THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Mystery of Short-Term Credentials

Colleges and lawmakers tout them as a speedway to good jobs. Where's the data to prove it?

MICHAEL THEIS, THE CHRONICLE

CAREER TRAINING

By *Lee Gardner*

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The temperature is approaching 80 degrees on a June morning, but it feels at least 10 degrees hotter on the vast blacktop parking lot as four semitrailer trucks idle in the sun. Out behind Brightpoint Community College, just south of Richmond, Va., about two dozen men and women take turns venturing from the slim line of shade cast by the trees at the edge of the lot to sit in the air-conditioned cabs, easing the massive rigs back and forth a few yards.

They are students enrolled in the college's commercial drivers' license, or CDL, training program. They won't earn any college credit — the CDL course is one of as many as 100 noncredit work-force training courses Brightpoint offers — but after four weeks of learning how to operate the trucks and trailers and studying road safety, they'll hopefully be prepared to pass the licensing exam and become drivers.

Instead of going into debt, one student figured, "I could do this and be making about as much money as the average college graduate in a shorter amount of time."

Trucking companies are always hungry for drivers to help shore up pandemic-rattled supply chains.

Seth Anderson, a lanky 21-year-old whom everyone calls "Andy," is one of several students on the lot who opted to pursue a CDL after leaving behind the conventional college-degree path. After briefly studying at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, in Richmond, he "figured that instead of getting in massive amounts of student debt, I could do this and be making about as much money as the average college graduate in a shorter amount of time."

Anderson's story slots neatly into a narrative common in higher education these days: Short-term work-force credentials are a shortcut to a good job without the time and expense required for traditional degrees. Noncredit work-force programs are big and growing, according to the anecdotal buzz from politicians, college leaders, and other observers.

There's just one problem: Parts of that narrative may be false, or at least impossible to verify. Few states collect data on noncredit enrollment, and the federal government in

the administrative burden it'd require, so there is little reliable information on how big noncredit programs are, or how much they've grown. And whether work-force credentials actually lead to good jobs, much less careers, is still a matter of debate.

Without such data, employers can't parse where they're likely to find the trained employees they need without costly trial and error, and that may affect where they build new facilities, which can make billion-dollar differences for some communities. Without data, the federal and state governments have little clue where to target financial support effectively, or where to assign accountability. Without data, colleges operate blind on which programs are successful, which connect best with the regional work force, and how to help students succeed. And most importantly, without data, students have no idea whether the programs they're considering will lead to the outcomes they seek.

Noncredit work-force education has been the "hidden college" at two-year institutions for decades, experts say, siloed off from the credit side. The costs of that separation are becoming apparent as government agencies and college leaders scramble to make the most of an ostensibly popular offering amid work-force gaps, Covid-driven enrollment declines, and student re-evaluations of traditional degrees. Work-force credentials now have another nickname among observers — "the Wild West" of higher education — and taming them won't be easy.

A commercial-truck-driving instructor at Brightpoint Community College, in Chester, Va., signals for a truck to brake during a lesson.

Noncredit courses have been part of the community-college mission from their inception, and they take several forms. At many two-year institutions, you can take noncredit courses that serve the community through engaging personal interests — you can study how to dance, how to do your taxes, or how to cut your own hair. Many basic adult-education courses, such as GED prep and English as a second language, fall under noncredit, too.

The fastest-growing area of noncredit education, at least anecdotally, and the part politicians are excited about, is occupational training, which is either directly contracted by local employers — a business pays an institution to train its employees in a specific skill to order — or offered by the college for the area work force. The latter category encompasses both professional development — updates on new software for

mid-career information-technology workers, for example — as well as entry-level training for students hoping to enter a new profession, like trucking, certified nurse's aide, heating and air-conditioning maintenance, or early-childhood education.

Work-force training is a huge and lucrative market, says Anthony P. Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. Businesses spend an estimated $20 billion to $30 billion on training every year, some of which they spend with or through community colleges — money, he adds, that colleges don't have to get from the state. But there's no way of telling how many of those billions actually end up in colleges' coffers.

For-credit higher education is monitored by a vast web of metrics and related data-gathering at the federal, state, system, and institution levels, encompassing public and virtually all private institutions alike. Much of the data-gathering is tied to accountability, most importantly for government dollars in the form of federal student aid or state support for public colleges. Noncredit programs aren't eligible for federal student aid, and most states don't spend tax dollars on them. "Typically, funding and data reporting go hand in hand," says Mark D'Amico, a professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who studies noncredit education.

Federal data says that about 16 million undergraduates attended college in this country in the fall of 2020. For several decades, the most commonly cited estimate for noncredit students was five million each year, a figure that came from the American Association of Community Colleges, known as AACC. Christopher M. Mullin, now a strategy director for data and measurement for the Lumina Foundation, a nonpartisan think tank, worked as program director for policy analysis at the association in the early 2010s, and tried to discover the basis of the five-million figure. He discovered the figure had remained unchanged since it was published on a two-page "fast facts" sheet in 1995.

In 2022, the organization began using the number 4.1 million noncredit students, says Martha M. Parham, senior vice president for public relations at AACC, a figure derived from a new analysis the group did of existing college-reported data.

The heterogeneity of noncredit education works against a consistent count at any level. Some courses are taught off campus at an employer's site, where it may be difficult to compel students to sign in, much less share identifying information such as Social Security numbers. Noncredit students who study on campus often bypass the traditional admissions process. "Having worked with data sets from a couple of different states," says D'Amico, "there have been instances where 'missing' has been the largest demographic group in some categories."

Many organizations and scholars hoped that the U.S. Department of Education would finally begin collecting data on noncredit enrollment in the 2022-23 academic year. Department officials formally proposed it as part of a so-called technical review of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or Ipeds, this past spring and solicited public comments. But those who had submitted comments received an email in July announcing that the department would not require colleges to submit noncredit enrollment data, even though, the email acknowledged, "those students, and their outcomes, are not included in any publicly available national data collection, resulting in significant gaps in what is known about the scope or scale of noncredit activity."

The administrative red tape was too much, according to a department official who spoke on the condition that he not be named. Community and technical colleges are most closely identified with noncredit courses, but four-year institutions offer them, too, and "there's too much burden to collect this uniformly across the entire population of schools required to report to Ipeds," the official said. "We couldn't add it as a uniform collection element the way we were proposing." The next round of Ipeds data collection will include a check box allowing colleges that offer a lot of

noncredit programs to self-identify for inclusion in possible future collections of noncredit student data.

But even without the federal government demanding that institutions start tracking how many students enroll in noncredit programs, there are other reasons experts say administrators should get their arms around their own noncredit programs, in some cases for the first time ever. And it won't be a matter of just counting heads. Unpacking the numbers will lead community and technical colleges to face many questions. Are our programs accessible to all students? Are students getting the support they need? Are the programs bringing in enough revenue?

Iowa is a unicorn among states when it comes to noncredit. Like most states, it distributes state support to its colleges based in large part on enrollment, but unlike most other states, it backs noncredit education with state dollars, so Iowa's public colleges have been counting their noncredit students since 1999. In the early years, that was literally a head count, just a raw number. Over the past two decades, however, the state has built a data infrastructure and funding mechanisms for noncredit programs similar to what it does on the credit side of the house.

Just a head count wasn't cutting it, says Paula Nissen, who started work at the Iowa Department of Education as an education program consultant in 2014. When considering the state's work-force needs, there was no way to zoom in on truck drivers or other occupations, she says, and "no accountability, no way to know how many there were, where they were, if they were employed, whether the training programs do anything good." She and her colleague Vladimir Bassis, also then an education program consultant, soon started work on gathering more and better data on noncredit students.

They faced hurdles. It was sometimes difficult to get students in off-campus training to volunteer their information. Student information software that could be bought off

the shelf wouldn't accommodate noncredit data. Some administrators at local campuses weren't fully on board. "It was a fight at first to get them to understand the value of it," says Jeremy Varner, division administrator at the Iowa Department of Education. "If you get garbage data, you can't do much with it. If we don't have all the institutions, we can't give the systemic picture."

By persisting over the years, the Iowa Department of Education now [knows](#) that statewide there were 140,992 students enrolled in noncredit courses at community colleges in 2021, compared with 116,979 students enrolled on the credit side, slightly down from 145,814 and 127,013, respectively, in 2020. About 84 percent of those who completed noncredit work-force programs in Iowa in 2020 were subsequently employed in Iowa. For those who completed a noncredit program in 2020, their median annual wage beforehand was $34,868, and their median wage after the program was $37,684. About 17 percent of noncredit students in 2020 subsequently enrolled in for-credit courses. The data extends to the institutional level as well.

Having solid noncredit data on hand can make the difference in asking for funding, or settling a dispute, says Srdjan Golub, director of community and work-force solutions at Hawkeye Community College, in Waterloo, Iowa. He says he was told by local health-care providers that his institution wasn't producing enough certified nurse's assistants, or CNAs, to meet local demand. By going back through the data he'd provided to the state, the college was able to demonstrate to employers that it was producing more than enough CNAs to fill all the slots. The problem was that graduates were spending less than six months in the jobs, he says. "So really, the problem is not training; it's the wages, hours, the other things in the job. So we're able to tell the story better."
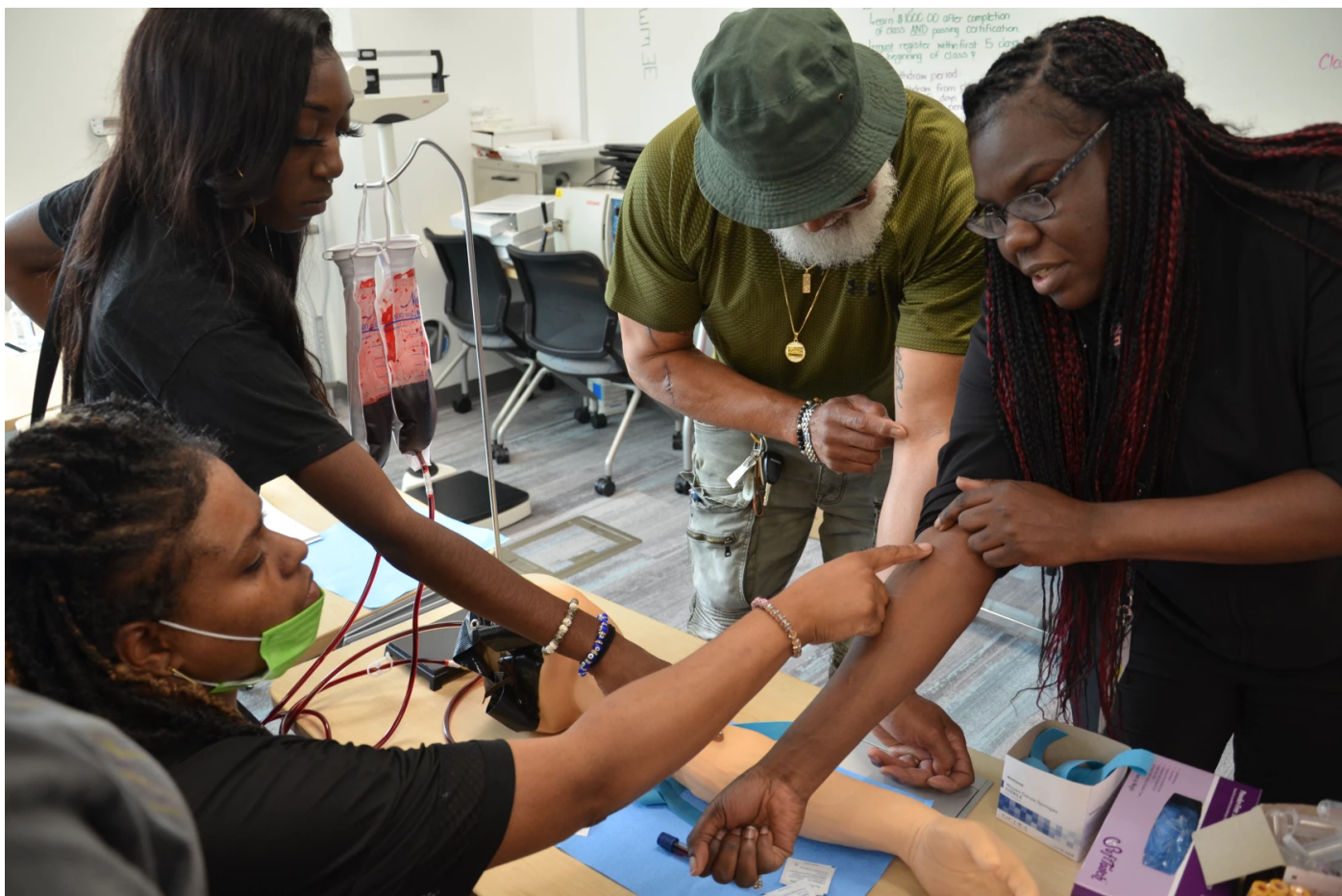
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Noncredit training for nursing assistants at Brightpoint Community College

Colorado is where Iowa was decades ago. Right now, the state doesn't track the number of noncredit students it educates. The institutions in the Colorado Community College system do keep a count of how many students enroll in their noncredit programs, says Landon K. Pirius, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, but "it might be a little generous to say all 13 colleges have databases." None of the colleges use student-information software that's compatible with the system's software, and a few have kept track of noncredit enrollment in basic Excel spreadsheets.

That's all getting ready to change. It has to, says Michael P. Macklin, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs and work-force development. Students want to know more about programs and their outcomes. Employers want different things than they did in the past--workers with different skills, out in the work force faster than

someone working on a two-year degree — and to make the most of that, "we're trying to be nimble and adjust," Macklin says. "To do that, we've got to play catch up with some of our infrastructure, frankly."

The system is using $1.3 million in federal funds gleaned from Covid-19 relief to create a systemwide noncredit student-information system that it hopes to have running in 2023. Having noncredit students on the system radar would provide them with many advantages. They could, for example, get easier access to campus-level resources that they often miss out on — libraries, advisers, and more. "We're moving toward really trying to focus in on that student as a student, regardless of what type of program they're looking at," Macklin says, "and that is a shift."

The shift is already underway at Pueblo Community College, in Pueblo, Colo. In the past, administrators from the credit and noncredit sides of the institution had a sometimes difficult relationship because they felt they were competing for the same students, says Amanda Corum, president of Pueblo Corporate College, its noncredit work-force arm. "We've really shifted our mind-set," she says. Having better data on all students in the same information system allows the college to bridge students from noncredit to credit programs, continuing their education and boosting their long-term earning potential. "We aren't necessarily serving the same students at the same time — we might both touch them," Corum adds, "but we're serving different needs."

Building those bridges is important. Although right now, noncredit credentials appeal to lawmakers and students as a shortcut to the work force, many of the most popular programs lead to jobs with low wages or high turnover and slim chances of advancement.

Many short-term noncredit programs do improve worker earnings, usually through professional development, says Davis D. Jenkins, a senior research scholar at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College. A few noncredit certificates can get newcomers into a better job, he adds, especially in

areas like construction, but in most cases, "you need at least an applied associate degree to get into a good-paying job, or a job in a field with some upward mobility."

While noncredit credentials give learners more choices in their education, says Carnevale of Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, the long-term data is pretty clear. By 2031, 40 percent of jobs will require at least a bachelor's degree and 75 percent of those will pay the equivalent of $17 an hour with benefits, the center's standard for a good job. About 30 percent of jobs will be "middle skill," requiring a two-year degree or certificate, but only 40 percent of them will qualify as good jobs. "It is not true that B. A.s aren't worth it anymore," Carnevale says. "That's just a lie."

Right now, the credit and noncredit operations at many community and technical colleges are all but walled off from each other, and there appears to be little transfer between them. "In the limited data that I've seen on that," says D'Amico of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, "it's not a large percentage of students who transition from one to the other." But with more and better data collection on noncredit students, that could change. A more integrated approach could potentially open the eyes of noncredit students to future possibilities on the credit side and potentially ease the process of awarding credit for noncredit courses, credentials, or other experience.

"I would never tell anyone, 'work-force training or a degree.' I think you need both."

Leaders at Brightpoint hope that improved data collection will help them guide more noncredit students toward continuing their education on the credit side. The average student in the Community College Workforce Alliance, the work-force development arm of Brightpoint and Reynolds Community Colleges, in Richmond, is 36 years old, according to Elizabeth Creamer, vice president for work-force development and

credential attainment at the alliance. "They're not going to go to a residential university" like Virginia Tech or the University of Virginia, she says. "They're looking for a way to get ahead as a working adult." Some students find their way into relatively lucrative fields like construction, but "almost invariably, at some point, they're going to want to do something less physical," she says. "Then there are management programs and supervising programs and home-inspection programs, either through the work-force side or the academic side of a community college."

Creamer acknowledges that for the first four years of the state's Fast Forward program, which covers two-thirds of the tuition for credentials in high-demand fields, the state wasn't assessing how many noncredit students returned to take for-credit classes at state institutions. But they're tracking that now "to make sure that it helps people over the long haul, and that it does lead to lifelong learning," she says. "I would never tell anyone, 'Work-force training or a degree.' I think you need both."

A couple of months after finishing his CDL course at Brightpoint, "Andy" Anderson is driving a truck for Western Express, a "starter company" that hires rookie drivers. The company is "kind of bottom of the barrel," he says, and he spends up to 70 hours a week driving. "Like, they try to take advantage of you and stuff." Western Express did not return messages seeking comment.

But Anderson says he won't be with Western long — maybe six months, and then hopefully on to a better company. And trucking isn't what he plans to do forever. He hopes to take the money he makes and invest it in real estate. "And ultimately," he adds, "I would like to get back to college and get a degree."

Correction (Sep. 19, 2022, 9:56 a.m.): An earlier version of this article omitted the first name and the title of Elizabeth Creamer, vice president for work-force development and credential attainment at the Community College Workforce Alliance. The article has been updated to reflect that correction.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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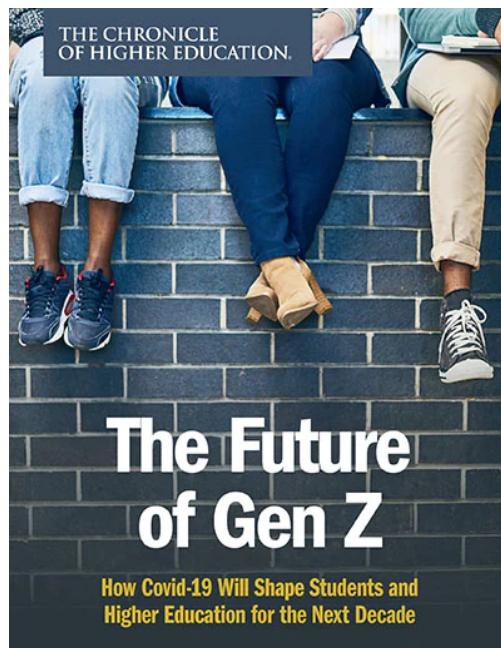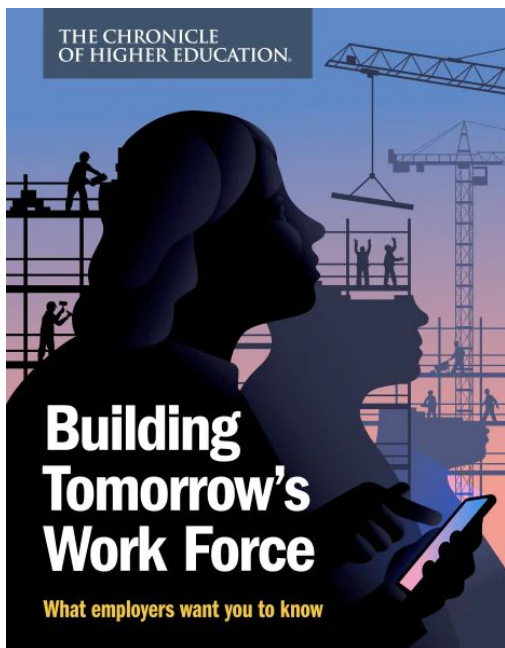
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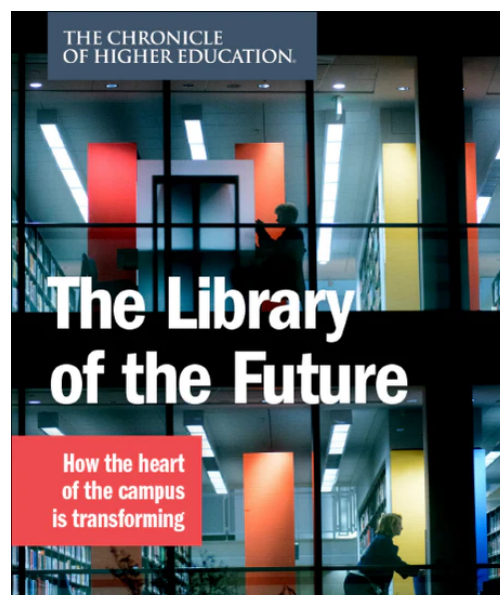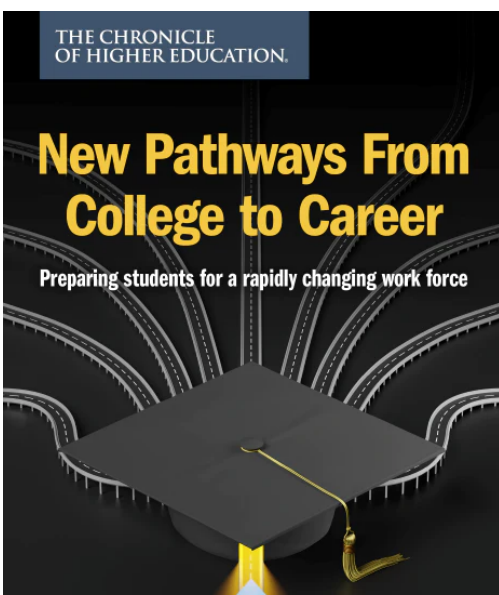
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