



The Noncredit Mobility Academy: Realizing the Potential of Noncredit Education

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The Noncredit Mobility Academy

Fifteen years ago, noncredit education was hardly visible on the map of American higher education. Flexible, ad hoc programs (e.g., workforce training or personal enrichment courses) existed at many community colleges, but they received little attention from state education officials, policymakers, or learners – a largely uncharted territory alongside traditional academic offerings. Fast forward to today, as many states are struggling to meet the need for short upskilling and reskilling programs, they are working to realize the potential of noncredit activity to build educational and workforce pathways for students and to support state economies.

Recognizing the importance of noncredit education in the postsecondary-to-workforce ecosystem, in late 2023, the [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association](#) (SHEEO), the [Education Strategy Group](#) (ESG), and the [Progressive Policy Institute](#) (PPI) launched the [Noncredit Mobility Academy](#) (NMA). This two-year project was designed to support state education officials working to create the data, pathways, and communications necessary to advance noncredit education and its benefits.

Why Attention to Noncredit Education Is Important

Seventy-two percent of American jobs will require some postsecondary education within the next five years.¹ Traditional blue-collar occupations are declining, leaving fewer well-paying jobs for those with only a high school diploma. Meanwhile, demand is rising for jobs on the middle skills pathway. These middle skills jobs – which require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor’s degree – are anticipated to comprise 29 percent of U.S. employment by 2031, with roughly 20 percent of those jobs defined as “good jobs” – positions with median earnings of \$82,500 annually.²

Noncredit education has the potential to equip workers with the skills required for expanding essential positions.³ Approximately 4.1 million students are enrolled in noncredit programs across America’s 1,024 community colleges.⁴ By focusing on noncredit education and working to address

¹ Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., and Quinn, M.C. (2023). *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023, p. 2. cew.georgetown.edu/Projections2031.

² Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., and Quinn, M.C. (2023). *After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023, p. 2. cew.georgetown.edu/Projections2031; Strohl, J., Gulish, A., & Morris, C. (2024). *The Future of Good Jobs: Projections through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2024. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-the_future_of_good_jobs-fr.pdf

³ Opportunity America Working Group on Community College Workforce Education (2020, June). *Indispensable Institution: Reimagining the Community College*. Washington, DC: Opportunity America, p. 7. <https://opportunityamericaonline.org/indispensable/>

⁴ American Association of Community Colleges (2025). *Fast Facts 2025*. Washington, DC: AACC. https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AACC2025_Fact_Sheet.pdf

the needs of learners and industries, states can better support student pathways and state economies. Despite the need and potential of noncredit education, challenges exist related to defining, tracking, and communicating the value of these activities.

Challenges Associated with Noncredit Education

State postsecondary agencies seeking to realize the potential of noncredit education face numerous challenges. These problems span noncredit educational definitions, contexts, data, pathways, and communications.

Variable Definitions and Contexts

A foundational challenge for noncredit education is definitional. Many noncredit offerings — workforce development training, adult education courses, and personal enrichment classes — emerged in response to the needs and interests of local residents and businesses. Noncredit programs often vary widely in purpose and content and are offered by an array of institutions and organizations. Their defining feature is that they are not credit-bearing; however, historically, there has been no unifying definition beyond that feature to describe noncredit education. Further, the term noncredit, itself, positions noncredit education negatively – highlighting the absence of credit rather than the learning and skills development these activities provide.

This reality makes it difficult to track and tie noncredit education to workforce outcomes. Lifting up the overlooked learning in noncredit programs requires distinguishing workforce-focused noncredit programs from other programs. Also necessary is reorienting noncredit terminology to more positively reflect its scope and purpose so that learners and other state stakeholders understand the value of noncredit education to personal and state economic outcomes.

Unclear Data

Data is central to the work of state postsecondary agencies and central to understanding the value of noncredit activity to learners and state economies. Yet most state postsecondary data systems were not designed to capture information about noncredit students or courses. Many state postsecondary agencies lack standard definitions and metrics for noncredit activity and may not include noncredit activity in institutional reporting requirements. Without the ability to measure noncredit education, it is difficult to convey its potential. Few colleges – and fewer states – collect consistent data on programs, learners, completion, or workforce outcomes related to noncredit activity.

This leaves many who could benefit from noncredit education – learners, employers, and policymakers – in the dark, without the information they need to make good decisions. Learners are not always aware of flexible and convenient programs that fit their urgent upskilling needs. Employers may not know about nearby training that could help them fill labor gaps. Policymakers struggling to make their regions more competitive may fail to tap an essential resource that could

multiply the state’s human capital. Better information is an indispensable tool for educators and policymakers looking to communicate the value of noncredit education. Better data collection is also essential for state postsecondary agencies seeking to assess the quality of noncredit offerings to create more opportunities for learners.

Unclear Pathways

Another challenge for noncredit education is creating high quality programs and pathways that can deliver for learners and employers. Different types of learners look to noncredit education for short, flexible reskilling or upskilling. Some are traditional college-age students. Others are mid-career adults. Some want to quickly acquire job skills and go straight into the labor market. Others decide — sometimes in the short run, sometimes years later — that they want to use noncredit education as a stepping-stone to traditional academic education. Regardless of their goals, noncredit learners may need help navigating the next step.

However, noncredit education often does not have the same oversight, articulation agreements, or stackable credits that credit-bearing courses and degree programs do. Few institutions or states offer ready-made, well-marked pathways. Few noncredit credentials translate automatically to academic credit, and students often struggle to find a bridge. As a result, noncredit program quality, learner pathway development, and outcomes can vary widely and make the transition from noncredit to credit education particularly challenging. State postsecondary agencies and institutions in many states are working to remedy this problem so that students enrolled in either credit or noncredit education have post-completion options and opportunities to advance.

Unclear Communications

The varied types, definitions, data, and quality pathways associated with noncredit education mean that communication regarding noncredit activity has often been a challenge for state postsecondary agencies. Recent years have seen growing interest in noncredit education, as state officials nationwide grasp the potential of noncredit learning and take steps to elevate and integrate it into the postsecondary options available to learners. But this new awareness is still limited – much of the public remains in the dark, with little or no understanding of the value of short, standalone, skills-centered instruction. The term “noncredit” is rarely used in public discourse. Those who are aware of short noncredit programs often view them as training rather than education. Students who could benefit from these programs often know little about the options available. And, despite political interest, funding is almost always short, a distant second to both formula funding and student aid for traditional academic education.

Without definitional consensus, consistent data collection, and clear pathways for advancement, noncredit education’s potential to transform postsecondary education and individual student outcomes is hampered. To help ensure that noncredit programs connect to future opportunities for economic mobility – through further learning and/or a well-paying job – requires informed and intentional communication from state agencies.

Advancing Noncredit Education via the Noncredit Mobility Academy

To address the challenges associated with noncredit education, the NMA focused on three levers: better data collection, clearer pathways to opportunity, and communicating the value of noncredit education. These levers were woven into NMA curriculum, coaching, technical assistance, and support that assisted participating state teams in their work to more effectively engage their state's education ecosystem. Nineteen state teams applied to participate in the NMA. The six selected state teams from Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, Texas, and Virginia had variable experience identifying, tracking, and funding quality noncredit workforce programs. State teams were led by SHEEO agency data leaders and comprised of team members from state education and workforce agencies, higher education institutions, and legislative branches.

NMA participants worked within and across their state teams to get a better sense of the noncredit contexts in their states. Each state team inventoried its prior work on noncredit education and the noncredit education offerings in its state to identify areas of strength and potential growth across noncredit data, pathways, and communication. State teams identified many of the same strengths and gaps related to their noncredit contexts – including an incomplete picture of the number of noncredit programs existing and a lack of stackable skills. State teams were also unified post-inventory in their agreement that the term “noncredit” needed to be reconsidered and, in many cases, done away with altogether. In a recent [NMA blog post](#), ESG Senior Associate Kanler Cumbass, explains the need for this shift and how state teams are reconsidering this term.

Using inventory information, state teams created and implemented action plans for advancing noncredit work and outcomes. States established noncredit data taxonomies, mapped noncredit pathways, and developed targeted communications strategies for varied stakeholder groups. These efforts have laid the groundwork for enhanced data collection and constructed new pathways that will support lifelong learning and skill development for noncredit students.

State Team Success Snapshots

The NMA provided an opportunity for state teams to share ideas and approaches, learn from the field and from each other, and create a knowledge network on which they can rely long after the Academy ends. Through participation in online and in-person convenings, activities with their coaches, and engagement with noncredit researchers and experts, state teams left the NMA with an improved understanding of the noncredit data in their state, improved identification and collection of noncredit metrics, ways to create pathways from noncredit to degrees, and strategies for improving communications to stakeholders about the value of noncredit activity to state and student outcomes. [Noncredit Mobility Academy: State Success Snapshots](#), the companion piece to this brief, highlights some of the work and future plans of each state team. Specific state team snapshots can be accessed directly via the jump links below:

- ◆ **Louisiana:** Creating Industry Credential Pathways
- ◆ **Maryland:** Formalizing Noncredit Education for Impact
- ◆ **Massachusetts:** Building on Existing Success
- ◆ **Montana:** Improving Definitions and Data
- ◆ **Texas:** New Opportunities through New Funding
- ◆ **Virginia:** Uplifting Noncredit Education Across Sectors

Cross-Team Insights and Actions

State team success was driven in part by the collaborative design of the NMA. The NMA prioritized cross-team interactions, creating the opportunity for successful strategies to diffuse across state teams. The peer-to-peer learning that was built into the design of the NMA allowed state teams to learn from their colleagues and to employ creative, practical, and peer-tested solutions to their noncredit education challenges. Some examples of this innovation diffusion that occurred via the NMA are:

- ◆ **Montana** followed **Louisiana’s** lead in rebranding noncredit education to avoid the negative implications of a word that begins with the prefix “non.” Now, both states highlight the value of short, flexible college upskilling with the new term “validated skills and learning.”
- ◆ **Maryland** took a leaf from **Montana’s** approach to noncredit data collection. Both states are focused on adopting an approach measuring educational attainment that includes definitions, taxonomies, and tracking of workforce training and credentials alongside traditional credit-bearing programs.
- ◆ **Massachusetts** followed **Maryland’s** lead in pursuing regulatory change to elevate noncredit learning. Maryland is lobbying lawmakers to recognize “professional certificates” – a new type of credential available to credit and noncredit learners alike – in state regulations. Massachusetts is also considering how to use the state regulatory process to redefine the term “certificate.”
- ◆ **Louisiana** borrowed a stratagem from **Maryland** for building buy-in among institutional leaders. Both states have convened small groups of institutional leaders from across the state to analyze data and discuss noncredit-to-credit pathways. Both states called these working clusters “affinity groups.”
- ◆ **Virginia** was inspired by **Texas’s** online education to workforce portal, [My Texas Future](#). The Virginia team introduced local employers and state policymakers to the Texas website, which helps learners assess their own skills and interests and chart pathways to careers. As a result, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia sought funding to create

something similar, and several Virginia employers have asked to have their internships featured on the new website.

Examples of Success

Through the NMA, as states tackled the three levers of data, pathways, and communications, common themes emerged among state teams for effective ways to improve noncredit education's potential in their states.

Improving Data

- ◆ **Define what matters.** Identifying and categorizing different types of noncredit programs will help states decide which ones to track and measure. Distinguishing workforce education from other noncredit programs, such as personal enrichment, adult basic education, and instruction for English language learners can help states focus data collection efforts.
- ◆ **Clarify terminology.** To compare data across institutions statewide, states need clear, standardized definitions. Definitions for noncredit credentials – certificates, certifications, badges – are particularly important for tracking program outcomes.
- ◆ **Set standardized reporting guidelines.** Noncredit offerings vary widely from campus to campus. Ensure state data are accurate by providing institutions with clear, detailed guidance about what to report.
- ◆ **Support institutional capacity building.** Help institutions build capacity for better data collection by providing training and technical assistance for institutional research offices.
- ◆ **Collect outcomes beyond higher education data.** To understand the return on investment for noncredit programs, states should include students enrolled in these programs in Unemployment Insurance data matches or other means of tracking employment outcomes.

Improving Pathways

- ◆ **Foster Collaboration.** Create noncredit education councils or working groups, comprised of state agencies, postsecondary institutions, employers, and other relevant stakeholders, who can work collectively to advance noncredit pathways.
- ◆ **Identify priority sectors.** Understand your noncredit context. Assess your educational offerings and workforce priorities. Focus your initial efforts on high-priority sectors with strong career opportunities.

- ◆ **Build on industry-recognized credentials.** Use existing building blocks, including competency-based, industry-recognized credentials valued by employers, to create pathways.
- ◆ **Secure stakeholder buy-in.** Building noncredit-to-credit pathways requires buy-in from multiple stakeholders. Foster relationships with the institutions, organizations, faculty, and instructors that offer noncredit education.
- ◆ **Identify equivalencies and articulation agreements.** Work with stakeholders to determine credential equivalencies and robust pathways. Once buy-in is established and credential equivalencies are identified, develop articulation agreements to help ensure that established pathways can be used by any student statewide.

Improving Communications

- ◆ **Clarify Objectives.** Identify and communicate noncredit education problems and goals as clearly as possible – a specific ask, call to action, or intended outcome.
- ◆ **Target messaging and the medium.** Identify intended audiences (e.g., lawmakers, state agency colleagues, faculty, employers, or students). Tailor messaging and select mediums that speak to varied stakeholder perspectives and priorities.
- ◆ **Ensure understanding.** Create clear messaging through straightforward and easily digestible information. This is especially true when communicating data – statistics and dashboards should be easy to understand for lay audiences.⁵
- ◆ **Include stakeholders in the process.** Leverage noncredit education councils or working groups that help provide new insights, alternative perspectives, and tailored approaches – all of which will help diffuse noncredit messaging.
- ◆ **Define success and measure it.** Establish and track markers of successful outreach, with an understanding that different goals and different audiences will require different metrics and may evolve over time.

⁵ For more data communications strategies, see resources from the recent [SHEEO Community of Practice on Strengthening Data Literacy Among Higher Education Stakeholders](#).

Conclusion

Noncredit holds enormous potential for improving individual lives and for bolstering state economic goals, and state postsecondary agencies have a central role to play in making that potential a reality. Sitting at the intersection of the education-to-workforce pipeline, state postsecondary agencies are well positioned to improve noncredit educational definitions, data, pathways, communications, and ultimately, outcomes. Through the NMA, state teams have made strides in making improved noncredit education a reality. While work remains to be done to build a robust national noncredit ecosystem, NMA state teams have created strategies and examples for effectively understanding, enhancing and promoting short, focused, skills-centered college programs that meet the needs of learners and employers and enhance regional economic competitiveness.

STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

3035 CENTER GREEN DRIVE, SUITE 100, BOULDER, COLORADO, 80301
303.541.1600 • SHEEO.org

