



# Noncredit Career and Technical Community College Programs as a Bridge to Employers

Report on NYC Region Study

Sara Haviland  
Steve Robbins  
Dessi Kirova  
Jennifer Bochenek  
Dan Fishtein

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Background

Many students have found appeal in obtaining career and technical education (CTE) credentials, such as certificates, diplomas, or industry certifications, in programs lasting 2 years or fewer. More than half of the certificates that can be achieved in fewer than 2 years are offered at public community colleges, often through noncredit programs. Noncredit programs are unique in that they are unregulated and thus escape the bureaucracy surrounding accreditation that credit-bearing courses must endure. Frequently, noncredit programs can be held without having faculty contribute to their curricula, as many are offered online or through third parties. Given their flexibility, noncredit CTE programs have the potential to respond to rapid shifts in labor market needs in a very agile and organic way. Without careful consideration and design, however, there is a risk that students can waste time and resources on programs that do not improve their career trajectories, while employers continue to experience skill gaps that leave good jobs unfilled. They are also part of a broader universe of credentialing that can be uncoordinated, quite varied, and confusing for students and employers to navigate.

Though it can be quite varied (see, e.g., Van Noy et al., 2008), noncredit workforce development has been a major discussion topic among community college practitioners for decades and is an important component of the evolving mission of workforce development in community colleges (Jacobs & Worth, 2019). However, there has been limited research on the impact of state policies or institution-specific efforts to address noncredit program quality, credit and noncredit alignment, and employer engagement. We hope our research report on this topic, *Noncredit Career and Technical Community College Programs as a Bridge to Employers: Report on NYC Region Study*,<sup>1</sup> demonstrates the importance of systematic evaluation of actual practices within the noncredit area within the context of a specific labor market.

## Study Goals and Methods

Our report examines the current landscape of noncredit CTE education in the United States by applying an existing model from the Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center (Van Noy et al., 2019) to evaluate credential design, competencies, and market process to determine how these programs are aligned to the labor market. Historically, these three factors are found to be related to desirable outcomes, including better employment, increased education, and social benefits for those pursuing noncredit education.

This initial study focuses on a sample of community colleges ( $N = 11$ ) in New York City (NYC) and its proximal region. We began by doing a document review of the 11 schools' course catalogs (see Figure 1) and added a deep dive on one urban and one suburban college using a push-pull design in which we interviewed leaders within these institutions (push) as well as employer recruiters in health care and information technology pathways (pull). Thus we triangulated an examination of both course and program offerings with school leaders' perspectives and employers' hiring behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full research report on the Wiley Online Library, see: Haviland, S., Robbins, S., Kirova, D., Bochenek, J., & Fishtein, D. (2022). *Noncredit career and technical community college programs as a bridge to employers: Report on NYC region study* (Research Report No. RR-22-09). ETS. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12351>

# Findings

## Areas of Strength

The portrait of noncredit CTE programs within community colleges that emerged in the NYC region shows protection of and sensitivity to the needs of adult learners:

- Attunement to reducing barriers to access for learners by providing evening and weekend programs with few prerequisites
- Tendencies to offer capstone tests preceded by high-quality credentials that are easily recognized and accepted by employers, thereby smoothing the pathway to employment
- Offering programs with high potential for career growth, even if those programs do not necessarily align to prominent regional labor markets

## Areas of Challenge

Results also highlighted several areas of challenge:

- Figuring out noncredit and credit alignment within the community college
- Engaging employers and creating partnerships that can lead to formal student contact with employers, such as externships, practicums, and clinicals over informal meet-and-greets
- Finding ways to partner with new sectors, for example, information technology, that have not traditionally relied on a pipeline of workers from community colleges
- Determining whether Pell funds should be used with short-term training program qualification (see, e.g., Lederman, 2021)
- Ensuring transparency of program offerings and helping students make informed career decisions

**Figure 1. Popular CTE Career Clusters in NYC Region (Based on a Representative Sample of Community Colleges)**



**Health sciences (35% of program offerings)**  
Photo by fauxels from Pexels



**Information technology (17% of program offerings)**  
Photo by CDC from Pexels



**Business, management, & administration (13% of program offerings)**  
Photo by fauxels from Pexels



## College Offerings

This case study investigated what colleges are offering and how those offerings fit within coherent curriculum or training pathways. Our use of a taxonomy of quality indicators is an important organizing tool to evaluate curricular coherence, transparency, and quality. Other ETS research has demonstrated gender, class, and race/ethnic differences in career decision-making, which we believe are in part based on limited information and support exacerbated by limited catalog information and highly variable curriculum or training programs aligned to employer hiring requirements (Olivera-Aguilar et al., 2021).

## Certificates and Credentials

From an employer perspective, industry-approved and/or -required certificates and credentials are primary drivers. There is little evidence that micro-credentials are in demand and even less evidence that training programs that do not have any capstone testing or demonstration of competency are facilitating student access to jobs. The processes for building student–employer connections improve when community colleges help individual students gain and showcase their job-ready skills and talents relevant to specific industry sectors (e.g., IT, allied health, advanced manufacturing).

## Employer Engagement

Another critical area of focus is employer engagement, yet most schools are offering very few of these formal, sector-specific engagement opportunities. This is a lost opportunity, as more formal, structured employer engagement opportunities embedded in curriculum would guarantee that all students, even those who are not as well connected or do not understand the value of employer engagement, can participate.

## References

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