State Level Non-Degree Credential Quality Ecosystems: Beginning Case Studies in Four States

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About the Authors

Eliza K. Peterson is a researcher with the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

Michelle Van Noy is the director of the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

As interest in non-degree credentials (NDCs) increases in states across the country, many are choosing to invest in funding for these often-short-term pathways to careers. Yet little data is available on the outcomes of NDCs, and systems are not in place to ensure their quality and value for learners. Because states are often the focus of efforts to address NDC quality (Van Noy et al., 2023), a deeper look at how states are approaching this issue is important to understanding this emerging area of inquiry. In this brief, we seek to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of the NDC quality ecosystem at the state level by exploring unique state contexts and answering questions based on our mapping of the non-degree credential quality ecosystem. Our research is guided by the following questions:

> » What organizations are involved in addressing issues related to quality within state non-degree credential ecosystems (both as providers and as influencers of quality)?
> » How do these organizations relate to each other and to the state across different types of NDCs?
> » How are key NDC quality-promotion mechanisms—transparency, norm setting, regulation, and/or capacity building—employed by states and the organizations within them?
> » How do unique state funding mechanisms influence the activity, data collection and analysis, and quality standards of the state's noncredit ecosystem?

Drawing on publicly available reports and information, we begin this brief by analyzing national efforts focused on building state-level NDC quality systems to identify areas of overlap. We then focus in on four purposefully selected sample states to report our initial observations on their emergent systems for NDC data collection and quality. We conclude with recommendations for ongoing research to examine state NDC quality efforts.

National NDC Quality Influencers on States

Several national-level influencer organizations are working with states to shape their NDC quality efforts, as outlined in our previously published landscape scan of NDC quality (Van Noy et al., 2023). Based on that review of NDC quality influences at the state level, as well as a review of related state-level initiatives such as those focused on skills-based hiring and learning and employment records (LERs), we compiled a table that displays which states are participating in these potentially cross-cutting, state-level efforts being led by the national organizations currently driving the field. Although some NDC quality efforts are localized to a region, industry, or college system (e.g., Education Design Lab's Community College Growth Engine Fund initiative centers serving specific community colleges/systems), for the purposes of this analysis, we focused on initiatives facilitated by national-level organizations that are influencing policy at the highest levels of state government.

Our nationwide analysis revealed that some states are involved in multiple initiatives led by these national-level NDC influencer organizations. Alabama topped the list as the state most deeply involved in NDC initiatives, participating in the work of eight of our nine focus organizations, and Louisiana and Colorado followed closely behind, each participating in the NDC initiatives of seven organizations. Neither Delaware nor West Virginia were

involved in any of the NDC influencer organizations that we looked at. For a more in-depth look at each state's level of involvement in national NDC quality initiatives/organizations, see Appendix A.

Selected State NDC Quality Efforts

Based on our review of national-level influencers on states, and of states that are actively engaged in NDC quality efforts, we sought out states that would provide opportunities for deeper examination of the NDC quality ecosystem. We chose our focus states—Alabama, Colorado, Tennessee, and North Carolina—based on their roles as leaders in NDC quality efforts. Some of these states have been deeply involved in the initiatives of national-level organizations, particularly the efforts of the National Skills Coalition (NSC), Education Strategy Group (ESG), and Credential Engine, to build state capacity around NDC quality and data infrastructure.

This section provides a preliminary analysis of the state-level NDC quality ecosystem in these states that is structured around three themes that emerged through our analysis of national quality influencer organizations and state policy: quality criteria, data infrastructure, and governance. Delineating quality criteria will pave the way for states to cut through the confusion of the field to determine and promote the NDC programs that lead to better student outcomes (Van Noy et al., 2019). Building up the data infrastructure for noncredit programs will allow states to assess and quantify these outcomes and, hopefully, be able to disaggregate their results by various demographic factors to ensure equity among different groups. The role of governance becomes more crucial as data collection becomes more robust, as data collection often raises questions of ownership: Where are these data housed? Who oversees the collection, maintenance, and analysis of these data? In the world of NDC quality, these questions are paramount, as different agencies may claim ownership of noncredit data, quality definitions, and other matters of great importance to the NDC ecosystem. Through our exploration of these three themes in each of our four focus states, we will begin to promote understanding of the complex intersections between states and NDC quality efforts, and of the organizational ecosystem at play.

Quality Criteria

National organizations play a notable role in states' efforts to develop quality criteria or frameworks and in codifying those efforts through state legislatures. In our sample of states, NSC and ESG were the two most significant influencer organizations in terms of credential quality. Alabama, Colorado, and Tennessee all participated in the NSC's Quality Postsecondary Credential Policy Academy. Alabama and Colorado participated in the first cohort of the Academy, and Tennessee participated in its second cohort. While North Carolina did not participate in NSC's Academy, it was a participant in ESG's Credentials of Value Institute. Establishing quality criteria is a key step in the process of norm setting, which is essential in the "Wild West" of NDCs (Van Noy et al., 2019).[1]

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1   These initiatives are: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' Comprehensive Learning Record Member Institution States, Credential Engine State Partners, Education and Employment Research Center's Learning Community, Education Strategy Group's Credentials of Value Institute, the National Council of State Legislatures' Working Group on Nondegree Credentials, the National Governor's Association's Skills-Driven State Community of Practice, the National Skills Coalition's Quality

Alabama

Alabama began to establish quality criteria and processes for NDCs in recent years. The state participated in the first cohort of the NSC's Quality Postsecondary Credential Policy Academy in 2020 and have recently begun working toward creating and codifying a framework for NDC quality (Cruse et al., 2023). The Alabama Committee on Credentialing and Career Pathways (ACCCP) "is responsible for creating a list of in-demand occupations regionally and statewide, including identifying competency models and career pathways linked to [them]" (Cruse et al., 2023). The ACCCP will publish the Compendium of Valuable Credentials, a list of career pathways that identifies which valuable credentials will be mapped to those in-demand occupations (Credential Engine, n.d.). The Compendium "identif[ies] credentials on the state's registry that have broad industry appeal as well as specific industry specialization" (Cruse et al., 2023). These credentials of value, which will include completion certificates for Registered Apprenticeships, will be recognized by the state and receive funding support (US Department of Education, n.d.) and will be defined using the language developed by Credential Engine (Credential Engine, 2018). Education and training providers must agree to publish information about their credentials to the Credential Registry in order to be included on the list (Credential Engine, 2018). Credentials must also be vetted by Technical Advisory Committees (TACs) to see if they meet a set of quality criteria (Cruse et al., 2023; Moore, 2020). TACs will be created for each of the 16 career clusters and 79 career pathways to create a competency-based framework for each in-demand occupation within a pathway, building up from basic skills (Johnson, 2019). The state is also preparing to apply quality criteria to their Eligible Training Providers List (ETPL) and is planning to add a quality requirement to the list of eligibility conditions providers must meet to receive WIOA or Perkins money (Cruse et al., 2023). This quality requirement—to be on the Compendium or to be aligned with ACCCP lists of in-demand occupations and pathways—has already been adopted by the State Workforce Development Board.

Colorado

In recent years, Colorado has made significant strides in collecting and assessing NDCs. Previously, there had been little consistency in the definition of "non-degree credential" across organizations, but through their work as part of the 2020–21 cohort of the NSC Quality Postsecondary Credential Policy Academy, Colorado was able to reach consensus among stakeholders for defining quality (Vilsack, 2021). Using guidance from the NSC and CE's Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL), Colorado was able to create a canonical record of all of the credentials offered in the state (Credential Engine, 2018; Cruse et al., 2023). The NSC, which helped Colorado adopt a quality framework for specific policies or programs, set the stage for Colorado's latest quality initiative, called the Quality and In-Demand Credentials Framework (Cruse et al., 2023). Released in October 2023, the framework was developed with input from business, education, government, and non-governmental organizations including the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC), the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE), the Colorado Community College System (CCCS), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and Colorado Succeeds (CWDC, 2023). The framework, which will also be used to build up the Colorado ETPL, is aligned with the state's Talent Pipeline report and gives special consideration to the highly regionalized industries that are common in some areas of the state (Orihuela & Walker, 2023). It identifies four

signals of credential quality: demand, evidence of skills, employment outcomes, and stackability. Credentials can bypass the rubric, however, by meeting specific, more stringent criteria such as being part of a Registered Apprenticeship Program (CWDC, 2023; talentFOUND, 2023). The two-page tool will live on state websites and be reposted by the various institutions involved in its development to their own web pages if they choose to do so (Orihuela & Walker, 2023).

North Carolina

Stakeholders throughout North Carolina are working to promote quality non-degree credentials (QNDCs). North Carolina was one of six states that participated in ESG's Credentials of Value Institute, where education leaders were provided with technical support to use ESG's toolkit for promotion of non-degree credential quality and attainment. North Carolina's participation in the Institute allowed them to engage deeply with stakeholders "to learn more about the types of credentials and skills most needed and valued in the state's workforce" (ESG, n.d.). The North Carolina Workforce Credentials Advisory Council has produced a list of valued workforce credentials that "identifies priority non-degree credentials that are valued by employers and puts those who earn them on a path to a sustainable wage career" (NCcareers.org, 2023). These credentials are sorted into four categories: Foundational, Essential, Career, and Advanced, based on their value to employers, their ties to occupations that offer family-sustaining wages, the potential for career growth, and whether they are designed for upskilling current employees.

Tennessee

Tennessee also participated in the NSC's Quality Postsecondary Credential Policy Academy (Cruse, 2023). The NSC helped Tennessee develop quality definitions and promote policy agendas to improve attainment levels, equity, and state data capacities (Cruse, 2023). The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) has established an NDC Taskforce with the goal of creating a statewide definition for quality credentials, aligned with the NSC model, which includes defining, promoting, and developing data tracking policies around quality credentials (Tennessee Department of Higher Education, March 2023). Tennessee has definitions for all five state quality criteria identified by the NSC: demand, mastery, earnings outcomes, stackability, and portability (Cruse et al., 2023). Outside of THEC's work with the NSC's Policy Academy, the state has adopted quality assurance criteria for specific policies or programs (Cruse et al., 2023). For example, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) is currently implementing quality criteria for Perkins V-related career and technical education programs (Cruse, 2023). They also have a list of Tennessee Promoted Student Industry Credentials, which classifies student industry credentials as Recognized, Valued, or Preferred based on an evaluation rubric that prioritizes the value judgment of employers and industry (TDOE, 2023). In the past, the state has also done noncredit-quality work with ExcelinEd. Yet another group of stakeholders involved in Tennessee's QNDC work are the regional workforce boards. They create their own lists of approved credentials, but they receive no official guidance from the state with regard to minimum requirements that approved credentials must meet— each regional board has its own ways of determining quality. Legislation aimed at defining quality NDC programs (2023 TN S 404, 2023 TN H 391) was proposed during the last legislative session but has not yet been approved. Advocates hope to pass a bill on the topic in January 2024, when the next session begins.

Data Infrastructure

Credential Engine was the most notable influencer in terms of data among our focus states, as they were involved in data efforts in both Alabama and Colorado. The Southern Regional Data Collaborative and the Coleridge Institute were particularly influential for matters of noncredit data in Tennessee. Though North Carolina's Forsyth County is a regional partner of Credential Engine, the state was not deeply involved with the work of outside influencers in terms of noncredit data as their focus was more on internal collaboration. Having a well-curated and easily accessible dataset is a building block toward promoting transparency in noncredit education. Capacity building is also an essential part of the process of building a noncredit data infrastructure—states need sustainable, accurate data collection processes in order to have quality data to analyze.

Alabama

In Alabama, the noncredit data infrastructure has been built up under the banner of Success Plus. Data has been an important component of this initiative, especially given the Success Plus leadership's choice to focus on a numerical attainment goal, rather than on the state's goal of 60 percent of Alabama's adults holding a degree or credential by 2025. Further, Success Plus expanded its target field from adults only to all Alabamians between the ages of 16 and 64 (Spencer, 2022). The Success Plus initiative encouraged the state to build a secure system for tracking attainment and workforce entry and, in turn, encouraged better data practices across state agencies (Spencer, 2022). Working with Credential Engine, Lumina Foundation, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, and the Alabama Workforce Council, the governor's office launched the Alabama Credential Registry in September 2022, which collects information on all of the state's degrees and noncredit offerings, e.g., certificates, licenses, and NDCs (Jhons, 2021; Council of State Governments, 2022). Under Success Plus, the state also created tools like the Alabama Terminal on Linking and Analyzing Statistics (ATLAS), the state's P20W longitudinal data system, and Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool (ACCET) so employers, jobseekers, and students could access LMI information and both upload and view digital resumes (Credential Engine, n.d.; Office of the Governor of Alabama, 2023). ATLAS and ACCET are both under the purview of the Alabama Department of Labor, while the Alabama Commission on Higher Education is in charge of data collection (Credential Engine, n.d.). This work has been heavily influenced by the state's collaboration with Credential Engine.

Colorado

Credential Engine has been working with Colorado to build on the preexisting My Colorado Journey project. My Colorado Journey is a cross-agency, public-private data trust that aims to break down siloes and create new datasets to connect services, programs, education, and training programs via a one-stop portal (Credential Engine, n.d.). Colorado also plans to use Credential Engine's Credential Registry to catalog all credentials offered in the state, including those on the ETPL. Additionally, Colorado was able to implement policies that promote NDC data accessibility, including data on apprenticeships, with the help of the NSC Policy Academy (Vilsack, 2021).

Tennessee

The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), the body in charge of the state's community and technical colleges, has been working to facilitate large-scale, longitudinal data collection via implementation of a Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR), which will display a student's entire academic and co-curricular journey (Learn & Work Ecosystem Library, 2022). Additionally, Tennessee became a state partner of the Coleridge Initiative as part of their work with the Southern Regional Data Collaborative, which is designed to help improve states' data practices (Kuehn, 2022). Tennessee is interested in sending representatives to various data policy and noncredit mobility meetings through the Education Commission of the States (ECS), Credential Engine, and ESG. In Tennessee, data availability varies across sectors. Though the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology have a single centralized student information system that is used and analyzed by TBR, many obstacles hinder the data collection and analysis process. Tennessee community colleges, on the other hand, have not yet begun to collect individual-level data on noncredit students and have not established a unified system in place to collect noncredit data on the program level.

North Carolina

North Carolina has been collecting limited noncredit data for a long time, though these data are limited in scope. Internal capacity, the capacity of partner licensing and credentialing organizations, and cost have been roadblocks preventing them from developing a more robust noncredit data system. The Department of Commerce's Labor & Economic Analysis Division runs the North Carolina Business & Occupational License Database (NCBOLD), which allows consumers, entrepreneurs, and other individuals to access and search information about licenses and their associated regulatory organizations (NCBOLD, n.d.). NCBOLD stores business licenses (for example, liquor licenses) as well as occupational ones. Data for NCBOLD are collected annually by the associated organizations, as required by state law, and then used for various state purposes, such as maintaining the NC Workforce Credentials Advisory Council's list of valued workforce credentials (available at NCcareers.org). Noncredit stakeholders in the state are also working on building a credential warehouse, with an eye toward contributing to the state's attainment data processes. This process is being managed by the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Government Data Analytics Center (GDAC). The GDAC has made significant strides in terms of noncredit data collection although their efforts have been limited by the lack of accessibility and decentralized nature of the data.

Governance

Each state—apart from maybe Alabama, where efforts were somewhat centralized under the ACCCP—had a bevy of organizations involved in the various mechanisms of quality. Government entities involved included departments/agencies of education, higher education, workforce development, public instruction, and commerce, as well as community and technical college systems. In Alabama and Tennessee, the governor's office sponsored postsecondary attainment–themed initiatives—Success Plus and Momentum Year/Drive to 55, respectively—to provide stakeholders and advocates with useful banners under which to organize their efforts. Policy is the key mechanism to keep in mind when discussing governance. State legislatures often lead the charge

in this regard, spurred by the encouragement of national organizations. The NSC has noted that the states that have made the most progress in this realm are those who have a specific body charged with NDC quality work (Cruse et al., 2023). This sometimes happens through executive order or legislation, like in the case of the Alabama Community College System.

Alabama

In Alabama, Governor Ivey's Success Plus plan, a statewide postsecondary attainment goal, has played a key role in the state's efforts to identify and promote QNDCs. The governor's office is just one of the many players in the game of noncredit quality in Alabama. The state uses significant cross-agency collaboration in their efforts to promote quality, with involvement from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, the Alabama Workforce Council, and the Alabama Community College System, among other organizations (Cruse et al., 2023). Notably, the state created a joint committee of the Alabama Workforce Council comprised of public and private stakeholders—the ACCCP—via the Alabama Industry Recognized and Registered Apprenticeship Program Act (Act 2019-506) (Cruse et al., 2023). As discussed earlier, the Act mandates the ACCCP with creating a list of the state's in-demand occupations along with a list of the competency models and career pathways that prepare students for employment in those fields.

Colorado

In Colorado, NDCs are under the care of CWDC, with partners across various state agencies and nonprofits, most notably CDHE, CCCS, CDE, and Colorado Succeeds (CWDC, 2023). These groups worked together, considering input from local employers, educators, and workforce boards, to create a quality framework for NDCs. The CDHE has been identified as the leader in efforts to develop a quality framework (Cruse et al., 2023). Governance of data collection is distributed among multiple entities, with noncredit data being maintained by various departments, and state partners such as the University of Denver.

North Carolina

In North Carolina, nonprofit organization myFutureNC has been the locus of much of the state's noncredit quality work. It is currently in the process of transitioning into the state's Department of Commerce. North Carolina's QNDC work differs from that of other states in that their promoted list of credentials is more cross-sector (K–12, community colleges, Department of Commerce, Department of Public Instruction, etc.) rather than situated solely underneath a certain agency. NC Workforce Credentials Advisory Council maintains a list of valued workforce credentials that is housed on NCcareers.org, the state's online career exploration website. For a credential to be included on this list, providers must fill out an application that is then assessed by the Credential Review Committee. The Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Commerce, and the Governor's Office on Business and Education are co-leaders in this process.

Future Directions for Research

In this brief, we focused our attention on state-level efforts to support the NDC quality ecosystem, particularly those shaped by national-level quality influencers. Our preliminary analysis is intended to provide a beginning snapshot of the NDC quality ecosystem within each state, including their quality standards, data infrastructure, and governance. Our analysis of our four focus states led to some preliminary characterizations of these states and how they have been developing and promoting quality NDCs. Alabama's efforts were largely guided by governor's office–based reforms; Colorado had an influencer organization–heavy environment; Tennessee experienced some cross-agency complications; and North Carolina was somewhat nonprofit-influenced. More research is needed to fully vet these impressions and to expand our understanding of the NDC ecosystem in each state and how it functions.

Further research would provide a deeper understanding of the existing and emerging NDC quality ecosystem in states to inform policy and practice by unpacking on a more granular level how these state-level structures for quality are beginning to function within that ecosystem, as well as where they still need growth. This research would be guided by the questions laid out in the introduction. The ecosystem map outlined in our prior analysis provides a roadmap for states to examine the many organizations that are involved in NDCs—both as providers and quality influencers—across different types of NDCs. Case studies of states, including interviews and surveys, would allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of how the NDC quality ecosystem works across NDC type, as well as within particular industry sectors.

These preliminary observations have inspired questions like: How do states change policies and practices surrounding NDCs over time? Through which mechanisms are quality influencers working to make these changes and to influence quality? How are states ensuring that NDCs are beneficial to credential-seekers by leading to better employment outcomes for credential-seekers? There are a multitude of issues to examine state by state, and they depend on a variety of factors such as the role of the governor's office; the departmental structure; the potential for collaboration; the relationship between the state and its public colleges/public college system; and the buy-in from state officials, college staff, and other stakeholders.

A better understanding of the development of these state-level NDC quality ecosystems is essential in order to reflect on this process and to support the improvement efforts of the states and organizations that work within them. It is also important to share lessons with other states whose systems are not yet as fully developed. Careful review and reflection on the development of NDC quality systems will ensure that these newly emerging systems are designed to provide effective oversight across NDCs to support learners' goals and ensure quality and equity for learners.

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Appendix

Table A: State Involvement in Cross-Cutting State-Level NDC Quality Initiatives, in Descending Order by Number of Initiatives Engaged

	NCSL NDC Working Group	Credential Engine Partners	EERC Learning Community	NGA's Community of Practice	PSEOC	AACRAO's CLR Members	NSC's Policy Academy	ESG's CoV Institute	Count
AL	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		7
LA	X	X	X		X	X	X		6
CO	X	X		X	X	X	X		6
WA	X	X	X	X				X	5
OH		X	X		X		X	X	5
MA	X	X	X		X			X	5
FL	X	X	X		X*	X		X	5
IN		X	X	X	X				4
TX		X	X		X	X			4
MN		X			X	X	X		4
MO		X			X	X	X		4
CT		X	X	X	X				4
OR		X			X	X	X		4
VA	X		X	X			X		4
IA	X	X	X		X				4
NC			X			X		X	3
AK	X	X		X					3
MI		X	X		X				3
NJ		X	X				X		3
UT			X		X	X			3
TN			X			X	X		3
GA	X		X		X				3
IL	X	X			X				3
ME		X	X		X				3
NH		X		X		X			3
OK				X	X	X			3
SC			X		X	X			3
WI		X			X	X			3
KY			X	X				X	3
MD			X			X			2
PA		X			X				2
NY		X			X	X			3
HI	X				X				2

About

The Education and Employment Research Center

Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) is housed within the School of Management and Labor Relations. EERC conducts research and evaluation on programs and policies at the intersection of education and employment. Our work strives to improve policy and practice so that institutions may provide educational programs and pathways that ensure individuals obtain the education needed for success in the workplace, and employers have a skilled workforce to meet their human resource needs. For more information on our mission and current research, visit smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc.

EERC Areas of Focus

Community College Innovation	Student Choices and Pathways	STEM and Technician Education	Noncredit Education and Non-Degree Credentials	Education and Labor Market Connections

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About Philanthropy at Walmart

Walmart.org represents the philanthropic efforts of Walmart and the Walmart Foundation. By focusing where the business has unique strengths, Walmart.org works to tackle key social and environmental issues and collaborate with others to spark long-lasting systemic change. Walmart has stores in 24 countries, employs more than 2 million associates and does business with thousands of suppliers who, in turn, employ millions of people. Walmart.org is helping people live better by supporting programs to accelerate upward job mobility for frontline workers, advance equity, address hunger, build inclusive economic opportunity for people insupply chains, protect and restore nature, reduce waste and emissions, and build strong communities where Walmart operates. To learn more, visit www.walmart.org or connect on Twitter @Walmartorg.

Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center

Janice H. Levin Building

94 Rockafeller Road

Piscataway, New Jersey 0885

smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc | Email: eerc@smlr.rutgers.edu

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