Noncredit Students at Two Community Colleges: Who are they and what are their experiences?

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About

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

This paper presents an analysis of noncredit programming based on two sources of data – institutional data on program offerings and student survey data – from two colleges. The student survey included questions about respondents' demographic and socioeconomic traits; the features of the program they enrolled in; their reasons for enrolling and any challenges they faced to attendance; and their employment status before and after attendance. At both colleges, occupationally focused training, such as programs in business, information technology, and healthcare, constituted the majority of noncredit program offerings. These programs were offered in online, hybrid, and in-person formats and had a wide range of cost and time commitments. In terms of the demographics of the students in our sample, noncredit students were older than traditional college-going age and were predominantly female and non-white; however, the survey items on age, gender, and race had high rates of non-response. Respondents reported markedly higher prior education attainment than we expected given the reports of noncredit staff at these institutions. Students' goals for enrolling in noncredit programs were primarily to gain skills to pursue a new job rather than to progress in a current position. A substantial proportion, though not the majority, of the respondents were employed prior to their programs, with more employed after their program. The main challenges to attending their programs were costs and competing responsibilities. Given limitations to our data, we offer this study as a starting point that raises interesting and important research questions about students in noncredit workforce programs that the field should address in future work.

Introduction

Community college noncredit programs serve diverse needs. These programs include open-enrollment occupational training geared toward adults seeking skills for new or current jobs; occupational training arranged and paid for by employers for their employees; courses to pursue personal interests; English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for non-native speakers; and pre-college remedial education (Bahr, Columbus, Cepa, May-Trifiletti, & Kaser, 2022; D'Amico, Morgan, Robertson, & Houchins, 2014). Some programs lead to credentials while others do not. Noncredit programs attract students in different life stages with a variety of goals and education backgrounds. Many seek specific occupational skills and credentials with the goal of entering a career, changing careers, or advancing in their current field of employment (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008; D'Amico et al., 2019). Despite the popularity of these programs and the diverse needs they serve, little is known about the characteristics of noncredit programs or their students. This is because noncredit programs, according to Voorhees and Milam (2005), have been referred to as the "hidden college," and as such, few states make efforts to systematically collect data about them (D'Amico, 2017).

A few studies using administrative data are beginning to shed light on the characteristics of noncredit programs and students. Xu and Ran (2019) analyzed data from first-time students enrolled in credit and noncredit programs at nine community colleges and one community college system, including students enrolled in ESL, GED, adult basic education, and vocational courses. They found that the noncredit sample overall contained higher proportions of male and underrepresented minority students, as well as older students, than the credit sample contained. They also found that less than one-quarter of first-time noncredit students in their sample had previously earned a high school diploma. Thus, the authors characterized noncredit students as "low-performing and low-income adult learners" (Xu & Ran, 2019, p. 95). When the authors narrowed their focus to noncredit workforce programs and their students, they found that about half of the students in that sample were seeking vocational training and that vocational enrollments were prevalent in fields closely tied to an occupation, such as protective services (31%), business and marketing (14%), and allied health (14%). Completion rates for these courses were similar to those for college-credit courses.

Bahr et al. (2022) examined noncredit student data from colleges in five states from Academic Years 2013–14 through 2017–18. Similar to Xu & Ran (2019), they observed that the majority of noncredit students in their sample were over the age of 25. In some of the states, noncredit students were majority male but in other states the opposite was true. They cited no conclusive findings on students' race/ethnicity, however, noting that state administrative data were limited in that category. Across the five states they examined, the majority of noncredit students participated in open-enrollment occupational training courses. Only a very small proportion of noncredit students (less than 10%) took any credit-bearing courses within two years of their noncredit enrollment. Though the authors did not make any causal claims, they observed a modest positive relationship between noncredit course participation and employment outcomes.

These studies using administrative data provide helpful insights on noncredit students but are limited by the data available to them. Data that help us understand students' motivations and goals in seeking noncredit education are greatly needed, since both factors can drive how students make decisions about enrolling in noncredit programs. It also is essential to better understand noncredit students' prior education opportunities and experiences, since these can vary substantially – some have little or no postsecondary education, while others have college degrees. For those without prior college education, noncredit programs offer the benefit of more accessible admissions processes. Noncredit programs and their associated nondegree credentials can also offer an entry point into a career pathway that allows students to work while continuing to pursue an education aimed at advancing in a career (Education Strategy Group, 2019). However, the same ease of access that makes noncredit programs an ideal entry point for some students could make them a hindrance to others. For example, for students potentially interested in earning degrees, noncredit programs can be a diversion from this goal if those programs do not offer clear entry points to further, credit-bearing education (Education Strategy Group, 2019). Noncredit programming cannot meet the needs of potential students until it is clear who the students are and what their needs are. But the lack of data on noncredit students, including their goals, interests, and pathways, leaves these questions unanswered.

Given the need for a deeper understanding of noncredit programs and the students they attract, we designed a multi-component study to start to develop a fuller picture. The study includes: 1) an analysis of the organization and focus of noncredit offerings for 39 community colleges, including program structures and approaches to quality (Van Noy & Hughes, 2022), 2) a deeper examination of a sample of noncredit workforce programs at four colleges, focusing particularly on the conceptualizations of quality in the design and delivery of programs offered by those institutions (Van Noy, Hughes, & Bjorn, 2023), and 3) analyses of the program offerings and of a survey of noncredit workforce students currently or recently enrolled in two colleges (the present report). The overall study was informed by a framework for nondegree credential quality developed in part by one of the authors of this paper in 2019 (Van Noy, McKay, & Michael).

In this report, we present data from student surveys at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC), contextualized with descriptive data on program offerings at those colleges, as well as data from interviews with college administrators and staff. Through the analysis, we seek to enhance the understanding of noncredit programs and students by addressing the following questions:

- What types of noncredit programs do colleges offer?

- What are the demographic and education backgrounds of noncredit students?

- What types of programs do noncredit students enroll in?

- What are the reasons students enroll in noncredit programs?

- What challenges do students face as they pursue noncredit programs?

- What are the employment experiences of noncredit students?

Methodology

Our findings come from multiple types of descriptive data. First, we examine program-unit data provided to EERC by Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). This analysis gives a broad overview of the sorts of noncredit programs available to students at these institutions. Specifically, it provides information on the credentials they offer as well as the subject area, duration, and delivery format of their offerings. Second, we analyze data collected via an online survey of students enrolled in noncredit programs at these two institutions. These surveys provide information on the demographic and pre-enrollment characteristics of responding noncredit students, the types of programs they attended, and their employment situations. We supplement these data with interview data from administrators and staff from both colleges.

Data Collection and Samples

Program-unit data were requested from noncredit program staff at the two study institutions. Mt. SAC supplied data on 78 noncredit programs; NOVA provided data on 182 programs. Noncredit program staff at the two study colleges invited students to participate in the survey developed and administered by EERC via Qualtrics survey software. After cleaning the survey response data, a total of 182 Mt. SAC students (18% response rate) and 159 NOVA (5% response rate) students were included in the analytic sample. These are low response rates, and our samples are likely not representative of the noncredit student populations at the colleges. Still, the responses we received provide some information on the types of students enrolled, the programs they enrolled in, and their education backgrounds and economic situations. Additional details on the student survey procedures and student samples are provided below.

Staff at Mt. SAC invited 1,035 students to take the survey. Students invited to take the survey were either currently or previously enrolled in vocationally focused noncredit programs at the college in the Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 terms. The initial survey distribution took place on April 29, 2022; a follow-up invitation was sent in mid-May. Overall, 218 students opened the link (21% response rate). After examining responses, only 182 were complete enough to constitute valid responses, an effective 18 percent response rate.

Staff at NOVA invited 3,277 students to take the survey. Students invited to take the survey were enrolled in noncredit programs at the college either in the Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 terms. The initial distribution took place June 3, 2022; a follow-up invitation was sent on June 10, 2022. Overall, 205 students responded to the survey (a 6% response rate). After examining responses, only 159 were complete enough to constitute valid responses, leading to an effective 5 percent response rate.

Data Analysis

Both the program-unit records and student survey responses were received as Excel spreadsheets. They were then prepared for analysis in Stata statistical processing software. Program and student-unit data are presented in statistical tables, using frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations, etc.) for continuous variables. In general, what follows takes the form of a descriptive analysis (Loeb et al., 2017) of both program- and student-level traits.

Organization of Findings

The analysis provides descriptive insights on the nature of noncredit programs in these two colleges as well as the characteristics and experiences of students who enroll in them. Each college exists in a unique state funding and policy context, as well as its own organizational context for offering noncredit. We describe this context and report findings from our analysis of program information and student surveys. We present and compare the findings for each college. We begin by presenting program-level data, then proceed to student-reported data including demographic characteristics, program traits, reasons for enrolling, challenges to attendance, and employment status. Where relevant, we also include statements by staff and administrators from the two colleges to triangulate and contextualize the survey findings.

Findings

Mt. SAC is located in Southern California, 25 miles east of Los Angeles, and serves approximately 50,000 students. California provides apportionment funding for four categories of noncredit instruction: ESL, basic academic skills, short-term vocational, and workforce preparation. To be funded, programs must consist of two or more courses that lead to a noncredit certificate of completion or competency that is issued by the college and approved by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. [1] Mt. SAC has unique programs that blend the categories, such as vocational ESL designed for general career preparation. In recent years, prodded by the college's president and strong state support for short-term training programs, the college has developed more vocational and workforce programs. Concurrently, the status of noncredit has become more elevated within the college; the administration has added more full-time faculty, and the division's leader is now a college vice president. In addition, the state apportionment funding and other state sources such as the Student Equity and Achievement Program provide resources for student support staff; Mt. SAC has two full-time and two part-time counselors dedicated to short-term vocational students.

NOVA is one of the nation's largest community colleges, with over 80,000 students and six campuses in Virginia near Washington, DC. Funding for noncredit workforce programs – the FastForward program – was established by the state in 2016. Programs that align with the high-demand fields set by the Virginia Board for Workforce Development and that prepare students for industry-recognized credentials are eligible for state reimbursement based on student completion of the course and the credential. This funding has strongly influenced NOVA's noncredit program offerings.

At NOVA, noncredit workforce programs fall under five general categories: information technology (IT); business; healthcare; trades and transportation; and ESL. Significant changes have been made in recent years to the organization of noncredit workforce programming. While previously the administration of workforce programming was campus-specific, it is now centralized under a vice president, with content-specific program managers overseeing programs across all the campuses (e.g., one program manager is dedicated to overseeing the healthcare programs across all campuses). In addition, administrators and staff noted in interviews that FastForward funding has strengthened student support services.

Noncredit Offerings

Most program offerings at both colleges were workforce oriented. Table 1 presents some descriptive characteristics of 78 noncredit offerings available at Mt. SAC and of 182 offerings at NOVA during the period under study. They primarily included vocationally focused offerings (about 79% of the offerings at both colleges) but also included pre-college remedial, ESL, and personal interest courses. Among the vocational offerings, the largest categories at Mt. SAC were in the fields of business (35%), engineering/trade (15%), and health (14%).

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1   https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/education-code/edc-sect-84760-5.html

At NOVA, the largest categories are business (36%), IT (28%), and other professional education (12%). All Mt. SAC offerings culminated in some form of certificate; remedial and pre-college courses yielded a certificate of competency (18%), and the others yielded a certificate of completion (82%). Program-unit data from NOVA did not consistently indicate the credentials associated with programs, so we do not present these data in the table. Among the small proportion that did, most culminated in industry-recognized credentials.

Most noncredit programs (73% at Mt. SAC and 71% at NOVA) were offered in a variety of formats: online, in person, or hybrid. Fewer were offered in only one format: online only (12% at Mt. SAC and 18% at NOVA) and in person/hybrid only (12% at Mt. SAC and 11% at NOVA). Noncredit offerings at Mt. SAC were long relative to other programs we have studied, with an average length of over 300 hours; about 90 percent of programs were more than 100 hours in length (cf. Xu et al., 2023; Bahr et al., 2023; D'Amico et al., 2022). But there was wide variation in program length as indicated by the low minimum (2 hours), high maximum (1200 hours), and large standard deviation (206). Importantly, some of these longer-duration programs could be eligible for short-term Pell grant support if that legislation passes through the US Congress.[2]

Noncredit offerings at NOVA were typically shorter programs, with an average length of about 35 hours. Ninety percent of programs were less than 80 hours in length, but there was substantial variation in program length as indicated by the minimum (3 hours), maximum (500 hours), and large standard deviation (53). When comparing these program characteristics to those of Mt. SAC, we note much shorter average numbers of hours but a similar percentage of programs available in multiple delivery formats. This may be due at least in part to the impact of Virginia's FastForward program, which incentivizes colleges to offer short-term programs that provide training and credentials for in-demand occupations. The state's website describes FastForward programs in the following language:

> Most programs take between 6–12 weeks and are flexible so students can get their education
> while they work. While a signature of our programs is founded on hands-on, expert-led training,
> to be more accessible, more and more training is becoming available online. (FastForward, n.d.)

Table 1. Characteristics of Noncredit Programs of Study at Mt. San Antonio College and Northern Virginia Community College

Characteristic	Mt. SAC (N=78)	NOVA (N=182)
Broad Program Type		
Occupational training	78%	79%
Sponsored occupational training	1%	0%
Personal interest	3%	2%
Pre-college remediation	18%	19%

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2   Several versions of such legislation are being considered by Congress; while they vary, in general they would allow students in certain short-term workforce programs to be eligible for Pell grants to cover the costs.

Field of Study		
Agriculture	6%	0%
Architecture	3%	0%
Business	35%	36%
Engineering/Trade	15%	1%
Fine arts	1%	0%
Healthcare	14%	4%
Family/Consumer science	8%	0%
IT and computer training	0%	28%
High school, basic skills, and ESL*	18%	19%
Professional education & training	0%	12%
*Credential Offered***		
Certificate of completion	82%	--
Certificate of competency	18%	--
Format of Delivery (2021)		
Online only	12%	18%
In person or hybrid only	12%	11%
Multiple formats	73%	71%
Data not available	4%	0%
Number of Hours		
Mean	305	35
Standard deviation	206	53
Median	261	16
Minimum, Maximum	2, 1200	3, 500

*Coded as "Interdisciplinary" in California's Taxonomy Of Program system
**NOVA did not provide data on credentials associated with programs
Source: Program data supplied by Mt. SAC and NOVA, author's tabulations

Noncredit Student Backgrounds

For both colleges, the survey had moderate rates of non-response to many demographic questions (ranging from 13–28% at Mt. SAC and 20–42% percent at NOVA), which renders interpretation more difficult. Table 2 reports student demographic information from the student surveys.

Students were generally female, middle-aged, and non-white. Noncredit students who responded to the survey and to the gender item were mostly female (63% at Mt. SAC and 45% at NOVA; 31% of the NOVA respondents did not answer this question). Institutional data from Mt. SAC indicate that 54 percent of its students were female (MT. SAC, n.d.); at NOVA 51 percent of certificate-seekers were female (NOVA, 2022). Most respondents were beyond traditional college age, with the largest group being between 36 and 50 years old (27% at Mt. SAC and 24% at NOVA). Again, this broadly aligns with NOVA's reported characteristics of certificate-seeking students – 63 percent over age 25 (NOVA, 2022). In terms of race/ethnicity, Mt. SAC respondents were

predominantly Asian (39%) or Hispanic (24%). NOVA respondents were more ethnically/racially diverse, with 30 percent Black, 14 percent Hispanic, and 12 percent white respondents.

Prior education and employment status varied. The Mt. SAC respondents varied dramatically in terms of the level of education they previously achieved. A majority of respondents had at least some prior college enrollment (54%), and nearly 40 percent had completed a college degree – associate degree or higher – prior to enrollment in their noncredit program. Still, a sizable portion indicated having only a high school diploma (19%) or no education credential at all (12%). Notably, half of the Mt. SAC respondents indicated that they were not employed prior to enrollment in their program.

Among NOVA respondents, there was similar variation. Over half had at least some prior college enrollment (58%). Among those, most (about 43% of respondents) had completed a degree – either an associate, bachelor's, or higher – prior to enrollment in their noncredit program. Still, 22 percent had only a high school diploma or no education credential at all. Fewer NOVA students than Mt. SAC students – only about one-third versus one-half – indicated they were not employed prior to enrollment in their program.

While not all of our survey respondents answered these questions, these data portray a marked variation in students' prior education experience, education attainment, and employment status. They also show some alignment with descriptions of noncredit students by administrators and staff at Mt. SAC and at NOVA. For example, a counselor at Mt. SAC who works with noncredit students generally described those students as follows:

> "For the most part, noncredit students present with a lot of barriers, a lot of barriers. We get a lot of students who were just displaced from their employment. They were either, you know, let go, or they had an injury on the job, and they can't go back… and they're coming back to retrain in a different area altogether…We do have a lot of students who did not successfully complete the K through 12 system. And perhaps, you know, they're young single parents. Perhaps they're in the foster care system. They were foster youth. We have a lot of housing insecurity among our students, and a lot of food insecurity."

A NOVA administrator similarly described the variation among noncredit students at that college:

> "Once FastForward started, lots of different types of students were coming in the door. They're high school grads for the most part, but barely. There's some who have no college experience; others that started college, didn't do so well, say college isn't for me; have some others with college experience but fell on hard times; others are immigrants but are well-educated from their country. So English is a primary barrier for some."

Table 2. Noncredit Student Demographic Characteristics and Pre-Program Education and Employment (Data come from student survey)

Trait	Mt. SAC (N=182)	NOVA (N=159)
Gender		
Male	13%	22%
Female	63	45
Nonbinary	1	1
Refused	1	5
No answer	21	26
Age		
18–25	8	6
26–35	14	15
36–50	27	24
51–60	15	8
61 and older	7	6
No answer	27	42
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic, any race	24	14
Asian	39	6
Black	2	30
Indigenous	1	0
White	8	12
Refused	1	3
No answer	27	35
Prior Education Attainment		
No credential earned	12	6
High school/GED	19	16
Certificate/License	13	13
Associate's degree	10	8
Bachelor's degree	21	24
More than a bachelor's	8	11
Other/No answer	17	23
Prior College Attendance		
None	33	22
One college	31	25
Two or more colleges	23	33
No answer	13	20

Pre-Program Employment		
Not employed	50	34
Employed	37	45
No answer	14	21

Source: Mt. SAC and NOVA student surveys

Noncredit Student Experiences and Outcomes

Many students were enrolled in programs less than six months long in a variety of formats. Table 3 presents respondent-reported information about their programs. Fifty percent of Mt. SAC students and 33 percent of NOVA students reported enrolling in programs lasting six months or less (the majority of NOVA respondents did not answer this question). Most enrolled in online or hybrid programs. More Mt. SAC students (75%) than NOVA students (49%) reported that their programs were free of charge.

Many students seemed unsure about whether their programs led to credentials and what type – many reported that their programs did not yield any credential, that they were unsure about a credential, or that the credential was "other" than a certificate, badge, license, or industry-recognized credential. Twenty-four percent of Mt. SAC students said their program led to no credential, 18 percent chose "other" credential, and 10 percent were unsure. Respondents at NOVA were somewhat more likely to specify a credential they were pursuing and indicated a variety, including college certificates (18%), badges (including industry-recognized credentials) (21%), and multiple credentials (7%). Eight percent said they were unsure about any credential.

Table 3. Student-reported Program Characteristics, Mt. San Antonio College (N=182)

Trait	Mt. SAC (N=182)	NOVA (N=159)
Mode of Instruction		
In person	29%	16%
Hybrid	7	23
Online	51	36
Not indicated	14	25
Length of Program		
Less than 1 month	4	4
1-3 months	25	21
4-6 months	21	8
7-9 months	5	3
10 months or more	15	3
Not indicated	30	60
Source of Payment		
Free	71	9
Grant/Employer paid	4	40

Student paid	10	30
Not indicated	15	20
Credential Type		
No credential	24	11
Badge/License/IRC	6	21
College certificate	20	18
Other	18	13
Multiple	5	7
Not sure	10	8
Not indicated	16	23

Source: Mt. SAC and NOVA student surveys

Career change or finding new work are the most common reasons for enrollment for the respondents from both colleges. Half of the Mt. SAC sample reported pursuing their program with the idea of exploring a career change, and substantial proportions were trying to gain skills to change their line of work (30%) or escape low-wage work (28%). The least commonly reported reason for pursuing these programs was to keep doing their current job (20%). For the NOVA sample, about one in three were pursuing the program to explore a career change (37%) or change to a new line of work (33%). About one in four reported wanting to escape low-wage work (26%) or advance in their current line of work (26%). Similar to the Mt. SAC students, the least commonly reported reason for pursuing these programs was to keep doing their current job (9%). A NOVA administrator said that their noncredit students were sharply focused on one goal: "We'd never dealt with people showing up on our door and saying, 'I want a job and you're going to tell me how to get there' and 'If I get this (certification), will I get a job?'"

Table 4. Reasons for Enrolling in Course/Program of Study (Respondents could choose more than one)

	Mt. SAC	NOVA
New skills to escape low-wage work	28	26
New skills to keep doing current job	20	9
New skills to advance in current line of work	29	26
New skills to change to a new line of work	30	33
Wanting to explore a possible career change	50	37

Source: Mt. SAC and NOVA student surveys

Challenges to completing programs varied across the two colleges. Table 5 presents the students' self-reported challenges in completing their chosen noncredit programs of study (again, they could choose multiple responses). The responses were distributed among the options, with no challenge standing out for a majority or more students. The most commonly reported challenge for the Mt. SAC respondents was competing caregiving responsibilities (22%), with a smaller proportion reporting competing job responsibilities (14%). Sizable percentages of respondents reported obstacles related to costs of attendance, including tuition (18%) and

non-tuition (17%) portions. Transportation costs were also cited as a challenge by 18 percent. In contrast, tuition is the most common challenge for the NOVA students (28%). While Virginia's FastForward tuition support applies to many programs and students, not all are covered (Xu et al., 2023). The NOVA students' obstacles were related to costs of attendance, including tuition (28%), books and fees (16%), and transportation (15%). Some respondents also reported competing responsibilities at work (16%) and with dependent care (15%). Given the education attainment of respondents, lack of familiarity with college (9%) was among the least commonly reported obstacle at both institutions.

Table 5. Challenges faced in completing noncredit programs of study

	Mt SAC	NOVA
Trouble paying program tuition	18	28
Trouble paying for non-tuition program costs (e.g., books and fees)	17	16
Transportation costs	18	15
Housing costs	8	12
Food costs	7	8
Competing job responsibilities	14	16
Caregiving responsibilities	22	15
Personal health issues	13	6
Lack of familiarity with college	9	9

Source: Mt. SAC and NOVA student surveys

Many students reported alignment between their jobs and their programs, but a good proportion reported that their job was not at all related to their program of study. Table 6 presents data on respondents' employment status at the time of the survey, which was either taken during or following completion of/exit from a noncredit program. Forty-one percent of Mt. SAC respondents and 54 percent of NOVA students reported current employment, which is a slight improvement over the pre-program statistic of 37 percent and 45 percent (see Table 2). Among those who were employed, 56 percent of respondents at Mt. SAC and 48 percent of those at NOVA indicated that their jobs were either somewhat or exactly related to what they studied, which aligns with the workforce preparation focus of both colleges' noncredit offerings. Still, almost half of NOVA students said that their programs were not at all related to their jobs, reflecting their desire for a career change or new line of work (Table 4). Many respondents did not report current income, and there was a wide range among those who did.

Table 6. Current and Post-Program Employment Traits

Percentage	Mt. SAC (N=182)	NOVA (N=159)
Current Employment		
Not employed	46	26
Employed	41	54
No answer	13	20
*Job Related to Program**		
Not at all related	33	47
Somewhat related	36	36
Exactly related	20	12
Did not respond	11	6
Current Annual Income		
Less than $25,000	19	13
$25,000–35,000	10	6
$35,001–50,000	11	9
$50,001–75,000	10	9
$75,000 or more	8	14
Refused/Not sure/No answer	41	48

*Only calculated for the students who reported current employment

Lessons and Future Directions for Research

An overarching lesson is that it is difficult to engage noncredit students in primary data collection like surveys. A challenge to our analysis is that many of our survey items have high non-response rates. For example, at both institutions, between 40 and 50 percent of respondents did not respond to our question about annual income. Similarly, between 20 and 42 percent of respondents did not report their age, gender, or race/ethnicity. While responses to questions about program characteristics generally yielded better response rates, non-response issues are a limitation of our survey findings. It may be that noncredit students are more reticent to share information about themselves than are other postsecondary students. As discussed, there have been few attempts to collect systematic data about noncredit programs or students (one important exception is D'Amico et al., 2014). Our student survey results add to the knowledge base that other researchers (e.g., Bahr et al., 2022; Xu & Ran, 2019) have begun to develop using administrative data to examine noncredit students.

Beyond the challenges posed by survey research in general, specific challenges inherent to the noncredit population when conducting surveys may be a) this population is less connected to their academic institution than degree-seeking undergraduates, and b) these students may have less time or lack the digital resources and literacy to engage with online surveys. The first of these challenges may be indicated by our low overall response rates (18% at Mt. SAC, and 5% at NOVA), and the second may be indicated by the high levels of reported prior education among those who did respond. In addition, there is the larger issue that has been documented by prior researchers in this field – there is still a limited infrastructure of administrative data to support a rigorous analysis of noncredit programs and their students (e.g., D'Amico 2014).

Methodologically, these challenges indicate a need for better administrative data collection and in-depth research into noncredit student backgrounds, goals, and attainment. Given these limitations, our data can best be considered a starting point that raises interesting and important research questions about students in noncredit workforce programs that require additional data collection to be answered.

We need to better understand the goals of these students. Staff we spoke with at the two colleges generally described their noncredit students as individuals with many barriers and challenges who need employment. Correspondingly, our respondents were mostly not employed and generally reported being enrolled to gain skills to leave low-wage work and to explore and seek new jobs. But we know little about why they chose their specific programs, or whether they chose them with full and accurate information on the skills they will learn and the value of and opportunities for those skills in the marketplace. Responses to our question on the type of credential the students' programs lead to suggest a lack of information or understanding of credentials. We asked about badges, industry-recognized certifications, college certificates, and licenses, and notable proportions of students responded "other" (18% at Mt. SAC and 13% at NOVA) or "not sure"(10% at Mt. SAC and 8% at NOVA). Future research should explore students' comprehension of different types of credentials and to what extent their enrollment decisions are based on an intention to earn a particular credential.

An apparent disconnect arises between administrator characterizations of noncredit students and our survey responses. While administrators (and, indeed, other studies of noncredit students) characterize this population as low-income, nontraditional in age, and with limited prior education, many of our survey respondents (30–40%) reported having already earned postsecondary degrees. One possible explanation is that our survey was sent to all noncredit students, while Xu & Ran (2019) and Bahr et al. (2022) focused on first-time noncredit students. But another potential reason for this discrepancy may be that survey respondents were atypical of the noncredit population from which they were drawn. For both these reasons, we are careful in interpreting the results of our analysis as indicative of noncredit students in general.

Related to these points on goals and credentials is the question of why individuals who already have bachelor's degrees are enrolling in noncredit workforce programs. Twenty-nine percent of the Mt. SAC respondents and 35 percent of the NOVA respondents stated they already have a bachelor's or even higher degree. How are these individuals' goals similar to or different from those who have less prior education attainment? Given they are already well-educated, why are they seeking additional skills and credentials? One possible explanation derives from the presence of large immigrant populations in the geographic areas of the two colleges; the NOVA administrator mentioned immigrant students with postsecondary attainment from their countries of origin, and Mt. SAC has high ESL enrollments. Immigrant and native-born students with bachelor's degrees might also simply be seeking more specific skills (e.g., project management or web design) for their current jobs, or credentials like licensures to target particular new occupations.

Our survey did not ask about country of origin, but for the characteristics we did inquire about – race, ethnicity, age, prior education attainment, employment status – the survey respondents are very diverse. We assume they have a diversity of needs as well. Further exploration would help us to better understand the diversity of noncredit students, their decisions and pathways, and whether the programs are meeting their needs.

These questions can best be addressed through in-depth interviews with noncredit workforce students, as well as with additional data from colleges. We have already noted the lack of collection of outcomes data, particularly employment outcomes, and it would be useful to interview college administrators to delve into what challenges to data collection they encounter, and how they might be ameliorated.

The hidden college is becoming more visible as more research is conducted and more states raise its profile with supportive policies or funding. Yet there is still much to learn about its role in higher education, its accessibility and transparency, and its value to students and employers.

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