The post-secondary education landscape is changing in the “college for all” environment of the contemporary United States, with many more institutional and degree options available and a broader range of students enrolling. Modal educational attainment for recent cohorts is some college, with or without an associate’s degree. It is important to understand how these individuals are faring in their early careers, to understand the returns to some college. While studies have found wage returns for those with some college, even among those who did not complete a credential, other studies have found that some college does not lead to expected health benefits.

To better understand this paradox, we explore the early career working conditions at age 30 in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort. In a labor market characterized by increasingly nonstandard contracts, 24/7 expectations, and employment instability, those who obtain some college but do not make it to the BA may not see returns to their additional education. We find evidence for both a human capital approach to understanding returns to schooling, as well as a signaling/credentials approach, and discuss implications of these findings for inequality in status attainment and health.

*Lunch will be provided*