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OF NONCREDIT
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
WORKFORCE EDUCATION

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BACKGROUND

Noncredit workforce education conveys work-relevant skills in a wide range of industries. Courses and programs are provided by community and technical colleges to an estimated five million students annually (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021), and national survey data show that as much as one-quarter of adults hold a noncredit certificate, license, or

other vocational award (Cronen, McQuiggan & Isenberg, 2017). Noncredit programs vary in length, and they may or may not lead to a non-degree credential. When credentials are granted, they are either awarded by the college through which the program was offered (often the case with certificates) or earned through an industry-sponsored assessment (more common in the cases of certifications or professional licenses). While there has been a substantial increase in interest in these programs among both students and policymakers in recent years, little research is available on their value or economic return.

Recent survey data show that student interest in programs and credentials targeted at employment is high, particularly among adults, and has increased since the pandemic. Over two-thirds of respondents considering education indicate they would prefer a nondegree pathway, up from one-half of respondents in the prior year's survey (Strada, 2020). Respondents seek programs that are related to their work and are suited to their personal circumstances (Strada, 2020).

Policymakers are engaged in ongoing deliberations about investments in short-term certificate programs and noncredit courses. Many states are already moving ahead with special initiatives to fund these types of programs. Two examples are Indiana's Next Level Jobs program and New Jersey's Pay It Forward program, both of which are



designed to get unemployed workers retrained and back to work quickly. At the federal level current debates focus on whether to allow the use of federal student aid – Pell grants – for these programs, for which the aid may not currently be used. There are strong views in favor of and against supporting these kinds of programs.

Proponents of change argue for the importance of keeping up with changes in how students seek to acquire skills and in how colleges aim to deliver them most efficiently (Kreighbaum, 2019). In the case of short-term Pell, allowing the use of federal financial aid for short-term workforce programs will help individuals gain the skills needed to obtain better jobs more quickly, according to advocates (Olugbemiga, 2021). These views are supported by recent research that finds that, on average, certificates do lead to higher earnings, and economic returns don't generally differ between certificates that take a year of study to earn versus those that can be earned in a shorter amount of time (Baum, Holzer, and Luetmer, 2020[2021]).

Skeptics, on the other hand, point to evidence that shows significant variability in the economic returns of short-term training programs, arguing that policymakers should proceed with caution given that no such program is a "sure bet" (Ositelu, McCann, & Laitinen, 2021). Moreover, varying patterns of enrollment in short-term workforce programs by different races and genders point to worse outcomes for students of color and women, leading to concerns that it may serve to further stratify higher education (Ositelu, McCann, & Laitinen, 2021). In addition, the assertion that short-term credentials are commonly "stackable," or able to serve as building blocks for additional, longer-term, and more remunerative credentials, is not verified by the data obtained in a recent study (Bailey and Belfield, 2017). Further research is needed, but unfortunately, few states collect comprehensive data on noncredit certificates or industry certifications (Leventoff, 2018).

With the goal of informing these policy conversations, this brief provides a timely descriptive look at noncredit workforce education in a range of colleges across the country. By examining the focus and organization of noncredit offerings within colleges, including program structures and approaches to quality, this brief provides a snapshot of essential issues about community college noncredit workforce education. As the first phase of a larger study, we conducted interviews at community and technical colleges in several states, asking about how noncredit workforce education is developed, organized, and delivered. A primary aim was to gain a sense of different colleges' approaches to providing quality programs that yield value for their students. Our research does not provide data on student outcomes, but it does give a picture of a rapidly changing landscape. It also reveals significant variation in how colleges conceptualize the role of noncredit workforce education and how colleges approach quality.



METHODS

We sought to examine a range of community college noncredit programs. To identify colleges for interviews, we sought recommendations from national experts including community colleges researchers and thinktank leaders (UNC, CCRC, New America, Opportunity America) as well as higher education association leaders (League for Innovation, NCWE, UMUDL, AACC, WICHE, and NEBHE). We also reviewed recent trade publications for articles written by colleges on their notable noncredit activity. Based on that review and on recommendations from the sources listed above, we compiled a list of 50 community and technical colleges in 28 states. Of those, interviews were completed with administrators from the noncredit divisions or departments in 29 of the colleges, representing a diverse range of 22 states. We sought out programs that relied on a variety of funding methods, including three states with formula funding for noncredit (NC, CA, and MD) and several states with special grant programs dedicated to noncredit. Our exploratory interviews lasted about 45 minutes and examined, among other variables, the colleges' mission for noncredit workforce education, organizational structure, target student population, mechanisms for offering programs and ensuring quality, and connections to credit-bearing programs.

THE FOCUS OF NONCREDIT EDUCATION

Community colleges have long been recognized – and sometimes criticized – for having multiple missions. Noncredit education is just one of many community college missions, yet noncredit education itself can differ in its focus, purpose, and target student population. We asked our interviewees about the focus of their institution's noncredit programming and target student populations to understand how these are evolving in light of current policy dialogues.

Some colleges are shifting the focus of their noncredit education to prioritize workforce training over a more comprehensive approach. Respondents from the majority of the colleges reported that they have what we term a comprehensive model for their noncredit offerings. These colleges provide workforce training programs alongside other programs such as Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language courses; GED preparation; and recreational offerings for the community, including those targeted at youth and seniors. Some or all of these offerings are often grouped under a "Community Education" or "Continuing Education" division.

Some respondents, however, reported that their college was moving or had moved away from that comprehensive model. These colleges had deliberately pruned their recreational and personal enrichment programs, noting that other local organizations could provide them, in favor of focusing more strongly on workforce courses and programs. In some cases, this shift led to enrollment declines yet was seen as beneficial overall because it resulted in a more focused mission for noncredit.



In recent years, Broward College intentionally sought to prioritize skill-building among local populations with high levels of unemployment and low levels of education, and in that process has scaled back recreational and leisure offerings to a smaller number that reflect the college's strengths. About five years ago, Northern Virginia Community College also began to focus their offerings on upskilling and reskilling and to pare down recreational courses and programs for seniors, including many personal interest courses and short one-day programs like walking tours. As a result, NOVA's noncredit enrollments were reduced from over 20,000 per year to about 6,000 to 8,000 per year, but the college's mission is now more clearly to meet skills needs.

A college's reassessment and repositioning of its noncredit mission and offerings may include a reconsideration of its target student population. As noted above, some colleges are continuing to see their noncredit mission as serving the needs of their entire community, while others are focusing their attention more on serving certain populations of students.

Our interviewees mostly spoke of serving adult learners, meaning those who have been out of high school for some years. For example, an administrator at Savannah Tech said resolutely that the college's mission is to "connect adult learners with education, training, and learning experiences that get them a job and put them on a career path." Respondents from several colleges said their students' average age being in the mid-thirties. Across the broad population of adult learners, some respondents named specific subgroups as their primary clientele. For example, Bellevue College's noncredit workforce students tend to already have bachelor's degrees; they are primarily employees of the advanced tech firms in the immediate area who are looking for new skills or new positions.

Further, some colleges reported a particular emphasis on engaging low-income and lower-skilled adult populations. For these colleges, serving as an education access point for low-income adults is a central mission. Administrators with Broward College and Savannah Technical College mentioned providing or being in the process of developing research-backed I-BEST programs, which are aimed to lower-skilled adults in that they combine basic skills education with workforce training. Others, like Glendale College just outside of Los Angeles, reported targeting immigrant populations who are disadvantaged and need support to get a first job. Mount San Antonio College in California reported that many noncredit students are interested in programs they can take while working.

In some colleges, funding priorities dictate the populations on which offerings are focused. For example, in Virginia, the Fast Forward program supports short-term training and credentials that help working adults move quickly into better jobs in high-demand fields. Created by state legislation in 2016, Fast



Forward reimburses colleges for one-third of program costs when a student completes a program from the approved high-demand list, and another one-third when the student earns the associated credential.

Not all colleges are narrowing their target student population, however. Harper College is expanding its focus to include high school students, promoting noncredit to those students as a means of career exploration and settling on a college pathway, either noncredit or credit. Harper has recently opened up some short-term certification programs to high school students.

Finally, as noted earlier, many colleges have retained a comprehensive approach to noncredit that is characterized by broader community outreach to a wide range of populations, including youth and seniors. Bellevue College has continued to serve a diverse population, but it has sharpened its focus by segmenting its noncredit programs. Offerings under the TELOS program are aimed at retirees, for example, while technical programs have been re-branded as the Tombolo Institute to attract well-educated incumbent workers who are primarily employees of the advanced tech firms in the immediate area looking for new skills or new positions.

THE ORGANIZATION OF NONCREDIT EDUCATION

How noncredit is situated within and influenced by the college organizational structure varies across colleges. It also may be accorded a higher or lower importance relative to a college's other missions and foci. We examined the organizational structure and changes to it within the colleges in our sample, as colleges are shifting their focus and target populations.

Colleges differ dramatically in terms of where noncredit is situated organizationally, and in some cases, that location has changed recently. We found several different organizational models for where noncredit workforce programming is located within the colleges. In a few cases, such as with the San Diego College of Continuing Education, noncredit adult education and training is provided district-wide by a freestanding institution. More commonly, noncredit workforce falls under a college's Continuing Education Division. In some colleges it is located alongside credit-bearing workforce and career/technical offerings. Both Monroe Community College and Pima Community College, for example, have noncredit and credit offerings integrated under one division focused on workforce education. In yet other instances it is an entirely separate college division, even with its own brand. In addition, the customized training courses and programs that colleges develop directly for specific employers sometimes fall under the broader noncredit workforce umbrella, but they may instead be overseen and administered separately. Noncredit offerings can be divided across different entities such as at



Pierce College, where online professional development and career training along with personal enrichment courses are under Community and Continuing Education, while corporate training and job skills programs are offered through a county community and technical college consortium called Invista Performance Solutions.

Some colleges are making changes to the organization of their noncredit workforce programs. Harper College in Illinois recently moved its Continuing Professional Education courses and programs to the for-credit Career and Technical Programs division. The shift was motivated by the college administration's desire to better coordinate and align noncredit and credit-bearing workforce offerings. Mt. Hood in Oregon also recently consolidated all programs, including noncredit, under the Division of Instruction. In contrast, Central New Mexico Community College's workforce training unit is a separate nonprofit organization with its own name, CNM Ingenuity, and its own website.

Another organizational shift is towards increased partnering to increase capacity and reach.

Several colleges' workforce divisions or departments had recently partnered with other colleges and/or vendors. As noted above, Pierce College offers its noncredit workforce programs through a consortium model with other local community and technical colleges. Central New Mexico partnered with colleges in other states in the Unmudl marketplace. The college is a founding partner in this new noncredit endeavor, in which seven community colleges are listing their offerings in one "marketplace," or web platform. Students can enroll in courses from the member colleges without going through multiple application processes. Monroe Community College is also developing regional partnerships with other institutions and local businesses so together they can train more students as technicians within industries like HVAC and precision machining.

In addition to partnerships with other colleges, partnerships with vendors for online courses were commonly mentioned in our interviews. These vendors included LERN (Learning Resources Network: <https://lern.org/about/>), Ed2Go (<https://www.ed2go.com>) and VESi (Virtual Education Software: <http://www.virtualeduc.com/>). Ed2Go provides access to a catalogue of hundreds of courses the colleges can choose to offer without having to recruit instructors. Lorain reports this arrangement allows them expand their bandwidth and broadening outreach because of the online format. Pierce offers all of its online noncredit training courses via third-party vendors. Colleges that offer badges mentioned contracting with the digital badging platform Credly (<https://info.credly.com/>).



THE STRUCTURE OF NONCREDIT PROGRAMS

Noncredit education includes a wide range of programs in different industry areas, of different durations, that may or may not yield a variety of credentials. It may not always be transparent as to why a program is offered in noncredit versus credit-bearing format. We explored these issues in our interviews with college leaders to better understand how noncredit programs come to be offered and structured, as these issues can shape the experiences and outcomes of students.

The decision to offer a program in noncredit is typically driven by its speed and flexibility, but also by considerations about skills and degrees needed in the labor market. The most common reason offered by colleges for offering a program in noncredit is the speed with which they can offer the program. Many college respondents mentioned the timing of noncredit as essential to meeting students' needs to gain skills or employment quickly, and employers' urgency to find workers quickly to meet their hiring needs. For colleges with no state approval processes in noncredit, programs can be launched within a matter of weeks; even those with state approval processes typically take months to get off the ground rather than the years that a typical credit program approval processes can take. Salt Lake Community College notes that noncredit programs typically cannot wait until the start of the semester term when seeking to be responsive to hiring needs.

Another common and related reason to offer a program in noncredit is the flexibility in the schedule and format for noncredit programs. Colleges can offer programs that do not follow the traditional semester schedule and can meet the needs for quick skills development to respond to labor market needs. For example, Valencia is similar to many others in that its noncredit programs do not follow a semester schedule; rather, they can be completed in a short time period of weeks, not years. Its programs are entirely skills based, do not include general education, have industry certifications embedded within them, and run full time to help prepare people quickly for jobs, a format that would be challenging for the traditional semester based academic credit scheduling. In line with the priorities of flexibility and speed, noncredit can also be easier for students to enroll in, as discussed by a respondent from Pima. Noncredit workforce students at Mt. Hood register via an interface that is different from and simpler than the admissions process students in credit programs must use.

Another broad set of considerations colleges reported has to do with the skills and degrees needed in the labor market. Several colleges reported they considered whether a degree was required or if specific skills were needed in an occupation before deciding if a program should be offered in credit or noncredit. Fundamentally, this approach is essential to truly aligning a program with labor market needs.



In contrast to the trend to offer workforce programs in noncredit, Owensboro Community and Technical College, a member of Kentucky Community and Technical College System, offers more credit-bearing courses than noncredit ones. This strategy ensures that students gain credit towards relevant career-advancing certificates and degrees. At the same time the entire state system and its credit-bearing programs are exploring opportunities to offer an additional learning option that includes a competency-based approach to instruction with a goal towards better serving time-challenged, working adults.

In line with student interest, several colleges reported designing and marketing shorter programs. Colleges are heavily promoting their very short-term offerings with names like “Quick Jobs” (Greenville Tech) and “Fast Track” (Savannah Tech). According to Greenville Tech’s website, Quick Jobs programs offer “training and certifications that are skills specific and job preparatory with most courses lasting three months or less”; our interviewee at the college said that some QuickJobs programs “will get you skilled up in a few days or a few weeks and place you in a job.” The college’s Economic Development and Corporate Training Catalogue has offerings organized by duration: one month or less, with some classes lasting one day; four months or less (one semester); and eight months or less (two semesters). Similarly, on the website of Mt. Hood College, prospective students can also search programs by duration: 1 to 2 terms (3 to 6 months) or less; 3 to 4 terms (9 to 12 months); 2+ years. And, as part of the Community College Growth Engine Fund, Pima Community College is developing micro pathways of short-term, stackable, employer-validated credentials in their noncredit programs, marketed to students as “fast career credentials.” Westchester Community College is increasingly using the term “short-term workforce programs” instead of noncredit, since the latter describes what the courses are not, rather than what they are.

At the same time, most colleges seek to develop more pathways from noncredit to credit programs, but there is great variability in terms of how far along colleges are with these efforts. Nearly all respondents reported that linkages exist between noncredit and credit sections of their colleges in at least some programs, or that their colleges are in the midst of developing these linkages. As a Greenville Tech administrator said, “Our college is committed to maximizing our students’ potential, so our Prior Learning Assessment Committee works with our enrollment specialists and advisors to carefully review student transcripts, continuing education courses completed, work history, and other credentials to find opportunities to award academic credit when appropriate.” The one exception is Bellevue College – with its primary focus on serving bachelor’s degree holders in noncredit, there is little need for these linkages. Among the majority of colleges that seek or already have these linkages, the strategies they use varies. Many discussed developing closer alignment with their noncredit and credit programs, with a few mentioning distinct articulation agreements that allow students to move between programs



seamlessly. A respondent from Pima Community College reported that school had made significant progress in developing these linkages, with nearly one-third of noncredit programs linked to credit programs. Respondents from some other colleges reported their institutions had just begun initiating conversations with credit faculty to promote these changes.

Some respondents mentioned the influence of broader community college reform movements on the development of noncredit–credit linkages, such as the guided pathways movement, which aims to increase completion rates by providing students with more structure and support. Guided pathways efforts can provide opportunities for discussions on the role of noncredit and its connection with credit. In some of the colleges, noncredit was already a clear part of the college’s guided pathways efforts. At Alamo Colleges District, for example, a respondent reported that guided pathways reforms were spurring conversations about the ways in which noncredit can form pathways to credit programs. Similarly, a respondent at Wake Technical College reported that as part of a Completion by Design¹ state, they are having conversations about guided pathways and view noncredit as a rung on a ladder that can be a foothold into a degree program.

Another important mechanism to link noncredit and credit-bearing programs is credit for prior learning (CPL). Several respondents reported that their colleges use CPL processes to help students gain credit for noncredit programs. Others reported that their colleges are looking into or are already using credential awards like industry certifications or licensure to award credit for completion of the related noncredit programs; using the CPL model, certifications can be “pathways to credit” as we heard from Pierce College. A few respondents discussed the importance of mapping learning outcomes and competencies from noncredit programs to their credit programs to award credit based on those competencies. Central New Mexico Community College began cross-walking noncredit to credit several years ago and now has a defined process in place so that when a new noncredit program is developed, the competencies and learning activities are documented in collaboration with faculty from the credit side of the college to show the potential for credit award.

While most colleges have some activity under way to promote noncredit–credit linkages, the extent of that activity varies in terms of how many programs it applies to and the kinds of strategies being used. Further, once these pathways are in place, colleges need to devote attention to making sure others at the college, including faculty, administrators, and students, are aware of them. At Baton

¹ Completion by Design was a community college reform movement focused on improving college completion by low-income young adults. For more information, see <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/completion-by-design.html>



Rouge Community College, a respondent mentioned the importance of marketing and outreach to ensure that the rest of the campus knows about the opportunity.

Few colleges have dedicated supports for noncredit students, but these supports are increasingly needed with the increased focus on pathways for adult learners. Most report that noncredit students can access general resources at their college, but it is not clear whether many students avail themselves of these resources. A handful of colleges have recognized the unique needs of students in noncredit programs and are developing strategies to support them. A respondent from Mount San Antonio College, for example, reported the importance of recognizing noncredit students' needs for both wraparound services and assistance with academic preparation and of finding ways to address those needs. At Anne Arundel, success coaches help support noncredit students. Funded out of the college's operating budget, success coaches are guided by the I-BEST model to help students identify the right program and support them as they complete that program, providing assistance with career development as well as addressing any personal barriers to postsecondary success. Noncredit students at Baton Rouge Community College are supported by program navigators as part of special initiatives in those programs.

THE QUALITY OF NONCREDIT PROGRAMS

Essential questions exist about the quality of noncredit programs. Multiple approaches in how colleges design noncredit programs may promote quality, including labor market assessments, use of industry certifications, state approval processes, adoption of vendor-developed courses, and responding to student demand. In addition to these program design approaches, the ability to collect data on student outcomes is essential to understanding quality. While this research does not speak to the actual quality of noncredit programs in terms of whether they yield the desired positive outcomes for students, it does provide insight on how colleges seek to promote quality in these programs. We examined these issues with our college leaders.

The most commonly mentioned approach to ensuring quality is labor market analysis aimed at aligning programs with employer needs. According to our respondents, all colleges in the study have mechanisms to collect labor market information to inform their noncredit programs. Many use data vendors, such as EMSI and Burning Glass, as well as state departments of economic or workforce development, as sources of labor market data. Colleges rely on these quantitative data as well as input from advisory boards and individual employers to identify new programs to offer and determine the specific content to be included in those programs.



Monroe Community College has a robust system for labor market analysis built into all of its workforce programs, including noncredit programs. Monroe uses multiple sources of data, including real-time jobs data, traditional labor market data, and focus groups with local employers, to ensure that the skills included in their curricula map onto labor market needs. Lone Star College follows a multistep program development model: When an idea is submitted, they examine real-time jobs data, run industry focus groups, conduct a comprehensive competencies analysis with industry to identify occupational skills, and finally develop a curriculum and financial plans. If there is industry involvement, this process can move very quickly—within a matter of weeks. Baton Rouge Community College conducts surveys of businesses to assess needs, then looks to industry-based certifications to develop programs for short-term noncredit programs. A Middlesex College respondent reports that when designing programs the college reviews real-time jobs data and state labor market data, consults with employer partners, and checks with the state’s in-demand list of industry certifications.

In addition to local labor market information, many colleges also reported they rely on industry certifications to provide an external standard of quality for their programs that is valued by employers. A Lone Star college leader reports that industry certifications are important to help identify students as employable based on what industry thinks is important. A respondent at Valencia reported that all noncredit programs need to have an industry certification, and they work with employers and industry organizations to identify what the need is. Many others, like the respondent from Pima Community College, report that they align as many programs as possible with industry certifications, but the availability of certifications can vary depending on the type of programs that colleges seek to offer. For some colleges, state funding requirements promote the use of industry certifications. Alamo Colleges District is one such example, where state grant funds in Texas require programs to award an industry-recognized credential.

Not all colleges reported that industry certifications were a priority, however. A few respondents reported their colleges did not rely on industry certifications, saying that their local employers do not recognize or value them. These colleges rely instead on their own labor market assessments to design programs that are relevant to employer needs. One example is Macomb Community College where, given the college’s history of deep connections to the labor market, local employers ask for the college’s certificates more so than industry certifications. Similarly, Glendale College in California does not focus on industry certifications for its business programs, knowing that their local employers seek workers who can perform specific skills, such as software applications, for positions like office assistants and account clerks. In other fields, like allied health, employers are more focused on industry certification.



In addition to industry certifications, badges and microcredentials can be markers of quality for these programs to the extent they reflect valuable skills. Eastern Maine for example is involved in a statewide initiative to develop badges and microcredentials as markers of skill; Savannah Tech is also part of a consortium developing a statewide system of microcredentials. Monroe Community College is part of a similar effort in the SUNY system; these credentials will be transcribed and designed based on industry input. Other colleges, such as Westchester, are just beginning to explore offering badges; recognize the need for continued outreach to students and employers help them see their value.

Several colleges reported that their credit faculty are involved in the development of noncredit programs, helping to promote quality. While noncredit programs need not go through traditional approval processes, involving the credit faculty can help promote discussions of how noncredit can align with existing credit programs. At Pima College, for example, noncredit programs are developed in partnership with credit faculty, who are given the right of first refusal to teach noncredit programs. This approach helps to develop a more collaborative relationship between credit and noncredit programs, avoiding a sense of competition.

The Westchester administrator noted that aligning and articulating noncredit short-term workforce and credit programs can result in the former serving as a “feeder” into the latter. Another means of connection Savannah pursues is to develop noncredit add-ons to credit programs, such as a short-term microcredential program for nurses to meet niche employer needs.

Colleges in states that have FTE-based funding typically also have approval processes that may influence quality. These approval processes range in length and rigor, though they are always less complex and time consuming than approval processes for credit-bearing programs. In Oregon, regulations set by the Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development require noncredit training certificates to include a minimum of 18 hours and a maximum of 210 hours of instruction. In Maryland, Anne Arundel receives state funding at the same level as credit programs for its workforce-related noncredit programs. As part of this funding, the college follows the state’s code of regulations for course approvals, which can take two to three months to complete. The process requires the college to map out course learning objectives. Courses remain on the approved list once they meet the standard as long as they are active. If a course shows no enrollment for two years, it must be reviewed, reactivated, or removed from the active course inventory list. In states where there is an approval process, it can take between a few months to a half year to complete. Some states provide extensive guidance on the approval process. Guidelines in California state that noncredit



courses must meet “standards of good practice established in the field of curriculum design” (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2019).

Competition for grant funds may be another prompt for quality, depending on the way the grants are structured. Quality is an incentive for Baton Rouge Community College, for example, because it competes for state funds called “Workforce Training Rapid Response” grants that are sector-related and performance-based.

Some colleges work with vendors as another strategy to promote quality noncredit programming. While much is unknown about the use of vendors in noncredit programming, one of the reasons colleges seek these partnerships is because they believe in the quality of the courses and programs the vendors offer. Lorain and Pierce, for example, have a strong working relationship with EdToGo/Cengage Learning and include many of that vendor’s courses among their program offerings.

A few respondents reported that their colleges relied on student demand as an indicator of program quality. In the words of one respondent, “for adult students, working students, time is precious; they are not going to be led by the nose. The program will not survive.” All of the colleges with affiliated respondents who mentioned student demand as an indication of quality also had state funding that established quality standards for their programs, so within those contexts, students would be choosing among programs that met a minimal quality standard.

Some colleges consider earnings associated with occupations that noncredit programs prepare students to obtain as a marker of quality. As part of the Community College Growth Engine Fund, Pima Community College is focusing on programs that “lead to jobs with verifiable salary increases as more training is acquired.” In response to concerns that noncredit programs may prepare students for low-wage jobs, our Mount San Antonio College respondent pointed out that some jobs may be low wage but still slightly better quality, for example providing health benefits, than jobs students may have had before completing a noncredit program.

Despite the import role student outcomes data plays in measuring and understanding quality, colleges struggle with data systems to track noncredit, making it difficult to understand noncredit students and their outcomes. Fewer than half of the colleges in our study track demographic information on their students, and only a handful of respondents said their colleges track student outcomes such as completions (five colleges) and labor market outcomes (two colleges). Some



colleges have advanced their noncredit data collection efforts by integrating their noncredit students into college-wide tracking systems; four colleges reported they use Banner to track their noncredit students. Respondents from several other colleges reported they use separate data systems – and preferred to do so because of the challenges of capturing their programs and students in traditional college systems. Pima Community College recently integrated its noncredit and credit data systems. A Pierce College respondent cited an 82 percent completion rate for its online career training programs. Kirkwood Community College is part of Iowa’s statewide effort to link noncredit student data with wage records data at the state level. Monroe Community College in New York conducts its own match with state unemployment insurance records data to get information on both credit and noncredit student outcomes; this effort was an outgrowth of that college’s experience conducting evaluation of their U.S. Department of Labor TAACCCT grant.²

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The interview data show that community college noncredit workforce education is quite variable across the 28 colleges we spoke with, and many of its aspects are undergoing transformation. While there are commonalities across the programs offered, there are also substantial shifts under way in how the offerings are organized, conceived, marketed, and delivered.

Noncredit workforce education has always been known as the nimble division of community colleges, and that was apparent in our interviewees’ descriptions of their strong efforts to be quickly responsive to both students’ and employers’ needs. Being fully responsive to those needs increasingly entails offering programs of shorter duration as well as offering a wider range and higher number of programs through the use of vendors and consortia. Some colleges are marketing these offerings in savvy new ways. We also heard of inspiring efforts to train and place into jobs the lowest-skilled and most needy adults. And, significantly, almost all of the colleges are making efforts to better connect noncredit with credit-bearing programs. This movement acknowledges the continuing higher value of credit and seems to suggest that aligning the two boosts the quality of noncredit. In most cases, all of this work is being done without dedicated state formula funding.

How to ensure quality for purposes of policy remains an open question. The colleges in this research all share an awareness of the importance of offering quality programs for their students. Respondents report using a range of strategies to promote quality in their colleges’ noncredit programs. It remains

² The U.S. Department of Labor’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program, which awarded grants to colleges to improve worker training from 2011-2014.



an open question, however, whether and how these strategies actually lead to quality programs, and how quality can best be measured given the different aims of the many offerings. Yet, determining approaches to ensure programs are designed in a quality manner and lead to quality outcomes for students is essential as public investment increasingly turns to these programs.

Additional research is clearly needed. More information is needed on how colleges approach quality as their mission, on the student populations they target, and on organizational structural shifts, and as colleges slowly are able to track more information on their students, an analysis of their demographics and outcomes is key. Colleges and states will need to consider systems for data collection given the growth in interest in noncredit and the potential it brings for new sources of state and federal funding. These data are essential to resolving the debate on the role, function, and success of noncredit workforce education in bettering students' lives.



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APPENDIX A

LIST OF PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

COLLEGE	STATE
Alamo Colleges District	TX
Anne Arundel Community College	MD
Baton Rouge Community College	LA
Bellevue College	WA
Broward College	FL
Central New Mexico Community College	NM
Eastern Maine Community College	ME
Glendale Community College	CA
Greenville Technical College	SC
Harper College	IL
Kirkwood Community College	IA
Lone Star College	TX
Lorain County Community College	OH
Macomb Community College	MI
Middlesex College	NJ
Monroe Community College	NY
Mount Hood Community College	OR
Mount San Antonio College	CA
Northern Virginia Community College	VA
Owensboro Community & Technical College	KY
Patrick Henry Community College	VA
Pierce College	WA
Pima Community College	AZ
Salt Lake Community College	UT
San Diego College of Continuing Education	CA
Savannah Technical College	GA
Valencia College	FL
Wake Technical Community College	NC
Westchester Community College	NY



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