

Credit Mobility Considerations: Summary of Recent Non-Degree Credential Research, Evidence, and Quality Standards

By Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield

Today's students are more varied than any previous generation of college students: they're diverse in age, race, and income level. They are more mobile and may not live on campus. Most participate in the workforce, either full-time or part-time. Work and family responsibilities beyond the classroom—on-campus or online—often compete with their educational goals. Younger workers are changing jobs as many as four times by age 32, so lifelong learning and continuing education have quickly become the norm for most adults. Previously, the average college student was an 18-year-old with parental financial support who continuously attended a four-year institution directly following high school. That's not the case anymore, but higher education has been slow to adapt its model to respond to the needs of today's students.

The higher education ecosystem needs to better respond to these learners who move between programs, institutions, jobs, fields, and locations across their lifetimes. For instance, 45 percent of associate's degree holders and 65 percent of bachelor's degree holders have earned credits from multiple higher education institutions.¹ And nearly 37 million people have some college yet no credentials.² Other people bring life and job experience to their educational journey, which can be validated through credit for prior learning.

People are accumulating learning and credits through postsecondary and workforce training institutions, through dual enrollment in high school and college, and also in adult education and English as a Second Language and skills training. Washington offers an example of such innovations through the Washington Community and Technical Colleges' Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training programs (I-BEST). Many of today's students aren't looking for traditional associate's or bachelor's degrees but instead, shorter-term education and training credentials, like certificates and non-degree credentials, that more quickly lead to in-demand jobs. In addition, they want these credentials to be stackable and portable, meaning they provide credit toward additional credentials and degrees should they wish to return to school in the future. They want all of their learning to be validated, including receiving credit for prior learning in the workplace or life experience. Still, they see that parts of higher education are often unresponsive to their needs or refuse to acknowledge and reward prior learning and/or credits.

Introduction to Non-Degree Credentials

Non-degree credentials (NDCs), which serve as a supplement or an alternative to a traditional degree, can offer individuals a streamlined pathway to good jobs and family-sustaining wages. They include certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeship certificates, occupational licenses, badges, and microcredentials. They are an essential component of the credit mobility landscape. The prevalence of NDCs in the U.S. workforce is growing as more businesses look to skills-based hiring and more education

¹ [A National View of the Time Enrolled and Elapsed for Associate and Bachelor's Degree Earners.](#)

² [Some College, No Credential | National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.](#)

and training programs emerge to meet those needs.³ NDCs can increase the number of skilled workers, allowing them to demonstrate learned competencies and skills.⁴ NDCs tend to be specialized and lead to a specific occupation or career, making it easier for employers to discern competencies mastered by the credential holder.

NDCs are also generally more affordable and take less time to complete than a traditional degree, meeting many workers' demands for streamlined and flexible education and training programs. NDC programs can be more quickly designed since they are sometimes offered on the college or university's non-credit, continuing education, or workforce sides, which often have shorter timelines for program approval. Hundreds of training providers offer thousands of non-degree credential options in every state and many local areas.⁵

Learners ages 18 to 20 completed more certificates at higher education institutions than any other age group during the 2022–23 academic year, according to an April 2024 report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Nearly 154,000 young learners earned certificates that year—an 11 percent increase over the previous year—among the 670,665 certificate earners across all ages.⁶ If one includes microcredentials, which include digital badges, fellowships, licenses, boot-camp certificates, and more—from a vast array of public, non-profit, and for-profit educational providers, including non-academic institutions—there are now more than a million secondary and postsecondary credentials offered across the United States.⁷

Not all NDCs lead to good outcomes—like good jobs with high wages and prospects for career mobility. National and state data on the job outcomes and earnings produced by many of these programs remains patchy because federal data tracking doesn't include so many of them. Programs offered by companies or unaccredited providers aren't obliged to track outcomes data and those that do struggle to comprehensively survey students who come in and out of education and the labor market so quickly. Those that do not lead to good outcomes further entrench the economic inequities that already impact Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, women, and people who sit at the intersection of these identities. Identifying and communicating which NDCs are high-quality—meaning those that provide people with the means to equitably achieve their employment and educational goals—is essential to ensuring working people do not waste their time and money on credentials that do not help them achieve their aspirations and allow them to climb higher on the education ladder concurrently.

The existing postsecondary accountability landscape does not sufficiently provide quality assurance for NDCs in the ways students, workers, and businesses want. The wide range of NDCs that exist, variability in NDC outcomes—particularly for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color and women—and growing investment in and demand for these credentials among policymakers and employers require a transparent approach to ensuring credential quality and value.

³ [The Emerging Degree Reset — The Burning Glass Institute.](#)

⁴ [The Emerging Degree Reset — The Burning Glass Institute.](#)

⁵ [Counting Credentials.](#)

⁶ [Undergraduate Degree Earners | National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.](#)

⁷ [Counting U.S. Secondary and Postsecondary Credentials Report \(2022\).](#)

Non-Degree Credential Outcomes

Research finds that, while earnings for people with degrees generally outpace those of NDC holders, attaining an NDC can lead to meaningful employment and earnings gains, particularly for adults without postsecondary experience. Employment rates of NDC holders are generally higher than for comparable adults without an NDC. Adults with an NDC whose highest educational attainment is a GED or a certificate are also more likely to be employed than adults with a high school diploma alone or those who do not have one.⁸ In addition, studies show that holding an NDC leads to a 10 to 20 percent increase in annual earnings over the earnings of a high school graduate who does not hold a similar credential.⁹ However, wage outcomes associated with NDCs vary for different people and fields. The economic outcomes associated with certificates and other NDCs reflect overarching labor market trends of occupational segregation and gender and racial pay inequity.¹⁰ Limited studies examine NDC holder outcomes by race and ethnicity, but among the studies that do, they find that white NDC holders tend to out-earn NDC holders who are Black and Hispanic or Latino.¹¹

Limited Accountability Systems for NDCs

Other than the triad accountability system for education and training providers (gatekeepers consisting of the U.S. Department of Education, the state, and accrediting agencies), there is no federal accountability framework to evaluate all postsecondary programs. Often, a lack of data prevents even attempting a large-scale programmatic accountability system. The need for more information on some NDCs is particularly acute given the dearth of federal data for programs that do not participate in Title IV financial aid. There are significant limitations in the ability of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I and Gainful Employment rules to evaluate the full array of programs available to workers and students. Both restrict data availability and only apply to programs that receive federal assistance. These limitations leave the current accountability system insufficient for assessing NDC value for students and workers.

Limited NDC Data and Reporting

States generally have some ability to track and report on NDCs, yet capacity, infrastructure, and collection vary widely from state to state and system to system within states. In general, states collect and report on participation and outcomes related to participants of programs that receive funds from WIOA.¹² Many of these programs offer NDCs. Beyond this, states can only report on enrollment, completion, and labor market outcomes associated with credit-bearing short-term programs provided by the public community and technical colleges and universities participating in Title IV federal financial aid.

Public reporting on NDC outcomes also varies widely. States that invest in financial aid or other policies related to NDC attainment often also have required annual reports on the outcomes of those

⁸ [Should the Federal Government Fund Short-Term Postsecondary Certificate Programs? | Urban Institute.](#)

⁹ [Should the Federal Government Fund Short-Term Postsecondary Certificate Programs? | Urban Institute.](#)

¹⁰ [The Non-Degree Credential Quality Imperative - National Skills Coalition.](#)

¹¹ [How to Deliver High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Community College Programs.](#)

¹² For example, see: Department of Labor, "Workforce Performance Results: WIOA Title I and III Annual Report Data: Program Year 2021," [Performance Data | U.S. Department of Labor.](#)

investments, meaning they are more likely to collect, track, and report publicly on program outcomes for students or employers (in the case of workforce investments related to employer-provided up/reskilling training)—though this is not always the case.

Many states include NDCs (such as certificates, industry certifications, or licenses) within their statewide educational attainment goal. These goals set targets for the percentage of residents with a postsecondary credential. States must collect data about each student’s NDC attainment to measure progress toward educational attainment goals. States should also incorporate data on NDCs into their state longitudinal data systems, which match data across the education and workforce spectrum so that states can answer questions including “Are education and training programs preparing students to earn a credential?” and “Are people with credentials able to find good jobs?” Moreover, states should use data about demographic characteristics to better understand the attainment rates of subpopulations of interest, such as adult learners or racial and ethnic minorities. States may wish to count only credentials that demonstrate a certain level of quality towards their educational attainment goal. To do this, states should create a process and criteria for identifying credentials of value.

Why Quality?

A quality NDC definition and quality assurance system provide various options for improving economic opportunities for residents and businesses alike. Policymakers can use the definition to set clear targets for NDC attainment, with a focus on increasing attainment of credentials where demand outstrips supply, supporting business growth, and expanding the state’s tax base by helping unemployed or underemployed workers fill in-demand jobs. A clear quality NDC definition can ensure that underrepresented worker populations can access credentials that prepare them for emerging career pathways. Policymakers can adopt a range of policies to boost the attainment of quality NDCs, examples of which are highlighted below, and can transfer resources away from programs that aren’t providing good consumer or taxpayer value towards credentials that matter. By adopting a quality NDC definition, states can protect against increasing equity gaps by ensuring people of color, women, those with disabilities, and other underserved populations are not steered toward low-quality NDCs.

A state’s quality NDC definition can also help state policymakers identify and invest in new and emerging credentials that can help workers upskill quickly in response to technological changes and can help displaced workers figure out the right next steps as they transition to new occupations or industries.

States should consider the following criteria when assessing the quality of NDCs:

- Evidence of market alignment: Are credentials prioritized by employers hiring for in-demand, high-wage positions?
- Equity: Are there gaps in credential attainment or other outcomes by race, gender, or other student characteristics?
- Outcomes: What are the employment, earnings, and pathway progressions?
- Stackability: Is the NDC stackable to additional education, training, and credentials?
- Learning competencies: Does the credential serve as an appropriate marker for the mastery of competencies that employers value?
- Portability: Is the NDC credential industry recognized across multiple employers and regions?

Strada released a 2023 report on how well states provide access to accurate information on employment outcomes and other data that job seekers, students, and other stakeholders need to make informed decisions about education after high school.¹³ Based on their survey and analysis, the states currently leading the way in terms of their education-to-employment data infrastructure include Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Virginia.

It is estimated that states have invested at least \$3.81 billion in short-term credential pathways. Some states use this money to provide grant aid to make higher education more affordable. Others are investing in institutions to support program development and capacity-building, ensuring they have the necessary resources to create and maintain a diverse range of short-term credential programs that meet the needs of local economies. Some states are even incorporating short-term credentials into their funding formulas, thereby providing further recognition and financial support for these programs. Washington funds NDC credentials through multiple pathways. First, through the Washington State Board of Community and Technical College's trailblazing [Opportunity Grant](#), which helps low-income students complete up to one year of college and a certificate in a high-wage, high-demand career.¹⁴ Second, through the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board's Eligible Training Providers list, which determines which programs can receive funding under the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act.¹⁵ Criteria also apply to the state's Training Benefits Program and also serve as a guide to training under the state's workers' compensation program.

Models to Consider:

- [Minnesota's P-20 Education Partnership Credentials of Value](#) work group developed a quality framework for degrees and NDCs to ensure that both sets of credentials are held to the same standards. Minnesota also developed a rubric for measuring quality credentials, programs, and providers. In each category, they included measures that are intended to account for equity in quality determinations, specifically to ensure equitable access to and success in quality postsecondary opportunities for students who may face marginalization related to race, ethnicity, disability status, or other characteristics.
- [Louisiana's quality criteria](#), adopted by the Board of Regents, regulates which NDCs can be counted towards their state attainment goal, which aims to reach 60 percent degree or credential of value attainment among working adults by 2030.
- Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah allocate state formula funding for short-term credentials

¹³ [State Opportunity Index](#).

¹⁴ The approved high-wage, high-demand career pathways provide a minimum beginning wage of \$15.74 per hour in Washington State, except a minimum \$18.69 per hour in Seattle and \$19/06 in SeaTac.

¹⁵ For programs other than registered apprenticeships, subsequent eligibility is based on meeting program performance thresholds on three measures: (1) completion rate; (2) post-program employment rate; and (3) earnings. In setting the thresholds, the WTECB takes into account student access to fields of study in each area of the state and student characteristics. WTECB periodically updates the thresholds, and program eligibility is determined annually.

through an outcomes-based funding model, distributing money based on student performance. Because shorter-term programs often serve a disproportionately high number of non-traditional and underrepresented students, outcomes funding incentives can increase equity by providing funding and support for the programs often serving traditionally underserved populations.

- [Alabama’s Compendium of Valuable Credentials](#) includes credentials mapped to regional and statewide in-demand occupation lists as a first step in identifying credentials of value. Technical Advisory Committees (TACs) vet credentials associated with in-demand occupations according to a set of quality criteria; credentials that meet those criteria are then approved for the Compendia by the Alabama Committee on Credentialing and Career Pathways.
- [Connecticut’s CareerConneCT](#) specifically targets populations that are significantly underrepresented in the workforce, including individuals from Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities, people with disabilities, the re-entry population, opportunity youth, veterans, immigrants, and women. By directing resources towards these populations, the initiative aims to address systemic barriers and promote inclusivity in the labor market, thereby fostering greater workforce diversity and equity.
- [Iowa’s Gap Tuition Assistance Program](#), which provides financial support for students completing short-term training programs for in-demand occupations, is key to its robust system for non-degree credential attainment. [Data collection](#) is an instrumental part of the program. The state tracks employment outcomes for students who complete an eligible training program. Some metrics measured are wage growth, employment, and the percentage of students who continue their education.

A Note on Credit for Prior Learning:

As noted earlier, today’s students are learning everywhere: on the job, in the classroom, at the library, and at home. Their learning is not bound by credits, curriculum, and course codes; it is an accumulation of life experiences, workforce training, courses, military experience, and certifications from a variety of programs and institutions, ranging from employers to for-profit online platforms to public two-year colleges. However, these students are hampered by university and college policies that restrict the issuance of credit for prior learning (CPL) and the recognition of learning beyond the classroom when they attempt to attain a degree or certificate—often the most likely pathway to upward income mobility.

CPL, also known as prior learning assessment (PLA) and academic credit for prior learning (ACPL), is the recognition of learning policies and reflects the myriad methods colleges and universities use to evaluate and recognize learning gained outside the traditional academic classroom. The assessment is used to grant college credit toward further education. Students who earn CPL have a higher completion rate than their peers, save on tuition, and achieve their degrees sooner, paying dividends in the labor market.¹⁶ In some cases, colleges and universities use CPL to count learning accumulated through NDCs and through other non-credit means. [Indiana](#) has developed [model policy guidance](#) on implementing CPL and also provides state financial aid for CPL. Washington is home to an established, ongoing statewide workgroup, and has made progress in developing and sharing policies and practices as well as providing an [annual legislative report](#) which monitors CPL data trends and workgroup

¹⁶ [A Brighter Future Through Credit for Prior Learning \(CPL\)](#).

actions.¹⁷

¹⁷ [2023 Academic Credit for Prior Learning \(ACPL\) Report Update.](#)