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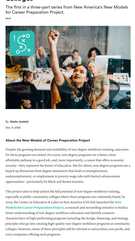
How to Plan High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs at Community Colleges

The first in a three-part series from New America's New Models for Career Preparation Project.



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About the New Models of Career Preparation Project

Despite the growing demand and availability of non-degree workforce training, outcomes for these programs are mixed. For some, non-degree programs are a faster, more affordable pathway to a job with good pay and benefits. For others, the outcomes are uncertain—they represent the future of education. But for others, non-degree programs are a hyped up diversion from degree attainment that leads to unemployment, underemployment, or employment in poverty-wage jobs with limited advancement opportunities—particularly for Black and Latinx students.

This project aims to help unlock the full potential of non-degree workforce training, especially at community colleges where these programs are commonly found. In partnership with the Kresge Foundation, New America launched the New Models for Career Preparation Project, a research and coaching initiative to build a better understanding of non-degree workforce education and identify promising practices and policies that can improve outcomes. This is the first in a three-part strategy brief on how to plan high-quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges. However, many of these practices and policies are relevant to universities, for-profit, and even companies offering such programs.

Over the past three years, we studied literature in the field to synthesize, develop, and pressure-test a practice-guide framework for non-degree programs at colleges. We conducted:

- An student case, we studied what goes into creating a good non-degree workforce program at colleges ranging from boutique to scale workforce in industry certification preparation programs and even apprenticeships. We identified, analyzed, and profiled 12 high-quality programs at Bunker Hill Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, Hudson Valley Community College, Mesa Community College, and Pima Technical Colleges.
- An student survey, we surveyed not to study the institutional structures that enable a community college to excel at non-degree workforce education. We chose six colleges to survey based on recommendations from our case study sites: Bunker Hill Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, Pima Community College, Hudson Community College, Lone Star Community College, and Tacoma Community College.

We conducted site visits at each college to understand what worked—and what doesn't—when creating non-degree programs. We collected data on colleges' four performing programs and conducted extensive research on the work of dozens of peer organizations, and, more importantly, the subjects of quality non-degree program development principles.

With both program and institutional level lessons in mind, we wrote this three-part brief series to provide practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders with practical guidance, lessons learned, advice, and expertise high-quality non-degree workforce programs.

We hope these briefs serve as valuable resources for the field—and we know that our work is not done. We look forward to continuing to help community colleges maximize their workforce impact in the years ahead.

How Colleges Should Use This New Models Brief Series

New Models for Career Preparation Brief Series:
Getting Non-Degree Programs Right at Community Colleges

This brief is the first in a three-part series that focuses on creating non-degree workforce programs:

1. **How to Plan for High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** This brief outlines approaches and strategies that colleges should use during the initial stage of deciding whether and how to offer a workforce program.
2. **How to Deliver High-Quality, Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** This brief outlines approaches and strategies that colleges should use in the day-to-day process of administering a successful program.
3. **How to Use Data to Improve Non-Degree Workforce Programs:** Forthcoming in early 2022, this brief outlines data collection and data-driven continuous improvement strategies colleges should use to boost program quality.

Community college leaders bring dozens of expertise to their work, drawing from lived experience, research, and practitioner knowledge. We don't claim to be experts in all of these areas, but these briefs will provide examples from well-respected practitioners and peer organizations and changes necessary to maximize the impact of non-degree workforce training.

We recognize that community colleges often are resource-constrained, and that non-degree workforce innovation despite our receiving aggressive support from philanthropy. To address this need, we are produced a special policy brief to provide state and federal policymakers with action items to help colleges maximize the benefits of non-degree workforce programs while mitigating the risks to students, institutions, employers, and the economy as a whole.

Adequate financing is critical for these programs, so together with our partners, we also recommended innovative strategies on financing non-degree programs for colleges to help in planning for and funding these programs.

Plan for the Best Outcomes

Spread and agility are critical of colleges want to be a top choice for workforce partnerships, but careful planning at the outset of program creation is worth the time. This section explores both program level aspects of high-quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges that contribute to their success and offers practical tips and tactics to build great programs.

Clarify Definitions for a Valuable Non-Degree Workforce Portfolio

In addition to offering programs that prepare students to transfer to universities, community colleges offer a variety of non-degree workforce programs that lead directly to jobs. However, confusion about non-degree training is pervasive inside and outside the community college sector. There is no commonly accepted definition of non-degree workforce programs at community colleges, neither federally, nor among colleges, employers, and other workforce stakeholders.

For our research, we have defined non-degree workforce programs as any credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing training program whose primary purpose is to lead to a job.

These programs are also called non-degree materials, never credentials, short-term programs, non-credit-bearing programs, alternative credentials, and other variations. Colleges use these to name policies, local employers, and college preferences. Colleges also offer non-credit-bearing workforce training and credentials or occupational programs, but these programs are not the focus of our project.

We settled on non-degree workforce programs as opposed to those other terms because not all programs colleges offer are micro or short-term (e.g., apprenticeships), not all are credit and/or a credential (i.e., customized training, certain boot camps), not are always non-credit or "alternative" options.

As a first step, practitioners should clearly and standardize definitions and lexicons for non-degree portfolios—especially when constructing a quality program. Since no ubiquitous definition exists, it is important that college staff are on the same page, particularly when discussing non-degree workforce programs with industry partners. Without this standardization process would happen on a regional or even state level, and collaboration with multiple colleges and universities, employers, employer intermediaries, state agencies, philanthropy, and the media process. We hope the framework set down here is helpful.

1. Types of Non-Degree Workforce Programs at Community Colleges

Below is a summary of common non-degree workforce programs offered by community colleges. These programs are offered in combination with one another.

Non-Degree Workforce Program Formats at Community Colleges

Program Format	Examples
Credit-bearing certificates	Pima Community College's Certificate of Advanced Manufacturing Skills (Level 1) Bookkeeping
Non-credit certificates	Central New Mexico College's Non-Credit Certificate in Medical Assistant
Stackable credentials	Tacoma Community College's Certificate of Medical Assistant
Other micro-credential	Hudson Community College's Computer Program Certificate Certificate of Completion, Microsoft Office Specialist, Adobe Certified Associate, Microsoft Certified Professional
Industry-recognized certification prep courses	Cuyahoga Community College's Manufacturing Associate Certificate
Occupational licensure prep programs	Tacoma Community College's Cosmetology Licensure Preparation Program
Boot camps	Mesa Community College's coding boot camp, Software Guild, Flatiron School, Revature
Apprenticeships	Cuyahoga Community College's Apprenticeship Program
Customized training, with building workforce partnerships, employer, direct customer	Mesa Community College's Customized Training

Best practices

- Clearly define and market the program
- Stackable credentials

2. Program Quality Indicators

We reviewed the literature as well as the policy and media narrative about program quality. We interviewed hundreds of college leaders, employers, policy leaders, workforce and economic development professionals, philanthropy officers, and academics to synthesize the field's understanding of what makes for a high-quality non-degree workforce program at colleges. Below is a summary of the quality criteria to guide program development, plus important quality indicators leaders should know.

Five Non-Degree Program Quality Criteria

Program Quality Criteria	Challenges and Solutions
The program leads to quality jobs with a clear career pathway and/or upskilling opportunities.	The many important professionals involved through non-degree workforce programs at community colleges. The lack of the correspondent to the Office of the Registrar and financial aid administrators at community colleges and name the impacts. Colleges need to develop partnerships and cross-functional teams with supporting their non-degree workforce programs and reviews.
The program is clearly for college, meaning it is part of the college's workforce portfolio.	Increasing percentage of a typical labor market and training participants are adult learners, colleges are advantaging to improve job quality and career pathways for adult learners. Adult learners are more likely than traditional students to have dependents, have more responsibilities, have less flexibility, scheduling and/or, childcare, transportation, and other challenges.
Employers and industry associations are involved in the program, and the program is clearly aligned with local, regional, and state labor market needs. Employer involvement is typically defined by colleges asking for employer input, but not actually making the hiring decision, with a handful of all of quality.	Hudson Community College is a case in point. Hudson Community College's Computer Program Certificate Certificate of Completion, Microsoft Office Specialist, Adobe Certified Associate, Microsoft Certified Professional

resources it takes to run a workforce program (for faculty upskilling, equipment purchases, marketing expenses, wraparound services, the time needed to work with employers and to collect and evaluate data for planning, etc.) and how program-level funds support effective overall organizational sustainability for the long haul.

To help colleges implement full-cost budgeting, we, along with the Non-Profit Finance Fund, a community development financial institution, produced a **dedicated report** on financing non-degree programs and a **technical assistance video** on the **full-cost budgeting technique**.

Source: **New America and Nonprofit Finance Fund, *Funding Non-Degree Workforce Programs at Community Colleges* (Washington, DC: New America, 2022)**.

Plan for Quality Partnerships

Secure Employer Buy-In at the Beginning of Program Development

The greatest predictor of a successful non-degree workforce program is evidence of employer buy-in. Colleges must, as a standard practice, require all non-degree workforce offerings to include some evidence of employer buy-in.

At a minimum, hiring managers must have confirmed that the program aligns with their needs, but ideally, employers should make a defined contribution to the program, whether financial (e.g., equipment donations, lending staff to teach in the program, scholarships, grants, or contracts) or in-kind (e.g., interview guarantees, preferential hiring agreements). Employer participation in job fairs is often pointed to as a sign of employer buy-in, but that signal is too weak to rely on alone.

Nearly all colleges rely on industry advisory committees to inform program design, but without quality control measures these committees can be limited in effectiveness. As with job fairs, employers serving on advisory committees is too weak of a signal of buy-in on their own.

Pima Community College **published a handbook** to enhance the quality and standardize the administration of advisory committees across its campus. The result was a more consistent and reliable experience for employers, a more valuable and substantive process for faculty and staff, and a stronger workforce reputation for the college. Other strategies to collect input from employers on the knowledge, skills, and abilities that workforce programs must offer include the **Business & Industry Leadership (BILT) model** and the **Developing a Curriculum (DACUM)** method.

Coordinate Workforce Offerings between College Systems and Districts

Striking the right balance between college control of workforce offerings and centrally planned strategy in college systems and districts is essential. Lone Star College has a **nine-step workforce development program process** guided by its 50-person Workforce Council convened by the Lone Star College System, for example. The collaborative approach balances system coordination with agency and voice for the colleges in the system. It takes time, but it pays dividends.

Bring Up Job Quality with Employers and Economic Development Partners

As discussed above, pay may be examined when planning programs, but rarely will colleges look at more nuanced qualities of the jobs they are training for. Colleges can be put in a difficult position when they need to respond to employers' call to train for essential jobs, such as child development associates or nursing assistants, but those jobs only offer a marginal improvement in economic security for college graduates. The best thing to do is to raise job quality with employers and other stakeholders early in the planning stage.

Source: **Aspen Institute, "Statement on Good Jobs," Aspen Institute Good Jobs Champion Group, October 4, 2022.**

Prioritize a Broader Set of Workforce Partners

While employers are the most important partners for strong workforce programming, colleges must broaden and deepen partnerships with other allies.

Colleges can partner with **labor unions**, for example, to support the training needs of union members, pursue joint grants, and recruit new student populations—perhaps with the use of union training funds. Colleges can partner with workforce development boards and workforce systems in new or improved ways.

For example, Sacramento City College **co-located its American Job Center One Stop Shop** within its career center and established mutually beneficial programming supported by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Funds. Rather than having career services report to student services, the center, housing the American Job Center One Stop Shop, reported to workforce development. The One Stop Shop promoted the college's career pathways to residents seeking training—90 percent of the college's service area also qualified for the One Stop Shop's services. The One Stop could pay for faculty time instructing in relevant programs as well as students' certificate training at the college.

Colleges in states like California with **High Road Training Partnerships** funding are well positioned to enter into partnerships with unions and employers that advance equity by connecting workforce training to efforts to improve job quality, and the U.S. Labor Department is launching a campaign to clarify how the **$3.6 billion Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act can improve job quality**, creating new opportunities for community colleges to advance job quality.

Broward College enlisted the support of dozens of municipal government, library, and nonprofit partners to administer its **BrowardUP program** which expanded the college's footprint in the ZIP codes of the most underserved communities in its region. City government properties began raising Broward College flags on municipal buildings to signal Broward's new presence.

Seeking to train students for jobs of the future in emerging technology fields, colleges like Pellissippi State Community College in Tennessee partner with federally funded **national laboratories and ManufacturingUSA Institutes** to align technology and talent development. Pima Community College joined the **U.S. Transportation Department-funded University Transportation Centers** to launch autonomous vehicle certificate programs. New programs out of the National Science Foundation will fund work-based learning college **partnerships for emerging technology jobs**. Colleges build workforce partnerships with U.S. Commerce-Department funded **Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) centers** which are located in every state to support small and medium-sized manufacturers with training and R&D needs.

These relationships help signal to policymakers, the business community, and learners that colleges are the most innovative and forward-looking places to invest their time and money in workforce training. Particularly as the two-year sector continues to see steep and persistent enrollment declines, these partnerships can help recruit and graduate students who might not otherwise choose the community college option.

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