



# The Noncredit Mobility Academy: State Success Snapshots

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January 2026

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In late 2023, the [State Higher Education Executive Officers Association](#), the [Education Strategy Group](#), and the [Progressive Policy Institute](#) launched the [Noncredit Mobility Academy](#) (NMA). This two-year project was designed to support state education officials working to create the data, pathway, and communication conditions necessary to advance noncredit education and its benefits. The State Success Snapshots shared in this brief highlight some of the work and future plans of state team participants. More information on the importance of noncredit education and the goals and outcomes of the NMA can be found in the accompanying brief, [The Noncredit Mobility Academy: Realizing the Potential of Noncredit Education](#).



## Louisiana: Creating Industry Credential Pathways

By 2030, Louisiana wants 60 percent of adults to hold a credential of value. These credentials of value are defined as degrees, certificates, or other awards in in-demand fields that improve job prospects, lead to higher wages, and support local economies. With a strong understanding of their state’s noncredit offerings, the Louisiana team used its participation in the NMA to build pathways that support their goal of increasing the number of residents with credentials beyond high school. Louisiana worked on several fronts, including building capacity for better data collection and rebranding noncredit workforce education as “validated skills and learning.” But the Louisiana state team, with representatives from the Board of Regents, the Community and Technical College System, the Louisiana Workforce Commission, and the governor’s office, was particularly keen to create pathways to further learning for students with competency-based industry certifications.

Many Louisianans earn industry certifications in high school, on the job, or in noncredit programs. But there are few clear pathways for learners seeking to build on these credentials and continue their education. The Louisiana team wanted to understand why this was the case. “We wanted to know,” explained Tristan Denley, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Innovation at the Louisiana Board of Regents, “does the state have career-development pathways for students with industry credentials? Do students, who want more education, know where to go next?” To better understand the student pathway experience, Denley conducted an experiment to see if there was a clear path from noncredit to degree. “I followed the pathway for a student with a National Center for Construction Education and Research Electrical Level 1 certification,” said Denley. “At the community college in Baton Rouge, that certification counted toward a technical diploma in electrical studies, which fed directly into an associate of applied science degree. Then, 60 credit hours of that AAS degree transferred seamlessly into a Bachelor of Applied Science at LSU Alexandria. From there, that BAS could be used for entrance into a graduate program.” The pathway existed. A learner with an entry-level certification in the electrical trade could use that credential as a springboard and continue their education, step-by-step, all the way through graduate school, without losing progress.

But Denley also discovered two problems. First, mapping that pathway took him nearly four hours. Second, when he tried to find a similar pathway at another community college, it did not exist. To find other pathways like the one Denley had identified, the Louisiana team needed to determine whether and where students with popular industry credentials could continue their education. As the Louisiana state team thought about applying this insight, they focused on establishing pathways in the high-growth sectors identified by the MJ Foster Promise scholarship program. That 2022 initiative provides financial support for adult learners pursuing certifications in the state’s five priority sectors: health care, manufacturing, construction, information technology, and transportation and logistics.

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In May 2025, supported by ESG and the NMA, the team convened a workshop in Baton Rouge, bringing together instructors from two- and four-year institutions who teach noncredit workforce education courses in the priority sectors. Groups of instructors identified the industry credentials most important for their sector, then discussed how students obtain these credentials and what further educational opportunities credential holders can pursue on their campuses. For each identified credential, groups mapped the courses a student could take at each of the colleges represented. This mapping exercise produced four categories: clear pathways, under development pathways, unclear or partial pathways, and no pathway. Using the color-coded categories, Louisiana is assessing its noncredit offerings and pathway support. For example, if no institution has a pathway for a particular certification, should the state reconsider whether to offer instruction that prepares learners to earn that credential? Conversely, if many institutions have a pathway for the same credential, should the state consider codifying it as a statewide noncredit-to-credit path?

Ultimately, the Louisiana state team hopes to establish noncredit-to-credit pathways across all five of the state's priority industries. As they work toward that goal, the team will continue to convene small groups of noncredit and credit faculty to determine credit equivalencies for industry certifications and understand student pathway experiences and outcomes. "We have a strategy for making these pathways happen at scale," Denley said. "We need to make certain each piece of a student's educational journey clearly connects to the next."

## **Maryland: Formalizing Noncredit Education for Impact**

As a state that was already working to enhance noncredit education through campus-based data collection and targeted funding, Maryland's NMA participation focused on better ways to uplift and communicate the value of noncredit programs. To do this, the Maryland team, with representatives from the Maryland Higher Education Commission, Maryland Longitudinal Data Center, Governor's Workforce Development Board, and Maryland Association of Community Colleges, is expanding the state's measure of educational attainment to include noncredit programs.

At a statewide student success summit in November 2024, the Maryland state team and their state agency and institutional colleagues discussed adding an attainment measure of "credentials of value," (i.e., completion of postsecondary courses and programs providing workforce skills required for jobs in high-demand industries). "It wasn't about choosing workforce credentials over bachelor's degrees," said Emily Dow, NMA participant and Assistant Secretary of Academic Affairs at the Maryland Higher Education Commission. "It was about recognizing that both contribute to a well-educated society."

Formally recognizing noncredit education's impact on outcomes was an important step for furthering support from the state. Maryland's community college funding formula provides support for students enrolled in approved noncredit workforce courses, and the Higher Education Commission vets noncredit courses for approval. But academy participants realized there was still

a stigma attached to the term “noncredit,” which was making it hard to convince various higher education partners of the value of short, standalone workforce programs. “The term ‘noncredit,’” Dow explains, “leads to the discounting of postsecondary programs that provide education, skills, and knowledge in similar ways that credit-bearing certificates and degrees do.”

Subsequently, in addition to adding a measure of noncredit into their attainment goals, Maryland sought a regulatory change to move noncredit education beyond the stigma. The Maryland team also searched for a new way to identify noncredit program completion. After reviewing regulatory definitions and names of existing academic awards and using NMA learning to understand how other states recognize noncredit workforce programs, the team imagined a new kind of certificate available for both credit and noncredit learners, called a “professional certificate.” Unlike existing certificates in Maryland, which are based solely on credit completion, the new certificate would also cover short, noncredit skills-focused workforce programs. “Participating in the academy gave us the confidence to move forward,” Dow said. “We could see that other states were working to realize the potential of noncredit programs and had grappled with different types of challenges on the way.” Implementing these changes required an improved understanding of their state context and institutional framing of noncredit education. The Maryland team surveyed institutions across the state, asking if the new term and certification accurately captured the programs colleges were offering and if institutions would award the new credential. Overall, colleges responded positively.

If approved through regulatory changes, Maryland’s professional certificates would allow students who complete what are currently noncredit workforce training programs to leave with a formal, state-recognized attestation of their college work. As Dow explained, “Professional certificates will give these programs the credence they deserve as providers of meaningful academic and professional education.” Issuing professional certificates would also improve Maryland’s education data collection. Maryland colleges already submit information on noncredit completers to the Maryland Higher Education Commission. But including professional certificates would create additional consistency in measuring student completion and tracking workforce outcomes. Finally, formalizing noncredit education could have significant funding implications for adult learners. Students in credit-bearing courses qualify for a variety of federal social benefits, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. If professional certificates were formally recognized by the state, learners in those programs could become eligible for these benefits.

The next steps for the Maryland team: presenting the proposed term and its utility to the Maryland Higher Education Commission and then gathering additional feedback about what regulatory changes would mean for statewide partners. “Creating professional certificates allows us to level up noncredit courses and demonstrate their value,” Dow said. “Pragmatically, if we want to measure the outcomes of workforce training, we must define it for quality and track completion.”

## Massachusetts: Building on Existing Success

Massachusetts has high hopes for short, noncredit workforce education programs. The Bay State has the nation’s highest share of adults with bachelor’s degrees – 47 percent – and Massachusetts employers have historically required degrees even for jobs that do not require them elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> But this is starting to change. Since 2023, the state has faced a tight labor market, and employers are struggling to fill open positions.<sup>2</sup> Many firms, especially in fields facing persistent labor shortages, such as manufacturing and health services, increasingly seek workers with postsecondary education but not necessarily four-year degrees.<sup>3</sup>

The Massachusetts state team wondered if noncredit workforce education could help fill these gaps. However, they also worried that, without clear noncredit-to-credit pathways, noncredit students would be locked out of future learning opportunities. Through the NMA, the team focused on creating those clear pathways across the state. “The idea is that there’s no wrong door into postsecondary education,” explained Lisa Carchia, Director of Workforce Development at the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges. “Every credential should lead somewhere. For example, truck drivers often move into logistics once they stop driving, so how do we build a bridge from a truck-driving credential into the right career pathway?” The team, with representatives from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Executive Office of Education, Commonwealth Corporation, and some of the state’s 15 community colleges, gathered education leaders from across the state, including institutional research officers, workforce development directors, and academic officers, to develop a strategy for advancing noncredit-to-credit pathways statewide.

Recognizing that many learners move back and forth between the classroom and careers, the Massachusetts team sought to create flexible pathways, with no distinctions between workforce-bound students and those interested in additional higher education. The team’s most important strategy: rather than starting from scratch or designing theoretical options, they leveraged existing state noncredit-to-credit pathways. North Shore Community College (North Shore) stood out as a bright spot. A small college 20 miles north of Boston, North Shore developed 27 noncredit-to-credit pathways in four areas of study. The key to charting these pathways is carefully structured faculty participation. As Cristy Sugarman, Executive Director of the College’s Center for Alternative Studies and Educational Testing, said, “You want to get the faculty and noncredit instructors together, talking about content and student learning outcomes. These are the things that bind these folks together.”

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<sup>1</sup> Ash, J., & Glenn, L., (2024, Feb. 11). No Degree? No Problem: Skills-based hiring is taking off in Massachusetts. Boston, MA: Commonwealth Beacon. <https://commonwealthbeacon.org/opinion/no-degree-no-problem/>

<sup>2</sup> Rubin, J., & Warrington, A., (2023, September). Addressing the Labor Shortage in Massachusetts. Cambridge, MA: The Project on Workforce. <https://pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/addressing-the-labor-shortage-in-massachusetts>

<sup>3</sup> Ash, J., & Glenn, L., (2024, Feb. 11). No Degree? No Problem: Skills-based hiring is taking off in Massachusetts. Boston, MA: Commonwealth Beacon. <https://commonwealthbeacon.org/opinion/no-degree-no-problem/>

Like many other institutions and systems, North Shore built its credit equivalencies on competency-based industry-recognized credentials. For example, noncredit certified nursing assistant programs, which are offered at all Massachusetts community colleges, prepare students to sit for the state certification exam. If they pass, the certification can be translated into community college credit. Academic faculty are often skeptical about the rigor of noncredit learning, and it helps allay those doubts if students can show they have passed demanding third-party assessments. “The learning outcomes [required to pass the exam for] an industry-recognized credential can be compared to student learning outcomes from credit courses,” Sugarman said.

Massachusetts is applying the lessons learned from North Shore to co-create noncredit-to-credit pathways with other colleges. Importantly, the Massachusetts team is doing this work in collaboration with campuses to build relevant and effective pathways that allow each campus to establish its own credit equivalencies, guaranteeing buy-in from faculty and instructors and support across the college. Through ongoing collaborative conversations, the team is working with campuses to focus on establishing pathways in the state’s priority sectors (i.e., health care, information technology, manufacturing, and clean energy) and tied to regional priorities (e.g., hospitality in western Massachusetts). Each community college’s chief academic officer will lead an effort to identify existing pathways and to create new pathways for currently unconnected noncredit programs. “We’re still in the early stages of identifying how many noncredit programs and credentials need pathways,” said Carchia. “Our long-term goal is clear pathways in each priority industry.”

## Montana: Improving Definitions and Data

Montana has enjoyed low unemployment – below 3.4 percent – since 2022.<sup>4</sup> But as in many sparsely populated states, this low rate masks rural labor shortages, underemployment, and limited access to workforce training. Noncredit programs offering flexible, locally tailored workforce training can help solve these problems; yet the scope and impact of these programs in Montana were unclear. The Montana team used its participation in the Noncredit Mobility Academy to lay the groundwork for future data collection and impact by learning more about the noncredit workforce education offered across a large, geographically dispersed state. “One important thing we realized was that our state has a lot of good programs, but no one was measuring them,” explained Tom Gallagher, Dean of Missoula College and Associate Vice Provost of Two-Year Education and Workforce Development at the University of Montana.

The Montana team’s priority was to categorize the varied landscape of noncredit education in their state. Representatives of the Montana University System, which includes the state’s community colleges, led the team’s involvement in the academy, joined by other entities with a stake in

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<sup>4</sup> State of Montana Newsroom, (2025, July 18). Montana Maintains Near Record Low Unemployment for Four Consecutive Years. Helena, MT: Governor’s Office. <https://news.mt.gov/Governors-Office/Montana-Maintains-Near-Record-Low-Unemployment-for-Four-Consecutive-Years>

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workforce development – education nonprofits, the Department of Labor and Industry, and the governor’s education liaison. The team mapped the variety of noncredit workforce training offered in the state. “When the conversations began, we quickly realized many groups were working on similar training initiatives without knowing about each other,” stated Montana’s Noncredit Mobility Academy coach, John Fischer. “Every time someone new joined the discussion, we discovered another program we hadn’t known existed.” Montana’s program mapping uncovered 10 significant workforce development initiatives.

The team also discovered that the term noncredit was being used to describe a broad range of offerings – workforce training, personal enrichment programs, and college-preparatory courses. “We wanted to untangle personal enrichment from workforce development and create a distinct category for workforce education programs,” explained Gallagher. To qualify as “workforce programs,” these upskilling initiatives must align with industry standards and meet market-driven employment needs, providing targeted skills and credentials for in-demand jobs. Once the new category was established, it needed a name. “We intentionally moved away from calling these programs noncredit,” Gallagher said. “That negative term goes against our purpose: to give these workforce programs the recognition and value they deserve.” Montana now calls these programs “validated skills training,” a term the team adopted from the NMA Louisiana state team after discovering in the academy that the Louisiana Board of Regents was also rebranding noncredit education.

Next, the Montana team focused on creating consistent terminology for credentials awarded by these programs. The group’s academy coach helped draft a set of definitions, aligning them with those in use in other states. The Montana team refined these and settled on nine distinct types of credentials, including certificates, certifications, and micro-credentials. “Our goal is to measure the outcomes of these programs to show they’re successful,” Gallagher said, “and to do that effectively, we need a shared language to ensure we’re comparing oranges with oranges.”

Moving forward, Montana is focusing on data collection. “We kept asking ourselves, ‘What do we do for our traditional academic programs, and how can we replicate that approach for workforce development?’” Gallagher said. “The missing tool is a shared student information system.” Ultimately, Montana’s goal is for all institutions in the state to adopt the same platform and taxonomy – a single, statewide system for tracking workforce training and credentialing. According to Gallagher, “Validated skills training is important. We want to demonstrate the success of these programs to ensure they get the recognition they deserve. It’s vital for us to begin measuring the outcomes of what we’re doing and communicating that to others. We’re ready to start measuring.”

## Texas: New Funding Formula Creates New Opportunities

In 2023, the Texas legislature approved a major overhaul of the state’s community college funding formula. After a multiyear process involving expert input and statewide consensus-building, House Bill 8 passed unanimously, replacing a traditional funding model based on enrollment and contact hours with an approach that rewards institutions for workforce outcomes, including job placement and earnings.<sup>5</sup> Under the new model, while all institutions continue to receive base-level funding, those delivering outcomes aligned with state workforce needs will earn additional dollars. “The state wants to keep the Texas economic engine strong,” explained Kenyatta Lovett, ESG Principal and the NMA coach for the Texas team. “Community colleges play a big role in that, but as the state refines its investments, it wants to show clearly which noncredit programs deliver real-world outcomes.” House Bill 8 provides performance funding for “credentials of value,” defined as those offering students a positive return on investment within 10 years. The state measures this return by evaluating whether a student’s cumulative 10-year earnings equal or surpass what a high school graduate would earn by entering the workforce directly.

Texas focused on implementing this first-of-its-kind funding approach through the NMA. Members of the Texas team, with representatives from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the office of the lieutenant governor, the office of the governor, the Texas Workforce Commission, and community colleges, began by investigating outcomes-based funding for noncredit programs. The team sought to understand if students completing noncredit workforce education courses (termed “occupational skills awards” in Texas) experienced tangible economic benefits, including higher wages and improved job prospects. Initially, the team found it was unable to answer this question. Data on workforce programs and their outcomes were not reliably reported by all 50 Texas community colleges, and much noncredit learning went untracked. Additionally, community colleges lacked a common definition of noncredit, making even tracked information inconsistent, difficult to compare across campuses, and unreliable for state-level reporting.

To address these data inconsistencies and reporting challenges, the Texas team sought advice from community college institutional researchers. According to David Troutman, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, “we wanted to understand the workforce development training community colleges were doing that our current data system overlooked.” Meetings with institutional researchers produced significant insight into noncredit learning that was occurring at many institutions, regardless of completion status. “[Institutional researchers] kept talking about things they were doing that we weren’t accounting for,” Troutman recalled. “The most important – the one they mentioned most often – was students who were attending noncredit classes but then dropped out when they felt like they had enough knowledge in the topic area to sit for a certification or licensure exam.” Although these students completed some instructional hours and sat for workforce certifications, they did not finish the

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<sup>5</sup> Texas Association of Community Colleges, (n.d.). House Bill 8: A New Way of Funding Texas Community Colleges. Austin, TX: TACC. <https://tacc.org/tacc/what-hb-8>

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course, so colleges were unable to grant them occupational skills awards. In turn, that impacted state reporting and potential institutional funding under HB 8.

To capture non-completing noncredit students, the Texas team proposed a new reporting category: “institutional credentials leading to licensure or certification awards.” Under this proposal, colleges could grant these students an official award and receive funding for their efforts and for the students’ success. According to Troutman, this financial incentive has increased campuses’ determination to identify noncredit students and track their outcomes by working with licensing and certification bodies and maintaining contact with learners who leave early. “Texas has long been a state with a relatively sophisticated higher ed data system,” Lovett explained. “House Bill 8 pressure-tested that data with funding, and now the data will improve.” “Community colleges don’t get enough credit,” Troutman added. “They’re agile, adapting to regional workforce needs – and they were doing important work that we as a state weren’t capturing. House Bill 8 allowed us to catch up to them. Before House Bill 8, noncredit reporting was voluntary, and some campuses didn’t report at all.” Now Texas community colleges will use their data to demonstrate that occupational skills awards pay off for students, which is changing practice and outcomes. Troutman explained, “Once dollars were tied to reporting, we saw changes...at some campuses, we saw as much as a 1,000 percent increase in the amount of data provided.”

## Virginia: Uplifting Noncredit Education Across Sectors

For more than a decade, Virginia has been at the forefront of noncredit workforce education, including the nationally renowned short-term workforce training program [FastForward](#). But FastForward is geared to two-year institutions, covering only selected, high-demand workforce offerings and not the panoply of noncredit options available across two- and four-year sectors. The Virginia state team was eager to communicate the worth of all the state’s noncredit workforce training – not just those at community colleges or those covered by FastForward. Through the NMA, the team focused on better understanding and promoting noncredit programs at four-year institutions in the state.

As a first step, the Virginia state team – representatives from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, the community college system, four-year institutions, legislative committees, and the governor’s office – set out to learn more about how four-year institutions were approaching noncredit workforce education – a unique focus within NMA state teams. Lesa Hanlin, NMA participant and Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives and Corporate Relations at the University of Virginia’s (UVA) School of Continuing and Professional Studies, volunteered to create a subcommittee to find out what noncredit programming looked like across the commonwealth. Hanlin and the sub-committee deployed the survey, the results from which highlighted variability of noncredit terms and experiences across four-year campuses. Each institution defined noncredit somewhat differently, with several types of courses included under the term. Course modality was also variable. Some universities partnered with third-party providers to deliver short workforce

training programs leading to certifications. Others offered intensive boot camps or semester-long classes with final exams. Most included corporate training and personal enrichment courses as part of their noncredit offerings. Four-year college noncredit programs also served a wide range of students. Workforce training attracted primarily working professionals, but it also drew undergraduates interested in earning an industry credential alongside their degree (e.g., an English major rounding out their resume with a Project Management Professional certification).

Through this process, the team also discovered that Virginia universities did not collect consistent data on noncredit students and programs. Reporting practices differed substantially from institution to institution. Some colleges were not reporting at all. Others assigned oversight of noncredit reporting to offices with competing responsibilities, such as the office of the provost, where reporting approach varied in formality, consistency, and accountability. “Everyone on the subcommittee was surprised by the wide range of what’s collected and what’s not,” Hanlin said. “The survey results were all over the map, so we had one-on-one meetings to better understand each institution’s programs and reporting practices.”

The Virginia team concluded that the first step toward communicating the value of noncredit offerings at four-year institutions was to explore how the state could expand and unify definitions and data reporting practices. The sub-committee began by clarifying the meaning around noncredit education by including skills-related programs in data and reporting taxonomies and excluding personal enrichment courses, English as a second language classes, high school programs, and college-prep courses such as “Writing Readiness.” They further refined their scope by excluding corporate training, though they chose to include training delivered in partnership with third-party providers. They also determined that courses did not have to result in an industry certification to be counted. The group included noncredit training for any duration, whether it lasted one day or an entire semester. “Getting nine institutions that have always done things their own way to agree on shared definitions was a huge success,” Hanlin says.

The team also prepared a white paper scheduled for release in Spring 2026. Its work has shown that four-year institutions were providing more noncredit workforce education than the Virginia team had realized, serving both adult learners and traditional college-aged students with a variety of learning goals. But the group decided it was too soon to draw qualitative conclusions about noncredit programs across Virginia’s four-year universities, so they are outlining common challenges for understanding four-year noncredit education (such as how the limited demographic information required from noncredit learners when enrolling can hinder data reporting practices) and providing recommendations on reporting timelines and metrics. The subcommittee hopes its white paper will support the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia’s efforts to communicate the importance of all Virginia noncredit education, particularly to legislators. “Four-year institutions aren’t looking to compete with community colleges in the state legislature,” Hanlin said, “but many do offer noncredit workforce programs and are potentially being overlooked for funding.”

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