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THE RISE OF NONCREDIT

Postsecondary noncredit education has become an increasingly popular option for community college students in recent years. At many two-year institutions, noncredit education enrolls more students than do credit programs. The following is an excerpt from a recent report published by the Community College Research Center, part of the Teachers College at Columbia University in New York.

The study, *The Landscape of Noncredit Workforce Education: State Policies and Community College Practices*, was conducted with financial support from the nonprofit Sloan Foundation. Its authors use several case studies to examine the growth of workforce instruction and contract training programs at the nation's community colleges, noting that the widespread expansion of such programs "raises fundamental questions about whether colleges are keeping pace with student and workforce needs,

using resources efficiently, and providing access to all students." What's more, they say, "the answers may challenge current state policies and college practices." Decide for yourself.

Examining Noncredit Workforce Programs

The study, conducted in collaboration with the National Council for Workforce Education and the National Council for Continuing Education and Training, focused on noncredit work-

WORKFORCE EDUCATION

BY MICHELLE VAN NOY, JAMES JACOBS, SUZANNE KOREY, THOMAS BAILEY, AND KATHERINE L. HUGHES

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“Community college noncredit students... tend to be older and interested in gaining skills.”

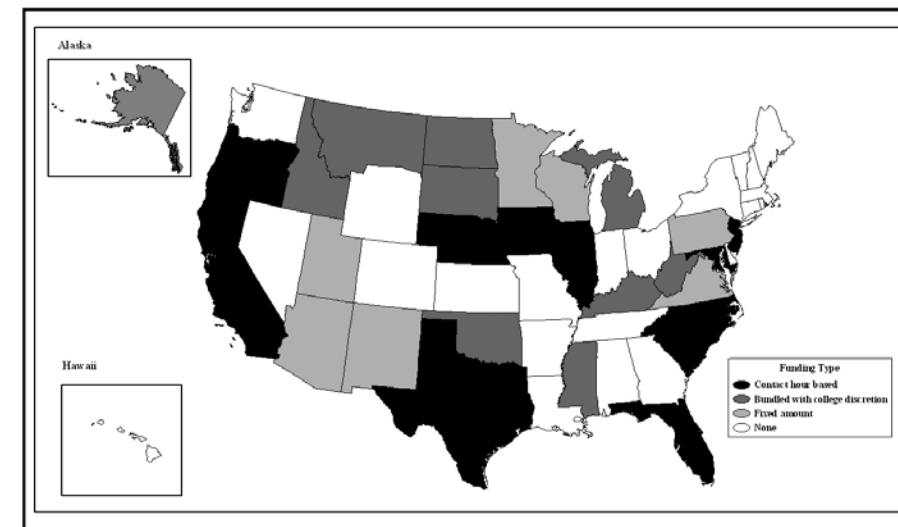
force instruction and contract training in community colleges. Specifically, it examined questions pertaining to the following: (1) the extent to which noncredit workforce education and state policies play a role in workforce development, provide disadvantaged groups with access to higher education, and generate revenue for the college; (2) the way colleges organize their noncredit workforce education programs to balance the tradeoffs between the desired flexibility of noncredit education and the integration of noncredit education with credit programs; and (3) the extent to which noncredit workforce education provides students with recorded outcomes, such as transcripts or industry certifications, and the extent to which outcomes data are available.

The study drew on two key sources of information. First, state policies on the funding and regulation of noncredit workforce education were reviewed in all 50 states by interviewing individuals in a variety of state departments with oversight for community colleges and/or workforce development. Second, case studies of 20 community colleges in 10 states were conducted by interviewing key administrative staff at each college. The colleges were selected to reflect innovative practices in noncredit workforce education, as well as a range of institutional sizes, locations, and states.

The Many Roles of Noncredit Workforce Education

As a local resource for workforce development, community colleges serve many individuals seeking noncredit workforce education for a variety of reasons and a wide range of industries needing employees at different skill levels. Community college noncredit

Funding From State General Funds for Noncredit Workforce Education



SOURCE: THE LANDSCAPE OF NONCREDIT WORKFORCE EDUCATION: STATE POLICIES AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRACTICES, 2008.

students have diverse educational backgrounds and tend to be older and interested in gaining skills. To bring students interested in pursuing a degree into credit programs, colleges use a variety of program features, such as recruiting noncredit students to credit programs and developing links between noncredit and credit programs. To support student noncredit enrollment, more than half of the states provide general funds for community college noncredit workforce education, which may provide an important indication of the state's vision for noncredit education. More than half the states have guidelines for defining what qualifies as a noncredit workforce course.

In addition to meeting the needs of students, community colleges' noncredit programs seek to meet specific employer needs at state and local levels. Some of them have developed flexible ways to offer courses in response to employer demand. Most states provide funds for workforce training and economic development, and just over half specify a direct role for community colleges as fiscal agents or preferred providers.

Community colleges also have a goal of revenue generation for many of their noncredit workforce programs. They are free to charge what the market will bear; few states place limits on the amount schools may charge for

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noncredit workforce courses. Many community college noncredit programs are, or plan to become, self-supporting or profit-generating in order to add value to the college and secure broader support within the college. Successfully

serving students and employers while also generating profits is a challenge for community colleges that requires careful thought and consideration.

The Organization of Noncredit Workforce Education in Community Colleges

The place of noncredit workforce education programs within the college's overall structure may have important implications for how programs operate and what they achieve. Community colleges use a range of organizational approaches, including both separate structure (in which the noncredit program is a distinct organizational unit within the college) and integrated structure (in which noncredit programs are interspersed among the colleges' academic units by content area). Regardless of organizational structure, colleges use a variety of strategies to achieve collaboration between programs, as well as flexibility in noncredit operations. Noncredit programs with separate organizational structures coordinate their activities through regular meetings and communication throughout the college to encourage collaboration, avoid duplication and allow movement between noncredit and credit programs. Conversely, noncredit programs with integrated organizational structures



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have an organizational entity to conduct entrepreneurial outreach, maintain flexibility and act as a central point of contact with employers. No single right way exists to organize noncredit workforce education, but coordination between credit and noncredit programs may help better meet the needs of both students and employers.

The increase in noncredit workforce education has prompted changes in the organization and course offerings of community colleges. Recently, several

“The increase in noncredit workforce education has prompted changes in the organization and course offerings at community colleges.”

community colleges have changed the organization of noncredit education to consolidate programs, elevate noncredit

education administratively within the college, and promote workforce development as a major college mission. Most are working to engage faculty and increase their appreciation of noncredit workforce education. In addition, noncredit workforce programs are bringing innovation to credit programs by developing strong links to the local labor market; they can benefit the college overall by increasing the depth and breadth of its offerings. State and federal funds have also spurred the development of noncredit program offerings in new technologies. As noncredit workforce education evolves, it is creating organizational changes within the community college that reflect its importance and its likely influence on the content of credit programs.

Outcomes From Noncredit Workforce Education

Since noncredit workforce education is not regulated by the academic rules that govern credit education, recorded student outcomes from participating in a noncredit program vary and serve different needs. While only a few states have guidelines for including noncredit courses on a transcript, many case-study colleges provide transcripts for noncredit workforce courses. Case-study college noncredit programs offer a range of industry certifications, but many noncredit offerings are not associated with such certification. The colleges therefore typically rely on external sources of validation to award Continuing Education Units for noncredit courses to meet industry demands. Some states and many community colleges have guidelines that could facilitate the retroactive granting of credit for noncredit courses, but their use in colleges is rare. Many states and colleges also reported interest in procedures for articulating noncredit programs with credit programs. The value of various recorded outcomes differs depending on the needs of students and employers.

With respect to reporting requirements for noncredit workforce education, many states tie reporting to fund-

ing, and several are seeking to collect more comprehensive data. State data systems can facilitate data collection for reporting requirements, but they must account for the unique format of noncredit programs. Case study colleges without state noncredit reporting requirements rarely collect noncredit data for their own purposes. The colleges reported several barriers to data collection, including their inability to collect information from some students, the non-traditional time frame of some courses, and poor data systems. A fuller understanding of the needs and outcomes of individuals and employers who seek noncredit workforce education is vital to determining which programs and recorded outcomes are of most value for which students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

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

- Provide state funding for noncredit workforce education with clear and targeted goals that promote workforce development and help students access credit education by cultivating better ties to career pathways.
- Increase coordination between credit and noncredit programs to benefit students and employers.
- Better assess student needs and support efforts to recruit noncredit students into credit programs and to articulate noncredit and credit pro-

grams to promote student transfer, when appropriate.

- Explore the development of non-degree forms of validation for all non-credit workforce education to record outcomes that promote the portability of evidence of skills for students and accountability for colleges and state workforce education funds.
- Collect more information on individuals' and employers' noncredit workforce education outcomes to assess the value of noncredit workforce

education to students, employers, and the economy.

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