



ISSUE BRIEF | June 2023 (updated October 2023)

A Primer on Noncredit and Non-degree Credentials and Their Link to Occupations

Michelle Van Noy

Rising interest in shorter-term pathways to good careers drives interest to alternatives to traditional degree programs, fed further by rising costs of higher education and a recognition of the hurdle that completing a degree program poses for many individuals, particularly for adults seeking new opportunities. The alternative pathways found in noncredit education and non-degree credentials offer distinct flexibility and adaptability, which can better meet student and employer needs in quick, affordable formats. At the same time, the recent flood of these new pathways runs the risk that these alternative pathways might perpetuate longstanding unequal outcomes while diverting individuals onto untested paths that the job market does not yet value. Given these broad questions, we must examine and evaluate exactly how these forms of education and credentials may serve the needs of learners, as well as employers and educational institutions. This brief provides an overview of noncredit education and non-degree credentials, and an analysis of their link to occupations.

What is noncredit education?

Noncredit education is often discussed relative to credit education. Noncredit education has many traits in common with credit education—as it is typically offered by educational institutions or other providers, is instructor led with an organized curriculum, and is intentionally sought by students. In contrast to noncredit programs, credit-bearing programs are not covered by Title IV in accredited educational institutions. In addition, noncredit can be grounded in the informal learning practices that occur via solving practical issues based on needs that occur in day-to-day life.

While these differences exist, there are no clear boundaries or distinctions between the substance of credit and noncredit courses. Decisions by institutions to offer programs in either form stem from a variety of factors—funding, organizational policies and politics, scheduling, and format—and are frequently inconsistent across and even within institutions (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008). Community colleges widely offer noncredit options, but they tend to collect minimal data, so little is systematically known about noncredit program outcomes relative to their credit-based counterparts.

Analyses of available data typically distinguish noncredit education into four broad types: pre-college remediation, occupational, contract, and avocational (D'Amico, Morgan, Roberston, & Houchins, 2014). Pre-college remediation

includes adult basic education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), GED high school equivalency preparation, and some developmental education. Occupational training includes instruction geared towards skill development to enter or advance in a job. Contract training is similar to occupational education but is sponsored by an employer for their workers. Avocational is instruction designed to meet the recreational or personal interests for students, not intended for job entry or advancement. Among these, occupational noncredit education and contract training have the goal of immediate preparation of skills for career entry and advancement. As such, these form the focus for the remainder of this brief.

What are non-degree credentials?

Non-degree credentials (NDCs) refer to a varied range of alternatives to traditional degrees (Van Noy, McKay, & Michael, 2019). They include:

- **For-credit certificates:** Credentials awarded by an educational institution for completion of a for-credit educational program, usually less than one year in length
- **Noncredit certificates:** Credentials awarded by an institution for completion of a noncredit educational program; for example, courses or programs offered by educational institutions and online providers, or military and employer-based training with clearly articulated learning outcomes
- **Industry certifications:** Credentials awarded by an industry body or governmental agency for the demonstration of skills, typically via examination based on industry or occupational standards
- **Occupational or professional licensure:** Credentials whose attainment may be required to work in an occupation, awarded by a governmental agency for the test-based demonstration of competence in a specific occupation and sometimes also for the completion of an educational program
- **Apprenticeships:** Credentials awarded after completion of a structured educational and workplace program based on industry and occupational standards
- **Badges and microcredentials:** Credentials awarded for completion of a short program of study or the demonstration of a targeted set of skills; these are newly emerging

Beyond these types of non-degree credentials, even more variation exists because of the many different types of organizations that award non-degree credentials or offer preparation for individuals to attain them. While for-credit certificates are offered only by accredited educational institutions, noncredit certificates are offered by a very wide range of organizations. Similarly, badges and microcredentials are emerging credentials also awarded by a range of organizations. Certifications, licenses, and apprenticeships are awarded only by certain organizations, but many other organizations offer preparation—often in the form of noncredit education—for individuals to attain these credentials from the organizations that award them. **Table 1** attempts to summarize these patterns which are evolving as credentials and providers evolve.

Table 1: Organizations that Prepare and/or Award NDCs, By Type of NDC

Organizations	Certificates (credit and noncredit)	Certifications	Licensure	Apprenticeships	Badges/microcredentials
Education institutions, including community and four-year colleges (both credit and noncredit programs)	A, I	I	I	I	A, I
Private training providers, including proprietary schools, online providers, and bootcamps	A, I	I	I		A, I
Employers	A, I	I	I	I	A, I
Union training funds	A, I			I	
Professional and industry associations		A			
State governments			A	A	

A= award NDC, I=instruction for NDC

Source: Van Noy & Michael (2022)

What is the relationship between noncredit education and non-degree credentials?

Noncredit education refers to an educational offering at an institution that provides instruction as part of a structured learning experience. A non-degree credential refers to the credential award, not necessarily the learning activity that led to it. Just about all noncredit education leads to the award of some type of NDC, whether a certificate or badge awarded by the institution for the completion of the offering, or a certification or license that the learner is prepared to obtain separately upon completing the noncredit offering. Many NDCs can also be attained through other learning activities, including self-study for some certifications or degree programs for some licenses.

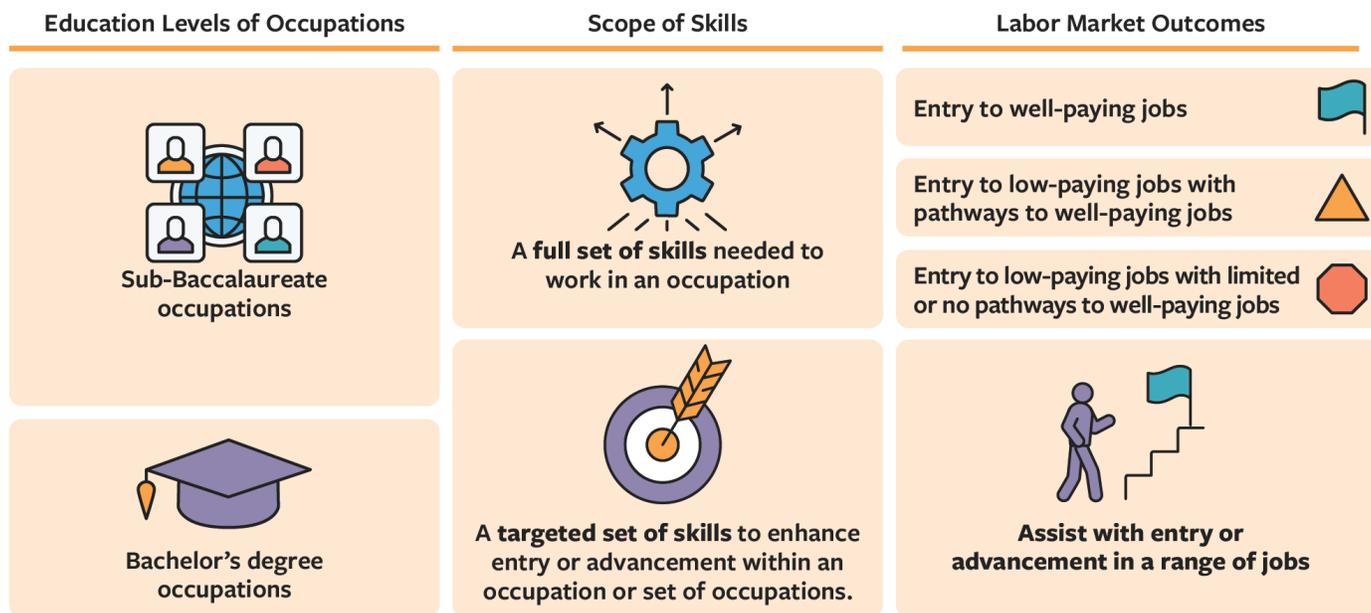
What is the link between noncredit education, non-degree credentials, and occupations?

To understand the role that noncredit education, focused on occupational and contract training, and non-degree credentials plays in connecting people to careers, it is essential to examine its alignment with occupations. While policymakers tend to focus on pathways specific to careers that do not require a bachelor’s degree, noncredit education and NDCs exist across the occupational spectrum, encompassing both occupations that require a bachelor’s degree and those that do not.

When examining the link between education and credentials to occupations, another key element is the scope of skills reflected—that is, the extent to which the noncredit education and/or NDC conveys a full set of skills needed to work in an occupation, versus a more targeted set of skills that enhances a candidate’s entry into or advancement within an occupation or set of occupations (see DOL TEN-2519). Those associated with advancement typically require an NDC along with other qualifications, like prior work experience or other degrees and credentials. Those that promote occupational entry at the

sub-baccalaureate level are of particular interest for promoting social mobility. However, these vary in the occupational opportunities they lead to. Some lead to well-paying jobs, while others lead to low-paying jobs with pathways to well-paying jobs, and others are simply geared toward low-paying jobs (Lamback, Gerwin, & Restuccia, 2018). See **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Link Between Noncredit Education, Non-degree Credentials and Occupations



Implications

Given the wide array of available noncredit education and NDCs options, efforts to assess outcomes must be clear about the linkages relative to occupations. What is the occupational goal? Is it for entry to or advancement in an occupation? What level is the occupation in terms of earnings and advancement opportunities? Is it the occupation a “good job” with “good pay”? With this basis in occupational linkages, a categorization of noncredit education and NDCs may more effectively align with conversations about outcomes and quality.

The reality of both noncredit education and NDCs is that little consistent data exist that allow for the systematic measurement of this kind of information—yet states and institutions continue to build capacity around data collection, and these questions should help guide and inform such efforts. Furthermore, as policymakers seek to examine student outcomes and ultimately assess quality, they must understand the basic descriptive characteristics of noncredit education and NDCs relative to occupations to better assess outcomes relative to the goals.

Alternative pathways to career-driven education offer myriad new possibilities for students—alongside complexity—relative to traditional degree programs, and as such they require a more nuanced and complex taxonomy for both navigation and success.

References

- D'Amico, M. M., Morgan, G. B., Robertson, S., & Houchins, C. (2014). "An exploration of noncredit community college enrollment." *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62(3), 152-162. doi:10.1080/07377363.2014.953438
- Department of Labor. (2020). TEN-2519, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/advisories/training-and-employment-notice-no-25-19>
- Lamback, S., Gerwin, C., & Restuccia, D. (2018). "When is a job just a job-- And When can it launch a career?" Jobs for the Future. <https://archive.jff.org/resources/when-job-just-joband-when-can-it-launch-career/>
- Van Noy, M., Jacobs, J., Korey, S., Bailey, T., and Hughes, K. (2008). "The Landscape of Noncredit Workforce Education: State policies and community college practices." Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/noncredit-workforce-education-policy-practice.pdf>
- Van Noy, M., McKay, H., and Michael, S. (2019). "Non-Degree Credential Quality: A conceptual framework to guide measurement." Education and Employment Research Center, Rutgers University. https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/rutgerseerc_ndcquality_framework_full_paper_final.pdf
- Van Noy, M. and Michael, S. (2022). "Promoting Quality, Creating Value: Organizational influences in the non-degree credential marketplace." Education and Employment Research Center, Rutgers University. <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Market%20Processes%20Paper-V6.pdf>

About the Author

Michelle Van Noy is the director of the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations

The Education and Employment Research Center

Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) is housed within the School of Management and Labor Relations. EERC conducts research and evaluation on programs and policies at the intersection of education and employment. Our work strives to improve policy and practice so that institutions may provide educational programs and pathways that ensure individuals obtain the education needed for success in the workplace, and employers have a skilled workforce to meet their human resource needs. For more information on our mission and current research, visit smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc.

EERC Areas of Focus

Community College
Innovation



Student Choices
and Pathways



STEM and Technician
Education



Noncredit Education and
Non-Degree Credentials



Education and Labor
Market Connections



Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations

Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) is the leading source of expertise on the world of work, building effective and sustainable organizations, and the changing employment relationship. The school is comprised of two departments—one focused on all aspects of strategic human resource management and the other dedicated to the social science specialties related to labor studies and employment relations. In addition, SMLR provides many continuing education and certificate programs taught by world-class researchers and expert practitioners. For more information, visit smlr.rutgers.edu.

Acknowledgements

At EERC, Tracy Cangiano skillfully provided research support through various phases of the project, Angel Butts of The Word Angel, LLC provided excellent editorial assistance, and Jade Zack provided graphic design support. The author is solely responsible for any errors.

