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Four Things We Need to Know About Community College Noncredit Workforce Programs & the Students Who Enroll in Them

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Introduction

A recent survey found that, for the first time, a majority of Americans believe that a 4-year college education is not worth the cost.¹ In addition, skills-based hiring—that is, recruiting and screening job candidates based on skills, rather than academic degrees—is becoming more common.² At the same time, the U.S. Congress has been considering legislative proposals to make some short-term and noncredit workforce training programs eligible for federal financial aid, notably Pell Grants.³

¹ Belkin, D. (2023, March 31). Americans are losing faith in college education, WSJ-NORC poll finds. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a836ce1?st>

² Castrillon, C. (2023, February 12). Why skills-based hiring is on the rise. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2023/02/12/why-skills-based-hiring-is-on-the-rise/?sh=b531a3e24a94>; McKinsey & Company. (2022). Taking a skills-based approach to building the future workforce. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/taking-a-skills-based-approach-to-building-the-future-workforce>

³ Under current policy, certificate programs must be for-credit and at least 600 hours or 16 semester credit hours over a minimum of 15 weeks to qualify for Pell Grants.

Providing noncredit workforce education programs has long been an important function of community colleges.⁴ These programs typically prepare students for industry-sponsored certifications, licensures, college certificates, and microcredentials such as badges.⁵ However, they have traditionally been separate from credit programs and thus do not have to match credit hour requirements and semester schedules. In recent years, the landscape of noncredit workforce education—including funding availability for colleges and students, program offerings, and its stature and location within colleges—has been shifting dramatically.⁶ But even as we see heightened interest in these programs among students, policy makers, and colleges, a great deal is still unknown.

This brief raises important questions about community college noncredit workforce programs and the expected value of these programs to the students. The answers to these questions are critical to informing responsible decision making by policy makers and practitioners.

How Many Students Are Enrolled and in What Programs?

We do not yet have reliable national data on the number of students who are enrolled in noncredit workforce programs in community colleges. Colleges and universities are not asked to report noncredit student enrollment or outcomes to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), so there is no publicly available national data source. The American Association of Community Colleges estimates that about 40% of students who are enrolled in community colleges, or about 4.1 million students, are enrolled in noncredit courses and programs.⁷ However, this figure includes enrollment in noncredit programs other than workforce training, such as English as a second language and adult basic education programs.

At the state level, the availability of data on noncredit offerings and enrollment varies. Some states, such as Virginia and Iowa, require their institutions to report noncredit enrollment and other data for programs or students who receive state funding. Other states are in the process of building the infrastructure for a noncredit data system, such as the Education and Employment Research Center's State Noncredit Data

⁴ The focus here is on noncredit courses and programs that teach occupational skills. Other types of noncredit programs typically offered by community colleges include adult basic education, English as a second language, and English and math remedial (precollege) education.

⁵ Community colleges typically offer both credit-based and noncredit certificates, and there is variation from college to college in terms of the programs that may be offered in one form or the other. Thus, certificates may be credit-based or noncredit-based, but certificates, along with certifications and licensures, are all considered nondegree credentials.

⁶ Van Noy, M., & Hughes, K. (2022, February). *A snapshot of the shifting landscape of noncredit community college workforce education*. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center.
<https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Snapshot%20of%20Shifting%20Landscape%20Issue%20Brief.FINAL.pdf>

⁷ American Association of Community Colleges. (2024). *Fast facts 2024*. <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>

Project.⁸ This project has brought to light the variety of state definitions for noncredit data elements as well as the differences in how states classify noncredit offerings, which makes comparisons across states difficult. For example, states may track enrollment and outcomes by course or by program (e.g., a group of courses).

Two surveys provide an idea of the prevalence of *noncredit* credentials through their reporting of *nondegree* credentials (e.g., certificates, licenses, certifications). First, a 2016 national survey found that 27% of adults hold a nondegree credential.⁹ Second, a nationally representative survey from 2020 that looked at working-age adults found that 40% have completed a nondegree credential.¹⁰ Thus, such credentials appear to be quite common across the general population, but we need better data on students who are currently enrolled in these programs, including data on the programs they select.

What Types of Students Enroll in Noncredit Programs?

Because noncredit enrollment data are not uniformly reported, we do not yet have much demographic information on enrollees. Even when data are reported, some elements may be lacking. The State Noncredit Data Project notes that a significant amount of student demographic information is missing from data on noncredit programs in Iowa, Louisiana, and Virginia, with more than half of the enrollments missing data on student race and ethnicity. Other researchers have also found data on race and ethnicity to be incomplete in the state administrative data they analyzed.¹¹

With regard to age, students in noncredit programs tend not to enroll directly after high school and are on average older than their for-credit counterparts.¹² Findings on gender vary, with some states reporting higher noncredit enrollment among female students compared with male students while other states report the opposite. However, these analyses combine multiple categories of noncredit students, such as those in precollege remedial courses and other types of programs. As a result, we cannot be certain how the findings apply to workforce students specifically. Other recent qualitative research at more than 2 dozen community

⁸ Srivastava, S., Van Noy, M., & D'Amico, M. (2023, November). *The state noncredit education data project journey: Two-year project summary*. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2023/11/SNDP-2-Year-Summary_EERC_11.21.23.pdf

⁹ Cronen, S., McQuiggan, M., & Isenberg, E. (2018). *Adult training and education: Results from the National Household Education Program of 2016*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017103rev.pdf>

¹⁰ Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights. (2021, July 28). *Examining the value of nondegree credentials*. <https://stradaeducation.org/report/pv-release-july-28-2021/>

¹¹ Bahr, P. R., Columbus, R., Cepa, K., May-Trifiletti, J., & Kaser, S. (2022). *Investigating the hidden college: A study of community college noncredit education in five states*. University of Michigan and Opportunity America. <https://noncreditresearch.org/our-work/publications/reports/investigating-the-hidden-college-a-study-of-community-college-noncredit-education-in-five-states/>

¹² Bahr, P. R., Columbus, R., Cepa, K., May-Trifiletti, J., & Kaser, S. (2022). *Investigating the hidden college: A study of community college noncredit education in five states*. University of Michigan and Opportunity America. <https://noncreditresearch.org/our-work/publications/reports/investigating-the-hidden-college-a-study-of-community-college-noncredit-education-in-five-states/>; Xu, D., & Ran, F. X. (2020). Noncredit education in community college: Students, course enrollments, and academic outcomes. *Community College Review*, 48(1), 77–101. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0091552119876039>

colleges found that there was large variation in how administrators described their noncredit enrollees—from low-income immigrants to professionals with bachelor’s degrees.¹³

The lack of demographic data on students who are enrolling in noncredit programs is troubling to some analysts, who see signs of race- and gender-based inequities in short-term training.¹⁴

Why Do Students Enroll in Noncredit Programs?

We lack an in-depth understanding of student awareness and understanding of noncredit workforce program options. Survey data from 2020 show that student interest in programs and credentials that are focused on employment is high, particularly among adults, and has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. More than two thirds of respondents considering higher education indicate that they would prefer a nondegree pathway (up from one half of respondents in the 2019 survey), and they seek programs that are related to their work and suited to their personal circumstances.¹⁵ Similarly, other research finds that students enroll in noncredit programs to parlay short-term training into a new job or upward movement in their current job.¹⁶

As colleges take note of these new student preferences, they are promoting short-term noncredit programs with names like “Quick Jobs” (Greenville Technical College) and “Fast Track” (Savannah Technical College). Pima Community College promotes programs that can yield industry certifications in two to six months, such as in automotive technology and emergency medical technology as “PimaFastTrack.”

But are students choosing the programs that will propel them forward? One recent study found misalignment between students’ and colleges’ goals for certificate programs. Those who completed certificates in manufacturing strongly expected that the credential would lead to a quality job, while college personnel viewed their programs as a first exploratory step.¹⁷ Other research has found that the short-term

¹³ Van Noy, M., & Hughes, K. (2022, February). *A snapshot of the shifting landscape of noncredit community college education*. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center. <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Snapshot%20of%20Shifting%20Landscape%20Issue%20Brief.FINAL.pdf>. Some administrators’ perceptions that many students in noncredit programs already have degrees are in line with the 2016 and 2020 surveys that indicated that holding a nondegree credential was more common among adults with a college degree than among those without a college degree.

¹⁴ Ositelu, M. O., McCann, C., & Laitinen, A. (2021, May). *The short-term credentials landscape: What we see and what remains unseen*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/the-short-term-credentials-landscape/>

¹⁵ Strada Education Foundation. (2020). COVID-19 work and education survey [data set]. <https://stradaeducation.org/publicviewpoint/>

¹⁶ Douglas, D., Hughes, K., & Van Noy, M. (2023, August). *Noncredit students at two community colleges: Who are they and what are their experiences?* Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center. <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Noncredit%20Students%20at%20Two%20Community%20Colleges%20Final%20-%20EERC%20-%20August%202023.pdf>

¹⁷ Dadgar, M., Genz, F., Thorne, T., & Buck, D. (2024, September). Making every rung of the credential ladder count: Understanding how community college certificates can meet learner expectations for economic mobility. Education Equity Solutions. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Making-Every-Rung-Count.pdf>

certificate programs that women and students of color typically enroll in lead to lower-wage occupations.¹⁸ Overall, there is considerable gender-based segregation in career and technical education and training programs at both the high school and postsecondary levels and in occupations, suggesting that individuals' decision-making around noncredit programs may be influenced by traditional gender expectations.¹⁹

Thus, there is much more to learn about why individuals choose the noncredit workforce programs that they do, and whether they have informed or realistic expectations about their potential employment and earning outcomes after completing such programs.²⁰ In particular, research should explore why and how students choose their noncredit workforce programs to support informed decision making. A study doing just that is underway by the Education and Employment Research Center.

What Is the Value of Noncredit Programs to Students' Employment Status and Earnings?

The field does not yet have the data to know which noncredit programs have value. To help assess the value of these programs, we would first want to see that the programs and the credentials they lead to, such as college certificates and industry-recognized credentials, result in upward socioeconomic mobility for learners. However, we lack the ability to consistently connect student- and program-level data with labor market data. As a result, data on outcomes like better employment and wages are just beginning to emerge.

A recent report on 12 studies that analyzed employment and wage outcomes for noncredit workforce students concluded that, overall, the programs resulted in modest labor market gains.²¹ Because studies varied in terms of their data sources (e.g., national surveys versus state administrative data), the findings also varied. Outcomes differed by industry, state, and gender. For example, those in male-dominated occupations such as construction, information technology, and protective services had higher wage gains than did those in female-dominated occupations such as administrative services.

¹⁸ Ositelu, M. O., McCann, C., & Laitinen, A. (2021, May). *The short-term credentials landscape: What we see and what remains unseen*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/the-short-term-credentials-landscape/>

¹⁹ For more information, see the following study: Nanda, N., Corea, C., Roy, M., & Patterson, L. (2018, February). *A literature review report: Feasibility study and evaluation of non-traditional occupation demonstrations*. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/NTO-Study-Literature-Review-508.pdf>

²⁰ A study being conducted by AIR and supported by Lumina Foundation aims to better understand the college journeys of adult students of color, particularly the motivations and aspirations that lead them to pursue postsecondary education. More information can be found [here](#) and study results are [here](#).

²¹ Van Noy, M., Scovill, S., & Boyd, N. S. (2024, March). *Review of recent research on noncredit outcomes*. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center. https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Review%20of%20Noncredit%20Outcomes_EERC_1.4.24.pdf

We do not yet know if noncredit programs that yield an industry-recognized credential, such as a certification in medical coding, lead to better outcomes than do programs that yield a college credential like a certificate or badge. Some programs lead to both. Research suggests that for-credit certificates yield better earning outcomes than noncredit certificates.²² A recent study found positive impacts on quarterly earnings (an increase of approximately \$1,000) for those who earned industry-recognized credentials through noncredit training programs in the Virginia Community College System.²³

A federal experiment to allow income-eligible students to access and use Pell Grants for short-term training programs provides new data to assess the value of programs in promoting upward mobility.²⁴ Students were randomly assigned to be offered Pell Grants for programs lasting eight to 15 weeks in occupational areas such as transportation and materials moving; health professions; security and protective services; and mechanic and repair technologies. Although this experiment required the programs to lead to credit college certificates, these types of programs are very similar to those frequently offered in the noncredit format.

The study found that students who were offered Pell Grants were more likely to enroll in and complete such programs, but there were no increases in employment or earnings in the medium to long term. The study emphasizes that policy makers should weigh the costs and benefits of making Pell Grant eligibility expansions permanent, noting:

If current very short noncredit occupational courses were eventually made credit-earning and eligible for Pell Grants, participation among students with low income would add as much as \$1.7 billion more to federal financial aid expenditures over the next 10 years. This cost should be considered against evidence on the economic benefits of short-term and very short-term certificate programs.

To better understand the value of noncredit workforce programs, it is also important to have data on program fees and other costs for students. The amount that students pay for these programs may vary greatly from state to state and from program to program. In California, many noncredit programs are free to students, but this is not the case everywhere. Some states, like Virginia, provide funding to colleges and students for programs in particular industry areas that are considered high demand.

²² Baum, S., Holzer, H., & Luetmer, G. (2021, January). *Should the federal government fund short-term postsecondary certificate programs?* Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/should-federal-government-fund-short-term-postsecondary-certificate-programs>

²³ Xu, D., Bird, K. A., Cooper, M., & Castleman, B. L. (2024). *Noncredit workforce training, industry credentials, and labor market outcomes* (EdWorkingPaper: 24-959). Brown University, Annenberg Institute. <https://doi.org/10.26300/6rd4-tg25>

²⁴ Thomas, J., Gonzalez, N., Williams, B., Wiegand, A., Paxton, N., Hu, J., & Hebbard, L. (2024). The effects of expanding Pell Grant eligibility for short occupational training programs: New results on employment and earnings from the Experimental Sites Initiative (NCEE 2025-005). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2021001/pdf/2021001.pdf>

We do not know if subsidizing costs for noncredit workforce programs (via state funding, college scholarships, or other means) leads to better student decision making, program quality, or student outcomes. In addition, we cannot measure the return on investment for states and students (i.e., what value the programs provide after costs are accounted for) without data on how programs affect the wages of those who complete the programs. Such analyses are critical to informing policy makers' and individuals' decisions on investing funds and/or time in these programs.

Conclusion

New research is beginning to provide some of the data we need on noncredit workforce programs and the students who enroll in them. However, we still need more comprehensive data on how many students are enrolled in these programs and the characteristics of these students. In particular, we need to understand their goals for enrolling and whether these goals are met, particularly those related to improving employment status and earnings. Are noncredit workforce programs the faster and more affordable way to upward mobility that learners are seeking?

Researchers should take a broader approach to measuring value and whether learners' goals of upward mobility are met. Employment and earnings outcomes are important, of course, but employment that includes benefits such as paid time off and opportunities for building new skills is more valuable than jobs that do not have those features. Value in the workforce may also be measured from the perspective of employers, including improvements to hiring and productivity. Researchers can also analyze programs according to whether they have characteristics associated with quality, such as transparency, accessibility, and availability of student supports.²⁵ A more multi-dimensional analysis can yield a richer and also more nuanced assessment of noncredit workforce programming.

To support decision making about these programs among current and potential students, policy makers, and colleges, we must invest in securing data on these programs and in conducting the research needed to answer the four fundamental (and still unsettled) questions about noncredit workforce programs. We call on federal and state leaders, colleges, and funders to work together with researchers to help all Americans achieve their career goals through quality education and workforce training.

About the Authors

²⁵ Van Noy, M., Hughes, K., Bjorn, G. (2023). Its Own Standard: Approaches to Quality in Community College Noncredit Workforce Education. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center.
<https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Its%20Own%20Standard%20-%20Approaches%20to%20Quality%20Final%20Formatted%206.14.23.pdf>

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