RUTGERS–NEW BRUNSWICK
Education and Employment Research Center
School of Management and Labor Relations

Review of Recent Research on Noncredit Outcomes Summary

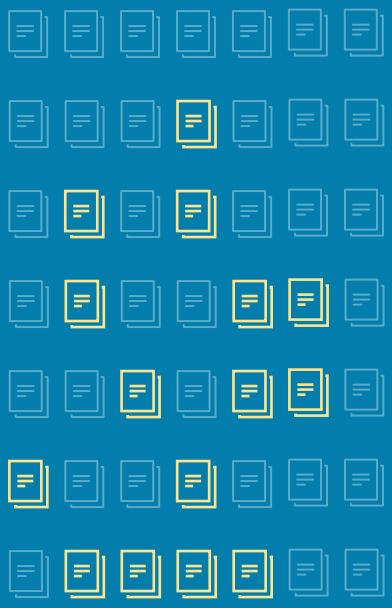
Noncredit education and non-degree credentials (NDCs) are increasingly valued by students and policymakers. Yet data in this field is scarce and findings on student outcomes are limited and difficult to interpret and compare. This study reviews a core group of articles on noncredit and NDC outcomes, focusing on completion, wages, and employment.

Varying Approaches

Data and methods are quite variable, making comparisons a challenge. After a comprehensive literature scan,

49 studies pertaining to noncredit and NDC outcomes were identified and then winnowed down to 15 core studies

for purposes of this review. The studies employ a wide array of approaches. Lacking the central data sources made possible by the *Higher Education Act* and the *National Student Clearinghouse* for research on degree-seeking education, researchers in the **noncredit space** have resorted to a broad assortment of data sources, methodologies, comparison groups, and definitions. In reviewing these studies as a body of work, the difficulty of summary statements becomes clear. We are limited to broad statements of trends.



National data sources include the national Longitudinal Survey of Youth; the Survey of Educational Attainment, the Adult Training and Education Survey; the National Postsecondary Longitudinal Student Aid Study; Beginning Postsecondary Students Study; and Strada's Education Consumer Survey. State administrative data provided the other primary source, notably from Louisiana, Virginia, Iowa, California, Ohio, and Texas, as well as CompTIA industry certifications in several states.

Findings on Enrollment Characteristics

Some demographic information is accessible, but it is preliminary in nature. Data on race/ethnicity, gender, and prior education have been made available on a preliminary basis, but reliance on state administrative sources means that demographic fields are often left blank.

Just 23%

of all noncredit students earned a high school diploma,

compared to 71%

of students seeking a noncredit credential,

and 93%

of students in for-credit programs. (Xu & Ran)

The average age of noncredit students was just over 30 years old (Xu & Ran).

Race/ethnicity and gender impact the type of noncredit in which students enroll.

Women were less likely to enroll in personal interest, pre-college remediation and sponsored occupational training, compared to men, and more likely to enroll in individual enrollment occupational training.

White students were more likely to enroll in individual occupational training, while Hispanic/Latinx and Black students were more likely to be in pre-college remediation (D'Amico et al).

Other relevant findings from Bahr et al, McConville et al, and Cronen et al extend the body of knowledge, showing that non-credit and NDC students tend to be older, mixed in enrollment by gender and lacking information on race and ethnicity.

Enrollment Characteristics Takeaway: More attention needs to be devoted to understanding students' pathways through noncredit and NDC programs by consistently collecting relevant data and exploring student identities more deeply.

Findings on Educational Outcomes

Few noncredit students transition to credit pathways and completion rates lag behind credit programs. The rate at which noncredit programs bridge students to long-term educational pathways appears to be low, but more information is needed. Some researchers also explored the extent to which noncredit students transitioned to credit programs, which practitioners and policymakers have long advocated. The findings here were mostly negative:

In a five-state study, four states moved only 1 in 20 noncredit students into for-credit education within two years of entering community college (Bahr et al). In the fifth state, California, over half of noncredit students simultaneously enrolled in for-credit courses during their first semester in community college. Daugherty & Anderson and Daugherty et al also show low rates of stacking.

Completion rates were substantially lower in noncredit courses compared to for-credit courses in allied health (69% vs 88%) and nursing (70%% vs. 94%). Yet these noncredit completion rates were actually higher than in other fields of study, probably because of their close alignment to an occupation (Xu & Ran).

Among individuals who had no college degree,
31% completed certifications/licenses,
36% completed certificates,
27% completed work experiences, and
22% completed continuing education (Lee et al).

Other relevant findings from D'Amico et al, McConville et al, and Tesfai et al also show low completion rates.

Educational Outcomes Takeaway: Strategies should be developed to improve pathways and articulation. Given the low rates of movement found between noncredit and credit pathways, policymakers and practitioners should consider ways to create articulation agreements between noncredit and credit programs.

Findings on Labor Market Outcomes

Noncredit programs lead to modest but measurable gains. Compared with having no postsecondary education, attaining an NDC or completing a noncredit program is associated with higher earnings, although lower than holding a degree. Researchers concerned with labor market outcomes looked at earnings and employment outcomes, with earnings being the most consistently examined.

Certificate holders earned more than the average high school graduate, but less than adults with one or more years of college but no degree (Baum et al).

In their descriptive analysis of noncredit student outcomes, Bahr et al (2022) found that in Texas, there was some evidence of modest labor market returns. The descriptive results for earnings indicate that a year after noncredit entry, average earnings were about

$6,000 higher than before enrollment.

Students who reported having a current job that was closely related to their recent training programs reported wage gains

3 times larger

than the wages of students whose job was not related to their training (McConville et al).

Average wages were nearly 42% higher one year after certification in **professional, scientific, and technical services; health care and social assistance; manufacturing; and public administration.**

But wages actually dropped one year after certification for individuals in **education services, retail trade, and accommodation and food services** (CDEP).

Earnings outcomes varied widely across field, gender, and geography.

A national survey found that individuals with a certificate or certification had higher full-time employment rates and earned a median annual income, but wage premiums varied sharply by students' occupation and gender. Certificates and certifications in male-dominated fields provided a nearly $20,000 earnings boost compared to adults lacking any credential. Female-dominated fields had very little to no wage premium (Strada, Gallup, & Lumina).

Other relevant findings from Beer et al, Hester & Kitmitto, Carruthers & Sanford, Daugherty & Anderson, Cronen et al, Lee et al, and Tesfai et al extend the body of knowledge in this area, demonstrating the large variance in economic returns to noncredit and NDCs across fields and labor market contexts.

Labor Market Outcomes Takeaway: Consider the context of the labor market when making policy. While it may seem reasonable to reserve public funding for noncredit programs leading to the most positive education or employment outcomes for students, such policies could lead to penalizing low-wage but socially vital fields – especially care occupations such as certified nursing assistants and early childhood educators.

Directions for Future Research

More rigorous analyses of outcomes are needed. As more data become available, additional research is needed to examine noncredit and NDC programs of study in increasingly rigorous ways, such as longitudinal analysis, linkage of state data sets to wage data, and consideration of equity implications through the collection of key demographic data.

Analysis of noncredit-to-credit transitions need to explore programmatic features. Research that helps identify programmatic features that support non-credit-to-credit transitions is key to promoting more successful transitions.

Program and student goals are important for understanding labor market outcomes. To better understand learner outcomes in the labor market, researchers should undertake program-level analyses designed to understand features such as intensity, links to industry, and instructional purpose. This research should be complemented with student-level analyses, collecting demographic data and linking it to program outcomes.

Examine outcomes within their specific labor market context. Noncredit and NDC programs are in constant dialogue with the labor market, and the nuances of that dialogue need to be better understood. Researchers can explore particular industry and occupational dynamics by studying labor market outcomes in various contexts: across states with different kinds of regional economies, across industries in a single area, across programs focused on particular requirements, and more.

Extend research to more noncredit programs and NDCs. Various providers exist in the noncredit space, including 2-year and 4-year institutions, employers, private providers, and unions. This variation introduces even more complexity to the task of making sense of the landscape of noncredit and NDC outcomes.

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