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Measuring What Matters for Non-Degree Credentials and Noncredit Programs

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With rising interest of non-degree credentials and noncredit program offerings that can provide quicker paths to careers than traditional degrees, confusion is also high as consumers try to understand their options. According to Credential Engine estimates, close to two million credentials exist—many of them associated with shorter forms of workforce education[1]. Research and data are critical to ensuring quality in these programs, particularly since some, but not all, will soon be eligible for new federal Workforce Pell funding.

For years, EERC has been engaged in a learning agenda to generate research evidence on noncredit workforce programs and credentials, guided by our conceptual model for non-degree credential quality.[2] Emerging from our work are a few key conceptions about quality. First, stakeholder groups can have different definitions of quality. Second, credential quality is nuanced and multidimensional. Finally, a strategy is needed to communicate quality that addresses these various dimensions and speaks to multiple audiences. In this brief, we unpack these observations and provide recommendations to the field at this pivotal moment following the passage of Workforce Pell.

Stakeholders and Definitions of Quality

What counts as quality in credentials or short-term workforce programs is not fully clear or agreed upon. Multiple approaches to defining quality have emerged from different contexts. Many states have developed

[1] Credential Engine. (2025). *Counting Credentials 2025*. Washington DC: Credential Engine. https://credentialengine.org/all-resources/2025-counting-credentials/

[2] Van Noy, M., McKay, H., & Michael, S. (2019). *Non-degree credential quality: A conceptual framework to guide measurement.* Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University. https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/rutgerseerc_ndcquality_framework_full_paper_final.pdf

their own standards and lists of quality non-degree credentials (NDCs).[3] Some national efforts have sought to develop common definitions and approaches that can be applied across states[4] as well as ways to assess value for individuals.[5] Accreditors such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) are working on processes to ensure quality related to noncredit education.[6] The Burning Glass Institute's Credential Value Index seeks to provide information on key characteristics of credential quality.[7]

Different definitions of quality may pertain to different stakeholder audiences that hold varying goals for understanding quality (see Table 1). Individuals typically seek information that will help them make decisions about whether a particular program will help them meet their career goals, whereas employers want information to help them assess whether a particular credential holder has the skills they are looking for. Policymakers need to judge whether a program is a good investment of public funds, and providers may look for information that will help them improve their programs and credentials.

Table 1: Stakeholders' Goals and Concerns Related to NDC Quality

Stakeholder	Goal	Key Questions to Consider in Relation to the Stakeholder Groups
Individuals	Informed decision-making	How do individuals know whether it is a good investment of their time and money to pursue an NDC?
Employers	Informed decision-making	How do employers know whether a given NDC is a useful indicator of skill and competency for hiring and advancement?
Policymakers	Accountability	How do policymakers know whether public funds should be used to support the attainment of NDCs? And which NDCs should be supported? How should support for NDCs be prioritized in relation to workforce and employer needs?
Credential Providers	Program improvement	How can NDCs be improved? How can such improvement support the quality of the practitioners in the profession as a whole?

Source: Van Noy, M., Kerrigan, M. R., & Bjorn, G. (2024, Feb). *Building a system for non-degree credential quality: A landscape scan of national influences on NDC quality.* Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University. https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Building%20A%20System%20for%20NDC%20Quality_EERC_02.2024.pdf

[3] See, for example, Louisiana's Industry Based Certification guidelines, available at https://www.laworks.net/PublicRelations/WIC_IndustryBasedCertification.asp.

[4] For example, see the National Skills Coalition's state scan (available at https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/measuring-non-degree-credential-attainment-a-50-state-scan/) and Education Strategy Group's toolkit to help state and community leaders identify high-value credentials and incentivize their attainment (available at https://edstrategy.wpengine.com/resource/building-credential-currency/).

[5] See the Postsecondary Value Commission's Equitable Value Explorer at https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/reports/.

[6] For information on HLC's Credential Lab, see https://www.hlcommission.org/learning-center/credential-lab/. For information on NECHE's accreditation process, see https://www.neche.org/neche-recognition-of-non-credit-providers/.

[7] See the Credential Value Index Navigator at https://www.credentialvalueindex.org/.

Thus, having information available on a broad range of quality elements is important because different stakeholders have an interest in different elements. A multidimensional approach to measuring quality can provide the holistic information necessary to guide a variety of stakeholders. To this end, EERC's conceptual framework for non-degree credential quality helps develop different yet complementary approaches to measuring quality that are relevant to diverse stakeholders.

Note that programs and credentials are highly, though not perfectly, related. Noncredit programs often lead to non-degree credentials. These include certificates awarded by an institution for completion of a program and/or credentials awarded via examination by entities representing industry standards, e.g., industry certifications and licenses. It is also possible, however, for a noncredit program to not lead to any formal non-degree credential, while some non-degree credentials—e.g., industry certifications and licenses—may be awarded by outside entities without completion of a formal education program.

A Multidimensional Approach to Quality

The framework's multidimensional approach to quality includes measures of various elements of noncredit programs and non-degree credentials, such as *design* features associated with quality; *competencies* attained by learners; *outcomes of value* for learners, employers, and communities; and *market processes* that promote the recognition of non-degree credentials. This multidimensional, more holistic approach can yield metrics that more thoroughly convey information on the quality of credentials and programs, including, critically, a more nuanced approach to outcomes measurement.

Design

The characteristics that shape the experiences of learners and their outcomes are determined by a set of decisions that institutions make when creating programs or credentials, including decisions about the content of the programs and how relevant that content is to program goals. It also includes how the program connects with other education pathways. Foundational decisions are made about the instructional processes used, the way learning is assessed, the way information is communicated to stakeholders, and how accessible the program is for the learner. Further, an important element of design quality is students' experiences with the program, including smooth enrollment, instructor engagement, and the supports available to help with program completion.

Competencies

Whether learners attain the competencies programs aim to convey and credentials seek to mark is an essential but difficult-to-obtain measure of quality. Understanding the content knowledge and skills included in a given program is an essential first step. More importantly, it is key to know how to measure whether those who complete programs and hold credentials possess the skills and competencies those programs and credentials

are intended to represent. Learner-level data may be limited on this element. Our research on noncredit workforce programs at four different community colleges found that instructors consider earning the industry-recognized credential as the primary assessment of learning, and program curricula are often geared toward this desired result. This should not be surprising, but how and to what extent programs and credentials are able to measure and document learner competencies is an important question for further exploration.

Outcomes of Value

Noncredit outcomes are the most widely coveted measures of quality. As noted, we need to broaden our conceptions of quality outcomes to incorporate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

Learners pursue noncredit workforce programs and credentials for various reasons. In research currently under way, EERC researchers are interviewing students to understand their motivations and goals for entering noncredit programs. Some are purely exploring, while others have an urgent need for the program to result in a well-paying job. Still others are seeking to obtain a specific skill to help aid their entry into a field and/or facilitate their advancement. An analysis of learner outcomes should include information on common career goals in pursuing programs and credentials. For those whose goal is employment, good wages are an essential factor and a key priority in policy discussions. Yet, other factors related to job quality—e.g., stable and predictable hours, control over hours and/or location, job security, employee benefits, career advancement opportunities, and having a sense of purpose and dignity in one's work—may be important to individuals.[8] Such broader conceptions of employment can help to inform a more holistic perspective on outcomes of value.

Employer and community perspectives are essential to assessing program quality. For employers, a key outcome is whether those who complete programs and credentials possess the skills and competencies needed in hiring and promotion: Do employers see the credentials as accurate signals of the talent they need? Further, one would expect that workforce training programs would be developed collaboratively and incorporate avenues for continuous employer feedback as an approach to quality. In addition to employer perspectives on outcomes, the perspectives of others in the community, including economic development organizations, can inform the understanding of how noncredit programs and credentials contribute to the attainment of larger economic and community development goals in the region. They may also place value on credentials that do not yield high economic returns but have high social value.

[8] Rothwell, J., & Crabtree, S. (2019). *Not just a job: New evidence on the quality of work in the United States.* Gallup. https://www.gallup.com/education/267650/great-jobs-lumina-gates-omidyar-gallup-qualitydownload-report-2019.aspx

Market Processes

Market processes are mechanisms that help translate a credential or program with a quality design associated with valuable competencies into outcomes of value by making the credential or program known in the market. Outcomes can be influenced by a variety of factors, including state regulations, third-party endorsements, credit for prior learning policies, and industry hiring practices—all processes that can imbue a credential with greater value for learners and/or employers by making it more well-known or widely recognized in the market.

Communicating Quality

An often-overlooked area of importance to quality is how NDCs are understood by key stakeholders in the market. This includes market processes that help guide students in their selection of credentials, signal the value of NDCs to employers so they know about them and use them in their hiring processes, demonstrate the value of NDCs for articulation of credit, and mark NDCs as valuable for public investment.

A more holistic approach to assessing and documenting quality programs and credentials is warranted. With that in mind, it is important to consider how quality will be communicated to students, employers, policymakers, and providers. We must balance this more thorough quality conceptualization with a clear communications strategy and not further muddle a crowded landscape already replete with unclear terminology.

As we pursue assessment of program and credential quality that includes additional meaningful dimensions, we must not lose sight of the need for a simple common language. EERC has been working collaboratively with states to develop common taxonomies for noncredit data elements at that level.[9] Also essential is consumer-friendly language to help address the confusion evident among students and other key stakeholders. An EERC survey of students enrolled in noncredit workforce programs at two colleges suggests that students lack understanding of different types of credentials. The survey asked about whether the students' programs led to badges, industry-recognized certifications, college certificates, and/or licenses, and notable proportions of students responded "other" or "not sure."[10] Other EERC research under way is finding through student interviews that few students speak with an advisor or counselor before beginning their programs. These findings illustrate that putting program information into the hands of students and ensuring they understand what credential they are pursuing is a challenge.

[9] D'Amico, M., Peterson, E., & Van Noy, M. (2025). *Noncredit data taxonomy 2.0 and implementation guide for states : Lessons learned from phase 2 of the State Noncredit Data Project*. Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2025/03/EERC_SNDP_Noncredit-Taxonomy-2.0-2.2025.pdf

[10] Eighteen percent of the Mt. San Antonio College respondents answered "other," and ten percent chose "unsure." Thirteen percent of the Northern Virginia Community College students answered "other," and eight percent chose "unsure" (Douglas et al., 2023).

Nutrition labels offer a good analogy for providing holistic information on credentials and programs.[11] A simple way to conceptualize the various credentials is to think of them as different types of containers or packages for a particular mix of content and skills. For example, microcredentials such as badges are simply smaller packages of learning than certificates. Labels on these packages—similar to nutrition labels on food containers—can display the quality factors they contain. Just as a nutrition label on a food product provides a range of information under a few broad categories, so might a credential quality label. We recommend the development of a concise label with consistent information, as it is relevant and available, and we suggest several potential broad categories for these labels to include that are based on our prior research.

An example of such a label that draws from the framework for quality just described might be visualized as shown in Table 2. This example provides a possible starting point for engagement with key stakeholder groups to gather insights on key information to inform their interests. More work is needed with different stakeholder groups to identify the most essential information to inform their decision-making.

Table 2. Sample "Nutrition Label" for Non-Degree Programs and Credentials

Design and Quality	
Duration	# hours
Cost	$$
Labor market demand	Job projections
Instructional modality	Online/In-person/Hybrid
Assessment	Industry exam
Education pathways	Articulation/Prior learning assessment
Learner Experience	
Student Satisfaction	% (student surveys)
Percent of students who complete the program	% (program data)
Percent of students who pass the exam to earn the industry-recognized certification	% (program data)
Workplace Outcomes	
Percent of completers who are employed	% (program/earnings data)
Average earnings (hourly or annually)	$ (program/earnings data)
Employment often includes paid benefits	+ (program/earnings data)
Common hiring requirement in industry	Employer surveys, job posting data
Skills and Competencies	
Skills the program/credential includes	e.g., Patient triage, drawing blood, performing EKGs, checking insurance information

[11] Geisel, N., Cheney, S., Van Noy, M., Okahana, H., and Gottlieb, M. (2025). "A nutrition label for credentials." *The Job* (blog). Work Shift. https://workshift.org/a-nutrition-label-for-credentials/

Recommendations

Finding data on some of these measures can be a challenge, but our research reveals promising approaches to gathering each of these various measures. Multiple sources of information—e.g., administrative data from institutions; interview and survey data from learners, employers, and community partners; as well as labor market information—are needed to fully understand quality and to contribute a range of data that can be compiled and communicated widely to consumers in a simple yet holistic way. Measurement needs to take place at both the state and institution levels. But the ultimate focus on quality needs to be at the level of the programs and credentials to allow for a granular and multidimensional examination of outcomes. This would help shed light on the wide variation across the range of industry sectors that comprise noncredit, as demonstrated by prior research on noncredit and non-degree credentials.[12]

Many states and institutions are already engaged in efforts to develop systems to ensure quality and collect and communicate the data necessary to do so. Workforce Pell provides an opportunity for states and institutions to accelerate the development of these systems to ensure quality in these short-term workforce programs and in credentials more broadly. If that opportunity is acted upon, the implementation of Workforce Pell can be a lever to establish systems that will help learners navigate this complex array of education options to prepare for the workforce.

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

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