Closing the Credit-Noncredit Divide

Bridging the Gap in Postsecondary Education to Expand Opportunity for Low-Wage Working Adults

AT A GLANCE

This report examines the structural divide between for-credit and noncredit postsecondary education and the problems it presents for people seeking better jobs with higher pay. It highlights innovative ways that some community colleges are trying to bridge the gap nationally—creating more seamless pathways between credit and noncredit coursework--and provides policy considerations to encourage more colleges and statewide systems to adopt these models.

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OCTOBER 2019

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Lumina Foundation for their generous support of this work.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the faculty and administrators from the following community colleges and organizations who took time to speak with us and provide their valuable insights to the development of this report:

- Achieving the Dream
- The Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges
- The Kentucky Career and Technical College System
- Kingsborough Community College, New York
- Long Beach City College, California
- Lorain County Community College, Ohio
- The Louisiana Community and Technical College System
- Mt. San Antonio College, California
- The North Carolina Community College System
- The Northern Virginia Community College

Additionally, we would like to thank the following JFF staff: Mary Clagett, Lexi Barrett, and Erica Cuevas for their leadership and guidance throughout development of the report; Jenny Freeman and Rachel McDonnell for their peer review, experience, and insight; and our communications team for editing and graphic design.

About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Join us as we build a future that works. www.jff.org

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Introduction

As more and more jobs require new skills to keep up with technological change, more and more people turn to postsecondary education and training to boost their career prospects. But the path forward is often unclear; the array of options overwhelming: a single class, a certification, a certificate, an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree. Some of these credentials are for-credit while others are noncredit. This is one of the most important distinctions in a credential program, but is often misunderstood.

The question is particularly fraught for low-wage workers—who make up the vast majority of America's untapped workforce—and who have little time or money to spend on skill development programs but can't find good jobs without them.[1] Earning a "noncredit" credential (a designation that means it doesn't provide college credit) is often the most attractive option for this group because they tend to be more flexible than for-credit programs. Noncredit workforce training is rarely eligible for federal financial aid and, therefore, does not need to meet the same federal requirements. As a result, noncredit

courses are typically shorter term, with minimal admissions requirements and adaptable schedules.

But there's a catch, with potentially significant consequences. For anyone looking to advance their career by earning a college degree or advanced certification down the road, it's not easy to transfer noncredit courses to credit-bearing programs. Many for-credit programs require students who already took noncredit courses—even earned noncredit credentials—to retake nearly identical classes to earn the credits needed for completion.

This poses a big barrier to continuing one's education, as it requires more money and more time than most working adults can spare. It's no wonder that only a fraction of noncredit students ever go on to earn a for-credit degree or credential.

However, many colleges see the importance of taking steps to be more responsive to the diverse needs of today's students, in order to increase attainment of both in-demand workforce certificates and advanced credentials and degrees.[2] Some are finding innovative ways to bridge the gap between noncredit and for-credit programs. They are using proactive planning, systemic restructuring, policy reforms, and cultural shifts to

become more inclusive of a wide range of educational trajectories.

This paper examines the structural divide between noncredit and for-credit postsecondary education and the impact on individuals seeking better jobs with higher pay. It also highlights innovative ways that community colleges are trying to narrow the divide nationally—creating more seamless pathways between noncredit and for-credit programming. Last, it provides policy considerations for policymakers and relevant stakeholders to help encourage more community colleges and statewide systems to adopt these models.

Characteristics of Credit and Noncredit Workforce Education

Noncredit education includes both workforce education and training programs as well as developmental education (adult basic education, remedial courses, and GED preparation) and English as a second language courses. In this paper, we focus specifically on noncredit workforce training and the short-term industry credentials that can help individuals quickly gain the knowledge and skills needed for employment or advancement.

Workforce education first emerged as a major mission of community colleges in the 1950s and 60s. As technology advanced throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s, giving rise to the global economy, the need for customized workforce training grew. By 1999, noncredit enrollment exceeded credit enrollment by more than 8 percent nationally.[3] Today, an average of 5 million Americans access noncredit training each year.[4]

From the beginning, noncredit workforce programs were held to different standards than credit-bearing programs, in areas such as faculty qualifications, curriculum content, and reporting requirements.

Most noncredit programs remain ineligible for federal financial aid because they adhere to different standards than for-credit programs. For colleges all across the country, these circumstances resulted in the philosophical and structural divides between credit and noncredit programs that, in many regions, still exist today.[5]

> "The current structure of workforce education at community colleges, with credit and noncredit programs existing in silos, may not be fully optimized to bolster local economies while giving students—especially working adults—the best chance of building sustainable careers."
>
> —Jim Jacobs,
> Macomb Community College

The graphic below highlights key differences between credit and noncredit courses and programs. It focuses on six characteristics—potential credentials earned, financial aid eligibility, entry requirements, curriculum focus, measurement of course or program length, and accreditation. Although the descriptions are generally true, we recognize that exceptions exist.

KEY DIFFERENCES

FOR-CREDIT		NONCREDIT
Intended to result in a degree (associate's or bachelor's) or a professional credential (i.e. a licensed practical nurse certification)		Intended to result in a short-term certificate, industry-recognized certification, or other occupational credential
Eligible for federal financial aid, such as Pell grants, as long as the student meets all requirements		Not eligible for federal financial aid (unless courses are woven into a for-credit program)
Often require prerequisite courses, entry exams, or evidence of prerequisite course performance		Usually do not require prerequisite courses, entry exams, or basic skills testing
Typically offer a wide variety of general education, occupational courses, and electives courses		Focus mainly on niche skills or competencies necessary for a specific job or for employment in a specific industry
Measured in "credit hours" (i.e., associate's degree programs typically require at least 60 credits or four to five semesters of full-time enrollment)		Measured in "seat time" (hours students are required to attend class per course), which varies greatly, though most can be completed in less than a year
Programs can be accredited by regional industry-led accrediting bodies, though many are not		Programs are not accredited (though the educational institution offering the program may be accredited)

Drivers of Credit and Noncredit Distinction

The decision to designate a course or program as credit or noncredit usually rests with faculty and administrators at individual institutions. In interviews with community college leaders, we found that, while each institution has a unique program development and approval process, several common factors influence decisions. These include: (1) the speed at which a program can be approved, as employers often need talent fast and community colleges cannot wait for accreditors to formally approve the course or program; (2) the depth of employers' skill needs, as some employers require mid-level skills while others require entry-level skills; and (3) whether the program aligns to an existing degree program.

There are also a number of systemic factors that influence the process:

Funding models for noncredit workforce programs vary by state. In addition to tuition income and revenue from contractual customized training for employers, some colleges receive state funding for noncredit programming. This includes fixed amounts for noncredit programs; reimbursements based on "seat time;" and "bundled funding," which allows colleges to spend a proportion of general funds on workforce education. Some receive no general funds for noncredit programs.

Policy incentives that allocate funding to colleges or financial aid to students based on degree attainment can lead to workforce programs being designated as for-credit. Such incentives, such as funding for sector initiatives, can also help establish deeper connections between industry and workforce training divisions, resulting in a greater demand for noncredit programs offered by the college.

Staffing obligations can lead colleges to designate a program as noncredit in order to enable the hiring of adjunct or part-time faculty that do not require tenure. Adversely, in states where colleges receive funding based on the number of full-time faculty employed, courses can being designated as for-credit as a way to increase funding allocations.

Elements of programmatic accreditation, such as faculty qualifications and curriculum requirements, can influence how colleges determine credit or noncredit status for a course. When colleges want to ensure that courses will transfer to four-year universities as part of a pathway, colleges must make sure the course meets accreditation requirements and designate the course as for-credit. Programs that are urgently needed, and require a more focused, discrete set of skills that are not part of a pathway to a four-year institution, are more likely to be designated as noncredit.

MYTHS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

of Noncredit Workforce Programs

▶ **MYTH** Noncredit programs aren't high quality because they aren't accredited.

TRUTH Many workforce programs undergo extensive institutional accreditation processes that include assessments of program content design and delivery, faculty standards, and achievement of a variety of benchmarks prioritizing alignment to regional labor market needs and employer relevance.

▶ **MYTH** Noncredit programs aren't as rigorous as credit programs.

TRUTH Noncredit programs tend to be shorter in length, but can still require students to adhere to a rigorous course of study.

▶ **MYTH** Noncredit programs are more affordable than credit programming.

TRUTH Often, low-income students find their only option for affordable education is a degree program because it is eligible for federal financial aid. Short-term credentials can provide on-ramps to good jobs but are usually not eligible for federal student aid.

▶ **MYTH** Noncredit education isn't as important to colleges as credit education.

TRUTH Depending on local skill needs and how noncredit education is funded within the state, noncredit education may be a lucrative source of income for community colleges and a crucial talent hub for the region.

Measuring the Quality of Noncredit Programs

Workforce programs are often subject to a high level of scrutiny when being evaluated for credit. While some of this scrutiny is due to accreditation standards and institutional processes, a major barrier for credit articulation appears to be college faculty reticence and a perception that workforce education is lower quality.

Models for awarding credit for noncredit learning have traditionally emphasized common accreditation measures such as seat time (the number of hours a student spends in the course), academic rigor, the complexity of learning objectives, and faculty qualifications, with the assumption that more is better for each. Yet studies have shown that program length is not always a reliable indicator of program effectiveness or labor market outcomes, such as earnings.[6] While accreditation is essential to ensuring that colleges focus on academic quality standards, most evaluations place little emphasis on how effective accredited programs are at meeting labor market needs, closing regional skills gaps, and contributing to economic advancement—the primary mission of workforce education.

Given that many workforce divisions are heavily reliant on customized employer training to support their operating costs, they tend to evaluate quality on the degree to which their programs contribute to the competitiveness of regional employers, the economic growth and development of their regions, and the job placement, retention, and wage gains of their students.[7]

A recent report released by the National Skills Coalition, *Expanding Opportunities: Defining Quality Non-Degree Credentials for States*, provides a definition of a quality non-degree credential as "one that provides individuals with the means to equitably achieve their informed employment and educational goals." The report goes on to say that "there must be valid, reliable, and transparent evidence

that the credential satisfies the criteria that constitute quality." It identifies four criteria for determining quality: evidence of substantial job opportunities associated with the credentials; transparent evidence of the competencies mastered by credential holders that align with job opportunities; evidence of increased employment and earnings outcomes of individuals after obtaining the credentials; and to the degree possible, stackability to additional education or training.

The Struggle to Collect Data on Noncredit Programs

A major challenge for students, employers, practitioners, and policymakers trying to determine the quality of noncredit postsecondary programs is the lack of national data about them. Most postsecondary institutions do not have robust and reliable systems in place to collect and analyze comprehensive employment and wage data. As a result, the field does not know that much about the return on investment or outcomes for students in these programs, or even the types of students that gravitate toward noncredit programs across regions and states.

This information gap hinders not only student decision making but also widespread efforts to more seamlessly integrate high-impact noncredit learning into for-credit programs. A 2018 study by the National Skills Coalition found that just 13 states are collecting all or most data on noncredit certificates awarded by publicly funded institutions, and just nine have all or most data on industry certifications, awarded by certification bodies.[8]

One reason for the lack of data is that noncredit programs that

are not eligible for federal financial aid are not required to report student outcomes into a national database. As a result, it falls on individual states and institutions to dedicate their own funding and resources, should they choose to undertake the effort.

The knowledge gaps that stem from a lack of outcomes data include which populations are accessing these programs most frequently and why, and which programs are yielding the greatest return on their investment. Since 2010, 36 states have received one or more rounds of grant funding from the U.S. Department of Labor as part of the National Data Quality Initiative, which is helping to support the creation and sustainability of statewide longitudinal data systems that track student progression from K-12 education through employment.[9]

However, this type of data collection infrastructure takes significant time to design and implement. Then it takes years more before students make the transition from high school to postsecondary education and then on to employment that yields reliable data about the value of those programs in the labor market. Texas received three rounds of funding to expand an already existing data system. The state's Consumer Resource for Education and Workforce Statistics is one of the only robust longitudinal data systems in
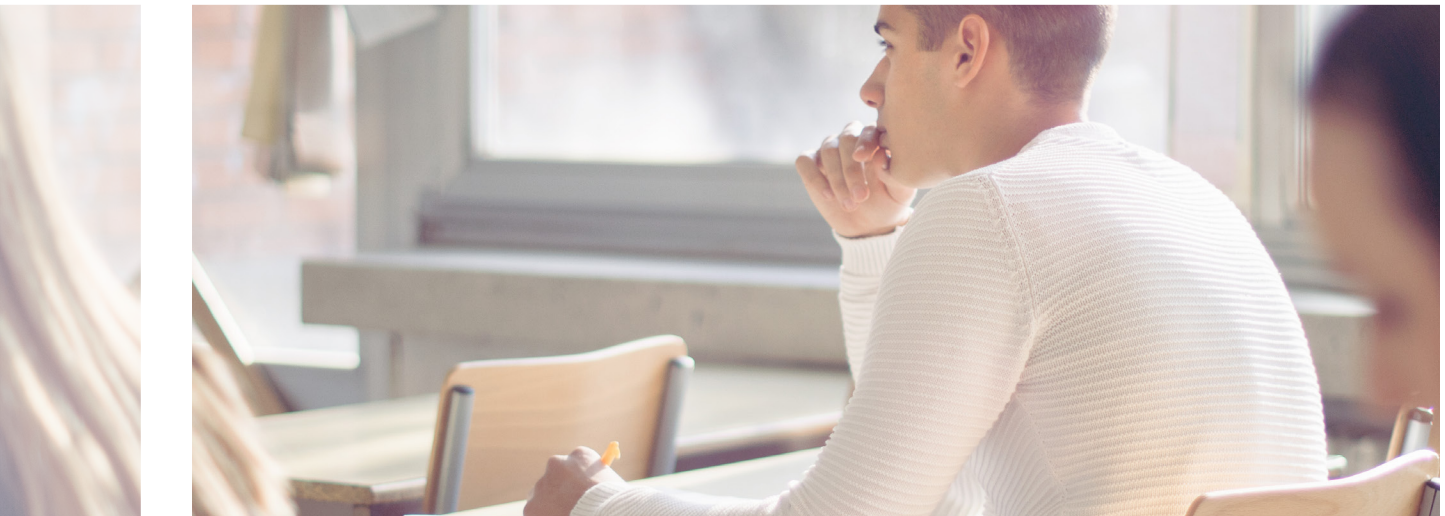
the nation and it's helping students and parents make more informed decisions about their educational investments.[10]

In 2018, Achieving the Dream released several reports and resources highlighting noncredit-to-credit pathway program outcomes from a regional consortium of seven community colleges in the Northeast.[11] The Northeast Resiliency Consortium data compared a cohort of students enrolled in a noncredit-to-credit pathway program (a structured series of courses that begins in noncredit education and allows students to transfer that learning into a for-credit program) versus a cohort of students that were not enrolled in a pathway program. The data revealed that students who were enrolled in a pathway and provided with structures such as counseling, supports, and credit articulation strategies, including prior learning assessments for transferring their noncredit learning to a for-credit program, continued to for-credit programs at almost double the rate compared to students not enrolled in a pathway program. In addition, these students were more likely to gain employment and remain employed three quarters of a year after exit.[12]

A Regional Glimpse at Noncredit Program Data[13]

The Northeast Resiliency Consortium was awarded a Round III Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. To increase the vitality and strength of their local economies, a consortium of community colleges in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York focused on narrowing skills gaps by developing stackable credentials that students could combine to be better prepared for employment in sectors that are critical to the resilience of communities, including health care, information technology, and environmental technologies. Goals of this work were to create pathways from noncredit-to-credit programs and provide comprehensive career, personal, and academic support services to participants. Despite only representing the northeast region of the country, this work and the coinciding data provide a valuable glimpse of demographic and programmatic outcomes for noncredit workforce programs and the potential for these courses to allow individuals to enter into immediate employment or progress on an educational pathway.

A Snapshot of Noncredit Students

College leaders JFF interviewed agreed that colleges' noncredit student mix can vary greatly based on regional demographics, local labor market conditions, the way noncredit programs are funded, and the availability of wraparound support services for those who need them.

In general, workforce development students tend to be older and more demographically diverse than students in degree programs. Many are incumbent workers who return to college to upskill and gain credentials to improve their economic mobility.

Demographic data from the Northeast Resiliency Consortium found that a greater proportion of students in noncredit programs at their colleges were female, 25 years or older, and African American when compared to credit programs at these colleges. The consortium also found that noncredit programs had a higher proportion of students whose highest level of learning prior to entering the program was a high school diploma or GED.[14] A 2016 Community College Research Center (CCRC) study revealed similar findings.[15] While some college representatives we spoke with confirmed these trends, others noted that their noncredit enrollment is primarily older, white males simply due to their region's demographics and shifting labor market dynamics.

The CCRC study also found that the primary motivation of noncredit students was to obtain discrete skills or certifications that would help with career progression in the short term.[16] JFF's interviews with colleges support this finding and emphasized that, for students who must work while they attend college and have families to support, minimizing barriers to completion and creating student-centered cultures and systems is a moral imperative.

> **"While it's great that low-income students are en route to a degree, many wish there was a quicker, more affordable path to employment, especially those facing economic hardships."**
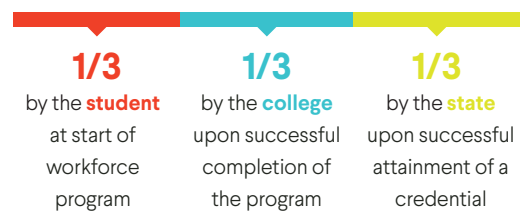>
> —Dr. Monty Sullivan, Louisiana Community and Technical College System

Many learners enter noncredit courses through federally funded employment and training programs such as those offered by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. These programs cover the costs of noncredit postsecondary courses and offer community-based resources and financial subsidies to help support the most basic needs of low-income students and dislocated workers (under WIOA) until they are able to complete training and find gainful employment. The programs provide participants with critical training for in-demand jobs, but often limit training options to shorter-term, noncredit programs offered by a wide range of providers. Many people who complete a noncredit course through federally funded employment and training assistance never pursue further education because the courses can't be transferred to for-credit programs.

State and federal financial aid eligibility also influence student participation in noncredit or credit courses. A majority of noncredit programs require individual out-of-pocket costs, which creates a multifaceted equity gap wherein students may end up choosing programs based not on their career goals, but rather on what they can afford. Low-income individuals who cannot afford high out-of-pocket costs for noncredit courses may choose a longer, for-credit option because of student aid eligibility. Efforts to make financial aid more accessible for high-value workforce credentials and to transfer that learning to credit toward a degree could help address these equity gaps.

Fast Forward, Virginia Community College System[17]

FastForward is an innovative approach to funding short-term education that is helping students complete in-demand workforce credential programs faster and at a lower out-of-pocket cost. Tuition is paid by:

1/3
by the **student**
at start of
workforce
program

1/3
by the **college**
upon successful
completion of
the program

1/3
by the **state**
upon successful
attainment of a
credential

North Carolina Parity Funding

North Carolina's legislature in 2019 funded noncredit and credit programs equally—making noncredit options all one price and more affordable for students. This demonstrates the state's recognition of noncredit courses as a valuable option for students. Pressure from employers and a rise in workforce program popularity across the state prompted the change in funding structures, which state leaders hope will enable learners to more quickly attain the skills needed for in-demand jobs.

What Are Colleges Doing to Align Noncredit and Credit Programs?

There are a number of models being implemented around the country that are helping students make seamless transitions from noncredit to for-credit programs in pursuit of higher-level credentials, including degrees. As these colleges will attest, adoption of these models requires organizational and culture changes, financial restructuring, a systemwide commitment to better integration and collaboration, and a clear understanding of the hardships, barriers, and needs of the student population.

Achieving the Dream and the Northeast Resiliency Consortium found that successful alignment relies on two key strategies—providing navigation or coaching support services that help students make informed decisions about their educational journey, and adopting transparent connections between noncredit and for-credit programs.

Navigation and Coaching Support Services

Attempting to bridge the gap that prevents students from making the transition from noncredit to credit programs begins with recognizing the many different ways in which today's students enter postsecondary education and the experiences and learning they bring with them. Student-centered approaches, which focus on meeting the needs of learners wherever they are in their careers and their lives, are helping college systems build the connections necessary to enable students to reach their goals regardless of their academic and non-academic barriers.

To ensure students from all backgrounds are able to make informed choices about their educational options, it is essential that postsecondary institutions provide career navigation and academic coaching services.

INNOVATION

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)

To help students make informed decisions about their coursework and career options, NOVA hired career coaches across all of their college campuses to help guide students in deciding what path is best for them based on their individual goals. Many coaches are industry-specific and are responsible for building connections with local businesses in order to keep a finger on the pulse of regional job openings and skill needs.

In addition to common wraparound supports such as tutoring; low-cost, on-campus child care; career guidance; and transportation assistance, navigators and coaches help ensure that students fully understand the path and requirements to transfer learning from noncredit to credit programs. Coaches also explain how these various options impact time to completion, out-of-pocket expenses, employment, wages, and career advancement. Support services are critical for students with barriers to completion, especially low-income working adults, those with dependents, and first-generation college students. Coaches and navigators help guide students down a path that meets their unique needs and career goals while also connecting them to resources inside and outside the college that can assist with helping them overcome common barriers to completion.

Linkages Between Noncredit and Credit Programs

While providing students with strong navigation and support services is essential to help students chart their college paths, students won't be successful if programming continues to be fractured or artificial barriers continue to exist between noncredit and credit programs. Colleges must put in the work to design thoughtful pathways that include bridges between noncredit and credit coursework.

Models to help students succeed along noncredit-to-credit pathways include noncredit-to-credit articulation, stackable credentials, and credit for prior learning. In this section, we explore these models by highlighting colleges and college systems that are leading the way on implementation. In addition, to better understand how these models can help working adults and those with barriers to completion achieve their goals, a fictional but representative student journey is presented for each one.

Noncredit-to-Credit Articulation

Articulation enables students to easily transfer their noncredit learning into credit. This transfer can occur within the same college or, in many cases, to a different educational institution as long as an articulation agreement between the institutions has been established. While some noncredit courses may transfer for full credit, others may transfer only for fractional credit, depending on the course content and alignment to the degree program. The criteria and requirements for credit articulation can vary greatly across programs, institutions, and states.

DAMON // STUDENT JOURNEY

As a single father, Damon is unable to commit to a full-time degree program because he must work his construction job during the day and care for his children at night. His employer has hinted that completing noncredit courses for blueprint reading and residential building codes would allow Damon to move to more advanced projects with higher pay. Damon would eventually like to earn a degree in construction management. This is his educational journey.

Damon finds that the local community college offers both of these noncredit courses on the weekend as well as low-cost child care while he attends class. He decides to enroll.

Damon's career coach informs him that these noncredit courses were designed to meet all accreditation requirements not only for the associate's degree program in construction management, but also a bachelor's degree at the local university, should he decide to continue his education.

Damon completes the two noncredit courses over the course of six months and, two years later, decides he is ready to begin his journey toward a degree.

Damon is able to transfer six credits from his noncredit coursework to his degree program, enabling him to graduate one semester early and giving him the confidence to pursue his bachelor's degree.

Mt. San Antonio College and Long Beach City College

These two California community colleges offer "mirrored" courses across their noncredit and credit program offerings. Through intentional planning and design, mirrored noncredit and credit courses feature identical syllabi, learning objectives, and faculty qualifications. Noncredit and credit students attend class together and complete identical assignments and earn equal credit. Mirrored courses offer students exposure to the demands of credit courses without the high stakes. They also create transparency across what can often be a confusing credit articulation landscape.

MODEL 2

Stackable Credentials

To assist students in the attainment of progressively higher credentials, many colleges are establishing stackable certificates and certifications where curricula is modularized and aligned with credentials that are valued in the labor market. Stackable credentials break down competencies into smaller "chunks" of learning. Each discrete credential builds on the previous one, enabling students to develop skills that help them find a job quickly, but also creating an easy access point for reentry if students choose to continue on for a more advanced credential or degree. Many stackable credential frameworks begin with a noncredit certificate as the lowest-level credential and progress to a for-credit certification or a degree.

However, colleges must focus on counseling students about the importance of progressing past the lowest-level credentials. While data from the Northeast Resiliency Consortium revealed that the percentage of students that transitioned to a credit program was higher for those enrolled in a pathway program versus those not enrolled in a pathway program, the overall transition rate for those in pathways was still just 26 percent.[18] This signals that, while students within a structured pathway are much more likely to continue their education, there is still a large percentage of students that do not progress past lower-level credentials. Advancing to higher-level credentials is critical to expanding job possibilities for workers later in life, increasing lifetime earning potential, and helping workers gain the digital and cognitive skills necessary for adapting to ongoing technological change in the workplace.

ANA // STUDENT JOURNEY

Ana is 28 years old and has two small children. She began working as a bank teller in rural Alabama right out of high school. In order to start putting more money away, she would like to move into a higher position at the bank. Her supervisor suggests that earning an associate's degree could help. With a full-time job, two small children, and no college experience, she is skeptical of her ability to be successful in a degree program. This is her educational journey.

Ana does some digging and finds a community college that offers stackable certificates toward completion of an associate's degree in financial services. She contacts the college for more information.

After speaking with a career coach, she learns that these shorter, highly focused certificates can be completed online. Since the community college is almost an hour away, the flexibility of online courses is appealing. She enrolls.

Over the next two years, Ana completes four short-term noncredit industry credentials, earning incremental wage increases along the way. She works with her career coach to transfer the learning from these credentials to a certificate in banking operations.

With the credit she is able to transfer from her certificate in banking operations, Ana is able to complete the rest of her associate's degree through online courses in three semesters, while being able to work full time along the way.

MODEL 3
Credit for Prior Learning

Credit for prior learning is making it easier for students with knowledge, skills, and experience gained on the job or in the classroom to quickly earn credits needed to obtain a degree without having to retake courses or develop competencies they already possess.

Credit for prior learning enables learners to demonstrate the competencies they have gained through significant on-the-job or military experience, or through courses or credentials completed at an approved institution and that align to a for-credit program.

Prior learning assessments, which is a term often used interchangeably with credit for prior learning, provide a means for students to receive credit as described above. These formal assessments, which can vary by institution and program type, gauge students' existing knowledge and skills in order to determine the degree to which they should be awarded credit for previous coursework completed at another approved educational institution or for prior work and life experience.

CELIA // STUDENT JOURNEY

Celia has been working at a long-term care facility for 12 years. She began as a certified nursing assistant. Six years ago, she completed the necessary courses and passed her certification exam to become a clinical medical assistant. This promotion led to more administrative and leadership responsibilities. Celia realizes that, in order to advance in her career, she will need an associate's degree in health care management. This is her educational journey.

Celia finds that her local community college offers a competency-based associate's degree in health care management.

She enrolls and mentions to her career coach that she has 12 years of clinical and administrative experience as well as an industry-recognized certification.

The career coach explains that Celia could earn several credits toward her degree if her certification is eligible to transfer for credit and if she completes a prior learning assessment.

She completes a CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) exam, which assesses her existing knowledge and competencies. She also finds that the college will accept her medical assistant certification for credit.

Celia is able to drastically reduce the cost of her degree and her time to completion by earning 15 credits through prior learning and work experience.

North Carolina Community College System

North Carolina's Community College System is developing comprehensive guidance for all 58 of its colleges, establishing statewide standards and assisting colleges in implementing consistent and transparent noncredit-to-credit transfer processes at the institution level. This guidance provides suggestions for implementing prior learning assessments, which enable working adults to translate their knowledge, skills, and experiences gained on the job into credits toward a degree program.

For lower-skilled working adults trying to rise out of poverty, a semester or two can make a huge difference in their ability to reach their education and career goals. But persistent cultural, systemic, and political factors are impacting broad scale adoption of these models. Much more must be done to fully address the skill needs of America's workers.

> **"Earning shorter-term credentials can give students the confidence and motivation they need to envision themselves as a degree-seeking student at the college."**
>
> —Margaret Roberton, North Carolina Community College System

Policy Considerations

National policy reforms have the potential for encouraging the nation's postsecondary education system to make needed changes in the design and delivery of education and training that will result in increased student success and system relevance. JFF offers considerations for policymakers that would help community college systems ensure that postsecondary education and training is more seamless for the many Americans in pursuit of industry-recognized credentials and family-supporting careers.

Improve data transparency and systems.

Improving data systems in postsecondary education will yield valuable information about student outcomes and high-value credentials. In addition to demographic data, postsecondary data systems should include metrics on student educational progress and completion, credential attainment, program costs, and labor market outcomes, including employment and earnings. While protecting student privacy, data should be shared across secondary, postsecondary, and workforce development systems to allow parents, students, educators, employers, and policymakers to make informed decisions about postsecondary programs. To the extent possible, policymakers should encourage the collection and reporting of student outcome data for all postsecondary programs—including noncredit programs, which would likely require dedicated funding, especially for programs that are not student-aid eligible.

Financial aid should be more accessible and innovative, while ensuring proper guardrails for quality assurance.

Federal financial aid helps millions of students and families to pay for postsecondary education. However, program limitations often inhibit students from utilizing financial aid for shorter-term, in-demand programs. To address this, financial aid policies should be more flexible, allowing students to access aid for education and training pathways that lead to a credential and a well-paying job, regardless of program length. Policymakers must also ensure that any expansion of federal aid is designed to support high-quality, in-demand programs with strong outcomes. Finally, policymakers should reinforce that, regardless of the course students start on, they are on a pathway that could lead to a degree if they choose.

Reexamine accreditation requirements.

Accreditation undoubtedly makes postsecondary programs stronger, but these processes have been slow to adapt to new models of learning and education delivery. Accreditation requirements that currently hinder the timely creation of postsecondary programs needed by industry or the seamless transfer of learning from non-credit to credit programs should be reexamined. Accreditation must shift to focus more on student and employer outcomes as well as labor market alignment and responsiveness to ensure that institutions and programs are fulfilling their missions as economic development engines for their regions. Identifying more modern measures of quality and becoming more agile and responsive to shifting teaching and learnings strategies is necessary to keep up with the rapid reskilling needs of students and employers in the new economy.

Better align postsecondary programs with evolving labor market needs.

Better alignment of postsecondary programming with in-demand industry needs will help ensure that all postsecondary programs (credit and noncredit) meet the needs of regional employers and are a good return on investment for students. Public policy should encourage that labor market information drive the development of all postsecondary programs in high-priority industries, and that employers and industry associations play key roles in the development of learning objectives and curriculum for pathway programs that allow learners to advance toward an advanced credential or degree at their own pace. Federal and state policy incentives should motivate postsecondary institutions to make these types of necessary changes to their academic development and review processes, resulting in structured, transparent pathways, regardless of a student's point of entry.

Promote and elevate examples from across the country where proven strategies for designing effective noncredit-to-credit pathways have been taken to scale.

Federal policy should encourage states to build upon and scale lessons learned through TAACCCT and other evidence-based initiatives to improve student success and align their noncredit and credit program offerings. These strategies could include but are not limited to:

- The expansion of seamless and efficient career pathways that include noncredit-to-credit articulation, stackable credentials, credit for prior learning, accelerated learning models, and competency-based education.

- The integration of labor market information and employer engagement

to ensure noncredit coursework aligns to workforce needs.

- Expanded career coaching and guidance, assessment strategies, and comprehensive support services to ensure that all students, regardless of their educational and employment barriers, are given equitable opportunities to succeed.

- Funding and delivery structures that aim to reduce out-of-pocket expenses for students, while also incentivizing completion and attainment of a credential.

Conclusion

The noncredit-versus-credit disconnect remains a complicated gulf for students, employers, and even institutions to navigate in the U.S. postsecondary education system. As described in this paper, there are a number of factors that contribute to these divisions in America's higher education system. While some of the reasons for designating programs as noncredit make sense from an institutional perspective, those reasons don't matter to students who just want to get the skills and credentials needed for in-demand jobs. Jobseekers and workers pursuing postsecondary education and training should be provided with transparent,

efficient pathways to credential attainment to minimize time spent in the classroom. This will become even more important as we head into the future of work when the need for rapid reskilling and upskilling becomes routine.

Students enrolled at community colleges that are working to better align noncredit and for-credit programming are better positioned to move into occupationally focused programs that meet their immediate needs and then progress toward higher-level credentials and degrees over time.

Federal and state policy can encourage the kinds of systemic reforms that are necessary for creating more flexible pathways to credential attainment, allowing learners to enroll in programs designed for real-time job preparation and apply learning toward for-credit credentials down the road. However, institutions must be willing to change their focus to the needs of students rather than the status quo.

ENDNOTES

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