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## The Landscape of Noncredit Workforce Education: State Policies and Community College Practices

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Postsecondary noncredit education has become increasingly common in recent years, and at many community colleges, noncredit programs enroll more students than do credit programs (Bailey et al., 2003). Courses connected with workforce instruction and contract training account for much of this growth (Dougherty & Bakia, 1999), and such courses are noted for their important role in responding flexibly to shifting workforce demands. Still, the growth in community college noncredit workforce education raises questions about whether the colleges are keeping pace with student and industry needs, using resources efficiently, and providing adequate access to all students. The answers to these questions may challenge current state policies and college practices.

The leadership of two major community college organizations — the National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE) and the National Council for Continuing Education and Training (NCCET) — sought to collaborate with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) to conduct a study that would illuminate the implications of recent changes in noncredit workforce education. These councils represent senior community college administrators nationwide who are responsible for workforce development and who have been grappling with their stances on noncredit workforce education when considering which policies to advocate.

CCRC's one-year study, summarized in this Brief, included the examination of state policies in all 50 states and case studies at 20 community colleges. Findings from the study document the empirical landscape of noncredit workforce education and identify issues that warrant attention from state policymakers, community college leaders, and policy advocates.

### Study Methods

To provide information that would be of practical use, CCRC researchers investigated the following issues:

- (1) The multiple roles of noncredit workforce education, which include providing workforce development and access to credit programs for individuals, providing workforce development for employers, and generating revenue for colleges.

- (2) The ways that colleges organize their noncredit workforce education programs to balance tradeoffs between flexibility and integration with the college, and the ways that these programs in turn affect the college organizationally.
- (3) The extent to which noncredit workforce education provides students with recorded outcomes, such as transcripts or industry certifications, and the extent to which data on outcomes are available.

To address these issues, researchers drew on two sources of information. First, state policies on the funding and regulation of noncredit workforce education were reviewed in all 50 states by interviewing individuals in state departments with oversight for community colleges and/or workforce development. Second, case studies of 20 community colleges in 10 states were conducted by interviewing key administrative staff at each college. The colleges were selected to reflect innovative practices in noncredit workforce education as well as a range of institutional sizes, locations, and states. Data, including supplemental information retrieved from Internet sources, were organized and coded, and comparisons were made across states and across the case study colleges.

For purposes of this study, noncredit workforce education refers to courses or activities that provide technical skills for the workplace but carry no institutional credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other formal award. These courses may result in industry-recognized certificates, but do not include Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, developmental education, or recreational courses. This definition includes courses for individuals as well as contract and customized training.

### Multiple Roles of Noncredit

As a local resource for workforce development, community colleges serve individuals seeking noncredit workforce education for a variety of reasons as well as industries needing employees at different skill levels. Colleges also seek to generate revenue through many of their noncredit workforce programs.

### Workforce Development and Access to Credit Programs for Individuals

To meet the educational needs of their students, the noncredit workforce programs of case study colleges encompass many different occupations and offer courses ranging from entry-level training to more advanced professional development. Compared to credit students, noncredit workforce education students in case study colleges tend to be older and tend to have more diverse educational backgrounds; an unknown number are interested in eventually earning a degree. While most are interested in gaining skills in the short term, colleges can provide career

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pathways linking students to degree programs that may lead to occupational advancement (Grubb, Badway, & Bell, 2003).

Case study colleges use a variety of program features to bring noncredit workforce education students who are interested in pursuing degrees into credit programs. They offer “chunked” courses by breaking down credit courses into shorter, noncredit courses on distinct topics that can be taken separately; they articulate noncredit and credit courses by allowing students to receive credit for completing a noncredit course if they later enroll in a credit degree program; and they list certain courses as both credit and noncredit.

To support student enrollment in noncredit programs, more than half of all states, using one of several funding mechanisms, provide general funds for community college noncredit workforce education. Such support can help colleges provide access for low-income individuals by maintaining lower tuition rates and by offering entry-level training. This support may serve as an important indication of a state’s vision for noncredit education.

Case study colleges consider multiple factors — including state funding, labor market needs, institutional practice, and instructional approaches — when deciding whether to offer courses in credit or noncredit formats. More than half of all states have guidelines for defining what qualifies as a noncredit workforce course, another possible indication of a state’s goals for noncredit education.

### **Workforce Development for Employers**

Community college noncredit workforce education serves employers, as well as students, by providing contract and customized training to their employees. The noncredit programs of case study colleges seek to meet specific employer needs at the state and local levels. Some have developed ways to offer courses in both credit and noncredit formats and to translate noncredit courses to credit in response to employer demand. Most states support noncredit workforce education with workforce training funds, and just over half directly specify a direct role for community colleges as fiscal agents or preferred providers.

### **Revenue Generation for Colleges**

Noncredit workforce education provides community colleges with an opportunity to generate revenue. While lower costs provide more accessibility for low-income individuals, colleges are free to charge what the market will bear for noncredit workforce courses, as few states place limits on such charges. While colleges in states with general funds for noncredit education may appear to have less incentive to pursue profit, most case study college noncredit programs are indeed seeking to generate revenue, regardless of state funding. Many are, or plan to become, self-supporting or profit-generating in order to add value to the college and to secure broader support within the college.

## **Organization Within Community Colleges**

How noncredit workforce education programs are situated within a college’s overall structure may have important implications for how they operate and what they achieve. A tension may arise from balancing noncredit workforce education’s need to respond quickly to employers with its need to connect and contribute internally to the college and to serve students’ long-term educational goals. Furthermore, as noncredit education grows and shifts in focus, colleges may change their organizational approaches

in order to adapt to new priorities and to reflect the increasingly important position of noncredit workforce education in the college relative to other programs.

### **Community College Organizational Approaches**

The case study colleges follow a variety of approaches in organizing their noncredit workforce education programs. Some colleges have separate structures, where noncredit is a distinct organizational unit within the college. Others have integrated structures, where noncredit programs are incorporated into various academic units across the college by content area. Regardless of organizational structure, colleges strive for collaboration between credit and noncredit programs to better meet the needs of both students and employers while maintaining flexibility in noncredit operations. Noncredit programs with separate structures coordinate their activities through regular meetings and other communication throughout the college in order to encourage collaboration, avoid duplication, and allow movement between noncredit and credit programs. Noncredit programs with integrated structures, on the other hand, while well-situated for collaboration within the college, often maintain a single college-wide organizational entity to conduct entrepreneurial outreach, maintain flexibility, and act as a central point of contact with employers.

### **Areas of Organizational Change in Community Colleges**

As noncredit workforce education continues to grow and evolve, changes may occur in the organizational approach and the model of revenue generation utilized by community colleges. Indeed, several case study colleges recently undertook some kind of organizational change. Some consolidated their noncredit education programs into one division. Some elevated the status of noncredit workforce education within the college, often by creating new high-level positions to improve communication and to reflect the importance of noncredit. In order to promote workforce development as a priority, some colleges limited other types of noncredit offerings, such as recreational and basic skills courses. A few other case study colleges integrated their noncredit programs within credit departments based on content.

In addition, whether or not they chose to alter their fundamental organizational approach, most case study community colleges are working to engage faculty to increase knowledge and appreciation of noncredit workforce education. Colleges are demonstrating the value of noncredit education by developing partnerships at the highest levels of college leadership, by allowing instructors to teach noncredit courses as part of their faculty load, and by highlighting noncredit education’s ability to communicate new information and ideas that come from local industry. At the same time, however, at most colleges, only a small number of faculty have a well-developed understanding of noncredit education, and only a small number have the industry-specific skills to teach noncredit courses.

The case study community colleges have developed strong links to their local labor markets through their noncredit workforce education programs, which benefit the college by bringing innovation to credit programs and by increasing the depth and breadth of its offerings. Administrators from case study colleges stated that noncredit education is very useful for testing the attractiveness and viability of new courses, particularly in technological or emerging fields, which may later be moved into credit programs. This process, spurred by state and

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federal funds, is especially helpful in bringing new technologies and practices into the colleges.

## Noncredit Outcomes

Understanding the outcomes of noncredit workforce education helps illuminate how well the programs fulfill their goals. However, little standard data may be available to document participation and outcomes of such programs (Voorhees & Milam, 2005). Since noncredit workforce education is not regulated by the academic rules that govern credit education, the recorded student outcomes stemming from participation in a noncredit program vary. How well such recorded outcomes serve different needs of individuals and employers varies as well.

### Recorded Outcomes

Just nine states have guidelines for including noncredit courses on a transcript, with most leaving the decision up to each college. Most of the case study colleges provide transcripts for noncredit workforce courses, but whether and how noncredit courses are included on a transcript varies across the colleges: some provide a separate transcript for noncredit courses while others include the noncredit courses on the same transcript as credit courses.

Most case study college noncredit programs also offer a range of industry certifications, some of which reflect specific needs of local industry. Still, programs culminating in such certifications often represent only a fraction of a college's total noncredit workforce offerings — the same colleges typically offer numerous other noncredit workforce programs that do not provide industry certifications. Some may issue certificates of completion for noncredit classes, which may or may not be widely recognized in the labor market. Case study colleges typically rely on external sources of validation to award Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for noncredit courses to meet industry demand, using a variety of mechanisms to determine how to award them, often following guidelines from professional organizations and state agencies.

In addition, some states and many case study colleges have guidelines in place that could facilitate the retroactive granting of credit for noncredit courses, but the colleges reported that few students take advantage of this process. In all, seventeen states have mechanisms for the provision of “credit for prior learning” or “life experience credit.” Students seeking such credit may take an exam to prove their knowledge of course material, but some restrictions may also apply, such as whether the noncredit instructor was adequately qualified.

To help support career pathways, many states and case study colleges are interested in procedures for allowing students to move between credit and noncredit programs in a seamless way, potentially gaining credit for noncredit courses. They are seeking to create competency-based noncredit modules that can later be combined for credit, as well as articulation programs that allow students to gain credit for certain noncredit courses if they continue to pursue a degree. But some states have encountered barriers to such an articulation policy, and some colleges are simply not interested in linking noncredit and credit but rather seek to encourage students who are interested in degrees to enroll in credit courses.

### Data and Reporting

Colleges without state noncredit reporting requirements rarely collect noncredit data for their own purposes, though a

few case study colleges seek to measure student outcomes from noncredit courses through program reviews. Administrators from some case study colleges noted barriers to data collection, including their inability to collect information from some students, the nontraditional time frame of some courses, and poor data systems. The majority of states do require reporting on some aspect of noncredit workforce education, however, and several states are seeking to collect more comprehensive data. State data systems can facilitate data collection for reporting requirements, but these systems must be sophisticated enough to account for the unique format of noncredit programs.

More data would be of use to community colleges and policymakers in providing a fuller understanding of the characteristics and needs of individuals and employers who seek noncredit workforce education. In particular, better data would provide information on the extent to which noncredit students seek degrees and the experiences of students moving from noncredit to credit programs. Furthermore, it could provide guidance to local colleges in determining which programs and recorded outcomes have value among employers and which are most valuable for which students.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Noncredit workforce education can play an important role in responding to local labor market demands by meeting the workforce needs of employers and the needs of students for immediate skills. It can also benefit students by providing access to credit programs, generating meaningful recorded outcomes for a range of student needs, and facilitating the long-term pursuit of degrees. Community college noncredit workforce education can play a central role in states that prioritize funding to support career pathways as part of their workforce development agenda by connecting short-term training to programs leading to degrees and credentials. The findings from this study lead to several key recommendations:

- (1) **Promote state funding to support noncredit workforce education with clear and targeted goals.** States that provide general funds for noncredit workforce education promote workforce development and help ensure that low-income individuals can gain access to workforce development programs. Since community colleges may seek a profit from noncredit workforce education, state funds can be used to support valuable noncredit programs that might otherwise not be offered due to lack of profitability. State funds can also help students to access credit education by promoting better ties to career pathways. In addition, state workforce training funds for employers should be connected to longer-term educational programs for workers who need them, thus satisfying employers' immediate training needs and also helping workers accrue valuable educational experience.
- (2) **Encourage efforts to increase coordination between credit and noncredit programs.** Greater coordination allows colleges to connect programs in innovative and meaningful ways that benefit students and employers. Indeed, regardless of whether they use integrated or separate structures for managing their credit and noncredit programs, the case study colleges sought to balance the tradeoffs associated with each type of organizational approach. Thus, integrated structures that promote connections among programs, faculty, and students do not necessarily curtail noncredit activities; the case study colleges

demonstrate that flexibility and responsiveness can be maintained and profit generation still pursued.

- (3) **Better assess student needs and support efforts to recruit noncredit students into credit programs and to articulate noncredit and credit programs to promote student transfer when appropriate.** States and colleges would do well to examine how noncredit workforce education fits into a larger system of career pathways. For students who want to pursue a degree, noncredit workforce education can provide an entry to a career pathway that allows for advancement. States and community colleges can implement mechanisms that create better ties between noncredit workforce education and credit degree programs so that students can gain workforce skills with immediate value and also pursue a college degree with broader labor market value. Evidence from the case study colleges indicates the potential usefulness of such pathways. In addition, colleges should develop clear criteria for deciding whether a course is offered in a noncredit or credit format, since certain courses may be better located in credit programs if they can be integrated into a degree program.
- (4) **Explore the development of non-degree forms of validation for all noncredit workforce education courses as well as standard systems to record outcomes.** Noncredit courses vary greatly in the amount and intensity of their content, and some result in the receipt of an external validation, such as an industry certification. Many colleges issue a student transcript that includes information about noncredit workforce education; they differ, however, about whether they include noncredit courses on the same transcript as credit courses and about the information they include on noncredit courses. Thus, the development of a standardized system for recording outcomes from noncredit workforce education might be warranted. It would allow the portability of evidence of skills for students and accountability for college and state workforce education funds, and it could allow for the external validation of noncredit workforce education. Some consensus on such a system would be needed among private industry associations, vendors, and companies that create and maintain external systems of validation.
- (5) **Collect more information on individual and employer outcomes from noncredit workforce education.** Substantive information is needed on outcomes to assess fully the contributions of noncredit workforce education to students, employers, and the community. State reporting requirements, along with the provision of resources and assistance, can motivate colleges to collect and tabulate such data. It

is crucial to document the value of noncredit workforce education for individuals and to determine which recorded outcomes have the most value for individuals in different occupations, industries, and labor markets. Follow-up on student performance in the workplace can provide information on the longer-term labor market outcomes of noncredit workforce education. Some states and colleges have indeed attempted to document the value of noncredit workforce education; their efforts should be supported and their methods refined. In addition, information is needed about how well community colleges are serving local employer needs, about what employers value in noncredit workforce education, and about employer experiences with program participants. More information is also needed on which outcomes best reflect the contributions of noncredit workforce education to the economy at large.

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