "welcoming environment" extended that sense of belonging, and graduates described leadership and networking skills gained through them that carried directly into the workplace. Basic needs support left a deep impression: one graduate recounted "lifesaving help," including diapers and transportation, that made completion possible. Criticism in this theme was rare and pointed. A few graduates encountered faculty or support staff who were dismissive or unresponsive and asked that complaints be taken seriously, and requests for programming for older single mothers and survivors of domestic violence, and for better physical accessibility on campus, suggest that where the College's care reaches, it matters enormously; the open question was who it has not yet reached.

Systems and Processes

Administration and logistics generated the most constructive feedback of any theme, and its subthemes share a root cause: information that failed to move between the College and the student. Financial aid was the sharpest pain point. Graduates described errors that cost them money, including one who paid "approximately $2,000 out of pocket" because of a departmental mistake, and asked the College to train staff to "recognize all codes" and to show new students how to accept their aid packages. Success coaching drew both the warmest individual praise ("I loved meeting with her and having her walk me through everything") and the most pointed complaints, which were rarely about a coach's effort and usually about turnover, availability, and program knowledge: one graduate was placed in the wrong program of study despite stating clear goals, delaying graduation, and another asked simply that the College "verify success coaches actually know what they're talking about." Technology compounded the frustration, with graduates describing Workday as "very difficult to manage" and noting the College had "changed systems at least 3 times" during their enrollment. International students described a distinct set of hurdles, from securing residency and clinical placements to navigating employment and licensure rules. They asked for a single knowledgeable point of contact and for partnerships with schools and districts willing to host them.

Figure 15

Graduates Praise People and Coursework, Flag Systems and Processes

Theme and subtheme	What graduates appreciated	What they asked the College to improve
Academics and Career Development		
Course quality and structure	"My education experience at Dallas College was exceptional because the various courses I took were applicable and practical to work life."	"I think the courses for degrees should be more interactive and not just busy book work. Especially with professors that assign nothing but reading and discussion boards. I gained nothing from those."
Professional development and upskilling	"I am currently employed at Dallas College and enrolled in certification courses that directly support and enhance my responsibilities in my position."	"As someone who was already working in the field it was very discouraging to never feel like I learned anything in the classroom."
Future educational intentions	"Great experience and looking forward to continuing learning with you for my bachelor program."	*No concerns raised*
Transfer pathways	"I am appreciative of the aids who have given me assistance with the Texas Direct program, aligning me on a smooth transfer pathway to the University of Texas."	"I wish they would prioritize transferring by having the transfer coaches know more about the other universities we would transfer to."
Online vs. in-person classes	"Working at Dallas College while taking online courses has provided both financial and scheduling flexibility."	"I also strongly disagree with the shift towards online and 8 week (or even shorter) classes, particularly for more difficult courses such as Calculus 2 or Chemistry/Physics."
Community, Relationships, and Belonging		
Faculty	"I feel there are good teachers that really care about helping the students succeed."	"Pay attention to professors, some are rude and some are inconsiderate, others were great and the best, but please look at any complaints."
Community and belonging	"Being able to engage in various student organizations, I strengthened my skills as a leader and allowed myself to experience the amazing benefits learning can provide through off-campus activities."	*No concerns raised*

Theme and subtheme	What graduates appreciated	What they asked the College to improve
Encouragement and interpersonal support	"I will always remember the teachers and classmates that I have had throughout my journey here… I believe I owe the success of my future to these professors and this program."	"When a resource is offered it would be a lot more helpful if the support person were personable. Any time I reached out for assistance I was never met with professionalism or an attitude of wanting to assist."
Resource and basic needs support	"I received countless help financially and emotionally… I can't name the amount of life saving help that I received… Diapers for my baby [and] transportation."	"There needs to be a program for older single mothers and a program for domestic violence."
Administration and Logistics		
Financial aid	*No positive comments coded*	"The Financial Aid Department made errors that resulted in me having to pay approximately $2,000 out of pocket, which caused a major financial burden."
Success coaching	"[My coach] was an amazing help and helped me hugely with my research, resume, and job interviews which helped me to get hired."	"From the beginning, I expressed my academic and career goals clearly, but I was not placed in the proper program of study by advising. That mistake created unnecessary confusion and delays in my graduation path."
Technology and systems	*No positive comments coded*	"At times Dallas College seemed unorganized, and they have changed systems at least 3 times since I've been in the program and it cause[s] confusion."
International students	"It was a great experience [to] be part of this college as an international student."	"[A] major challenge is securing residency placements… It would be beneficial if Dallas College could partner with specific schools or districts that are willing to accept international students."

Sources: Dallas College; Research Institute coding and analysis.
Notes: Comments reflect graduates from Fall 2025 and Spring 2026 who answered the optional open-ended question. Responses were coded into four themes and fifteen subthemes; the overall-experience theme (general appreciation and general satisfaction) is summarized in the text rather than shown here. Comments are lightly edited for length; bracketed text is added for clarity and staff names are removed.

Taken together, the feedback affirms what the quantitative results show: graduates value what they learned and who taught them. Their frustrations sit in the connective tissue of the institution, in aid, advising, transfer guidance, and systems, where a single error or unanswered

question can carry real financial and academic consequences. These are also the areas most within the College's control, and they inform the recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

Two years of First Destination Survey data show Dallas College's graduating classes are consistent in their plans, positive about their education, and earning, on average, just enough to make ends meet in Dallas County. They also show where the College's next gains lie: with the youngest graduates entering a cautious labor market, and in the institutional processes graduates themselves flagged. We offer four main recommendations based on this year's survey results.

1. Turn the First Destination Survey from a snapshot into a system

This year's survey combined text reminders, a gift card drawing, and outreach tied to the graduation application. The next step is to make the survey a routine part of completing a credential, so that every applicant sees it, and to reach Continuing Education students, whose exit status the College still cannot see due to low response.

Paired with the Student Information Profile at entry, the survey could trace intentions through outcomes; linked with administrative wage records, it could also check self-reported earnings against official data. Two smaller changes would sharpen the instrument: revising the value question so that service use is separated from perceived value, and adding a brief basic-needs item to understand why more than one in four graduates planning full-time work indicated multiple jobs. Finally, the 203 graduates who asked for help this year deserve a standing protocol: a warm handoff to career and transfer teams within days of asking, not a list compiled monthly.

2. Adopt a living wage as the College's shared standard for post-college success

This report benchmarks earnings against the MIT Living Wage Calculator's estimate for a single adult in Dallas County, $48,485 in 2026, because it is transparent, updated annually, and grounded in local costs. Dallas College should formally adopt this or a comparable standard as its definition of a successful wage outcome and add the share of full-time-working graduates who meet it to the College's key performance indicators, alongside the completion and transfer measures already tracked. Consensus and consistency on living wages are key to gauge progress.

Reporting the metric by age group and by school of instruction would make it actionable: this year's data would have shown adult learners comfortably above the line, traditional-age graduates below it, and the School of Education just short despite the tightest program-to-job

alignment of any school. A shared standard also gives leadership a consistent yardstick for decisions about program investment, employer partnerships, and the baccalaureate portfolio.

3. Close the early-career gap

Traditional-age graduates had estimated earnings of about $43,000 on average this year, roughly $5,500 below the living wage, while adult learners averaged about $55,900. Regional hiring has slowed most for entry-level workers, and generative AI appears to be reducing demand for the tasks those roles once involved. Dallas College can lean against this in three ways.

First, scale work-based learning. Internships, apprenticeships, and clinical or classroom placements received fewer value ratings than coursework and faculty relationships, and can offer a route to the program-aligned jobs that paid about $9,800 more this year. Second, use survey and wage data to help the Employer Resource Center prioritize partnerships with employers who are hiring graduates into related roles at living wages, and to work with schools where alignment or earnings lag; raising earnings for education graduates and raising alignment for STEM graduates are different problems that call for different partners. Third, continue to grow bachelor's programs where the evidence is strongest. The 105 baccalaureate graduates in this year's survey reported strong satisfaction and work outcomes, and demand from returning students is clear.

4. Fix the friction graduates named

Graduates' open-ended feedback pointed to a small number of operational problems with outsized consequences. Financial aid errors cost students money and trust; the College should continue to invest in staff training on aid codes and processes, proactive guidance for first-time recipients on accepting aid, and error tracking that surfaces recurring failure points. Success coaching should emphasize continuity and specialization, with consistent coach assignments within a program and coaches who know complex or less common pathways in depth, so that students are not misplaced or left waiting. Transfer specialists need working knowledge of the universities students actually transfer to, and the College should expand structured pathways like Texas Direct that graduates praised. Student-facing technology, especially Workday, needs clearer training and fewer disruptive changes. And international students would benefit from clearly designated specialists who can answer questions across immigration, employment, licensure, and placement, along with partnerships with schools and districts willing to host them.

Individually, none of these is a large program. Together, they address the part of the Dallas College experience graduates most often asked the College to improve.

Conclusion

The Class of 2026 completed their credentials in a year when the region's employers grew cautious, prices rose, and the first rung of the career ladder got harder to reach. They finished anyway, more than 8,200 of them, including the largest class of Dallas College bachelor's graduates to date, and they told us, in numbers and in their own words, where they are headed.

Most know their next step. Most believe their education was worth the cost and prepared them for what comes next. Most who plan to continue their education are headed to Texas universities or back to Dallas College, and most who plan to work are entering jobs related to what they studied, in the schools, hospitals, and businesses that keep North Texas running. Adult learners and graduates of the College's own bachelor's programs report earnings above the living wage benchmark. These are the results of a college doing what it exists to do.

The report also names what is not yet finished. The average graduate working full-time clears the Dallas County living wage by a slim margin, and the youngest graduates do not clear it at all. More than one in four respondents planning full-time work selected multiple jobs. Access to internships and other work-based experiences also needs closer study. And graduates who praised their professors and coaches without reservation asked, just as clearly, for a financial aid office that gets it right, coaches who stay, and systems that work.

None of this is cause for discouragement. Dallas College now has a second year of survey data, a larger pool of survey responses, and wage benchmarks against which to measure progress. Used well, the First Destination Survey can transform from report card to steering instrument, helping us track which services, programs, practices, and partnerships help to move our graduates across the living wage line, and which students need more help to get there. That is the work ahead, so that every graduate, regardless of age, background, or the economy they graduate into, can find their next and thrive in it.



Congratulations Dallas College Class of 2026!

Appendix: Survey Questionnaire

The First Destination Survey was administered in Qualtrics to students who applied to graduate in Fall 2025 or Spring 2026. The questionnaire below reproduces the instrument as fielded. Respondents first report their status after graduation and then branch into follow-up questions on work, further education, or other plans; all respondents then answer a common set of questions on their Dallas College experience and how to stay connected. Branching rules are noted in italics. Dropdown menus are summarized rather than listed in full.

Introduction and Identification

We're inviting you to take a survey about your next steps after you graduate. Information from this survey will be used to improve services for Dallas College students and alumni. This survey should take less than 15 minutes to complete. Your individual survey responses will remain confidential.

1. To begin the survey, please enter your Dallas College student ID or email address.

   Open text: Student ID (7-digit number); Email Address

Plans After Graduation

First, we will ask you about your plans within the first six months after graduation.

2. Which of the following will best describe your status after graduation? Please select only one of the following options.
   - Working or employed → *Employment questions (10)*
   - Transfer or further education → *Further Education questions (20)*
   - Both working and enrolled → *Employment and Further Education questions (10)*
   - Military or community service → *Service questions (6)*
   - Still seeking employment, education, or not decided → *Still Seeking questions (4)*
   - None of the above → *open-ended follow-up (3)*

Shown to respondents who selected "None of the above":

3. In your own words, what are your plans after graduation?

   Open text

Still Seeking

Shown to respondents who selected "Still seeking employment, education, or not decided."

4. Which of the following best describes your career or education search?
   - Seeking employment (jobs, internships)
   - Seeking further education (transfer, coursework)
   - Seeking both employment and education opportunities

- Still deciding my next steps
- Other (please describe)

The Dallas College Career and Transfer Skills Development office offers services and resources to students and alumni who are seeking employment or planning to continue their education.

5. Would you like a member of the Career and Transfer Skills Development team to contact you to support your career or education search?
    - Yes
    - No

Military or Community Service

Shown to respondents who selected "Military or community service."

6. Which of the following best describes your service plans?
    - Join the military → *Military question (7)*
    - Volunteer for an organization → *Volunteer question (9)*
    - General community service
    - Other (please describe)

7. Which service branch are you joining?

    Dropdown: service branch

8. What will your rank or pay grade be?
    - Enlisted (E)
    - Warrant officer (W)
    - Officer (O)
    - Other (please describe)

9. What is the name of the organization you will volunteer for?

    Open text

Employment

Shown to respondents who selected "Working or employed" or "Both working and enrolled."

10. Will you be employed full-time or part-time?
    - Full-time (30 or more hours per week)
    - Part-time (less than 30 hours per week)
    - Don't know or not sure

11. What is the name of the specific organization you will work for?

    Open text

12. Which of the following best describes the general type of industry you will work in?

    Dropdown: industry sector

13. What will your specific job title be?

    Open text

14. Which of the following best describes the general type of occupation you will have?

    Dropdown: occupation group

15. What will your general annual income range be after you graduate?

    Dropdown: annual income in $10,000 ranges

16. You may also enter a specific value for your annual income.

    Open numeric entry

17. How related are your work plans after graduation to your program at Dallas College?

    - ○ Not at all related
    - ○ Slightly related
    - ○ Somewhat related
    - ○ Mostly related
    - ○ Directly related

18. How has your Dallas College education affected your future employment plans? Select all that apply.

    - ☐ I will work for a new employer after I graduate
    - ☐ My education will result in a change in career or field
    - ☐ My education will result in a promotion or raise
    - ☐ None of the above

19. Which of the following will apply to your employment after you graduate? Select all that apply.

    - ☐ Working multiple jobs
    - ☐ Entrepreneur / self-employed
    - ☐ Temporary / contract work
    - ☐ Freelance / gig work
    - ☐ Internship / fellowship
    - ☐ None of the above

Further Education

Shown to respondents who selected "Transfer or further education" or "Both working and enrolled."

20. Will you be enrolled in further education full-time or part-time?
    - Full-time (12 or more credit hours)
    - Part-time (less than 12 credit hours)
    - I will be enrolled in a non-credit program
    - Don't know or not sure

21. What credential are you seeking next as you further your education?
    - License or certification
    - Certificate
    - Associate degree
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Graduate degree (master's, doctorate)
    - Not seeking a credential
    - Other (please describe)

22. What is the specific college, university, or institution where you will continue your education after you graduate?

    Dropdown: institution list, including Dallas College and an "Other" option

23. Which of the following best describes the general major or program you will pursue after you graduate?

    Two linked dropdowns: Broad Program Category; Field of Study

Shown to respondents who selected "Other" as their institution:

24. Please enter the name of the college, university, or institution where you will continue your education after you graduate.

    Open text

Dallas College Experience

Branching ends. The remaining questions are shown to all respondents.

Next, we will ask you about the experiences you had at Dallas College and how those connect to your future plans.

25. Were you already employed while you were enrolled at Dallas College?
    - Yes, I worked full-time (30 hours or more per week)
    - Yes, I worked part-time (less than 30 hours per week)
    - No

26. How valuable were the following experiences to your overall experience at Dallas College?

Scale: Not at all valuable, Slightly valuable, Somewhat valuable, Very valuable, Extremely valuable, Not applicable

- Classes and coursework
- Academic support and tutoring
- Campus life, clubs, and events
- Financial aid or work study
- Job search, resume, or interview support
- Relationships with professors or instructors
- Advising from Success Coaches or other staff
- Internship, apprenticeship, co-op, or job shadowing
- Project, lab, research, or service learning experience
- Food, housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare, or other assistance

27. Please consider your Dallas College education for each statement. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Scale: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree

- My education helped me to achieve my goals
- My education was worth the cost in time and money
- I am prepared for my next steps after graduation
- I am satisfied with my initial plans after graduation

Staying Connected

Finally, we will ask a few questions so that we can stay connected with you after you graduate from Dallas College.

28. Where will you be located after graduation?

Two linked dropdowns: Region; Location

29. If you would like to stay connected with Dallas College, please provide an updated email address.

Open text

30. Do you have any other feedback you would like to share with Dallas College?

Open text (long response)

31. How did you find this survey? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Email
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ A friend or student
- ☐ A professor or instructor
- ☐ A flyer or poster
- ☐ An event
- ☐ A website
- ☐ Other (please describe)

Finding Their Next: Career and Transfer Outcomes (2026)

About Strategic Research, Analytics, and Effectiveness

We envision a Dallas College that consistently grounds its strategic decisions in high-quality research and, as a result, serves as a national exemplar in supporting the long-term success and wellbeing of its students. SRAE comprises the Research Institute and Labor Market Intelligence Center.

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