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

December 2022

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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 good job, and, more importantly, a career that offers economic security—they represent the future of education. But for others, non-degree programs are a hyped-up distraction from degree attainment that leads to unemployment, underemployment, or employment in poverty-wage jobs with limited advancement opportunities—particularly for Black and Brown learners.

This project aims to help unlock the full potential of non-degree workforce training, especially at public

community colleges where these programs are commonly found. In 2019, the Center on Education & Labor at New America (CELNA) launched the **New Models for Career Preparation Project**, a research and storytelling initiative to build a better understanding of non-degree workforce education and identify common characteristics of high-performing programs including the design, financing, and strategy principles that go into creating high-quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges. However, many of these principles will be relevant to universities, non-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 concise **quality framework** for non-degree programs at colleges. Then, we partnered with twelve colleges in

two sequential rounds of research to study what goes into quality program design.
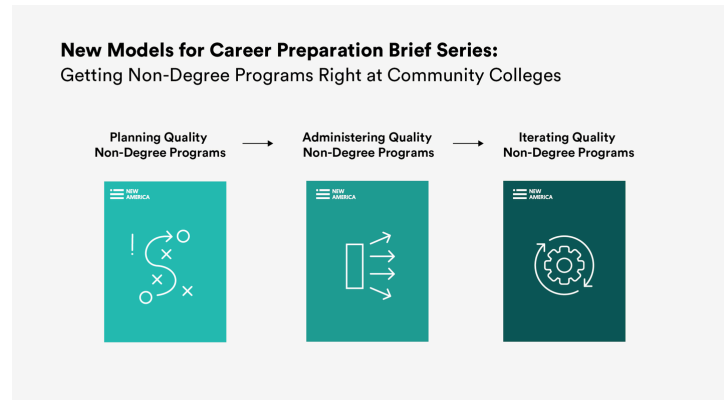
- In **cohort one**, we studied what goes into creating a good non-degree workforce program at a college ranging from bootcamps to certificates to industry certification preparation programs and even apprenticeships. We identified, analyzed, and profiled six high-quality, non-degree programs at Brazosport College, Dallas College, Miami Dade College, Monroe Community College, Mesa Community College, and Bates Technical Colleges.

- In **cohort two**, we zoomed out to study the institutional structures that enable a community college to excel at non-degree workforce education. We chose six colleges committed to prioritizing workforce development for the second cohort: County College of Morris, Tidewater Community College, Des Moines Area Community College, Mott Community College, Lone Star Community College, and Sacramento City College.

We conducted site visits at each college to understand what works—and what doesn't—when creating non-degree programs. We collected data on colleges' best-performing programs and conducted extensive research on the work of dozens of peer organizations, academics, and researchers to ensure that we were additive to the field's understanding and, more importantly, the adoption of quality non-degree program development principles.

With both program and institutional level lenses in mind, we wrote this three-part brief series to help community college leaders—mainly presidents, provosts, and workforce leaders—better *plan*, *deliver*, and *improve* 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 The New Models Brief Series to Enact Change

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

Planning Quality Non-Degree Programs → Administering Quality Non-Degree Programs → Iterating Quality Non-Degree Programs

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:** This brief outlines data collection and data-driven continuous improvement strategies colleges should use to iterate programs regularly.

Community college leaders bring decades of expertise to their work, drawing from lived experiences and national best practices. We hope that this collection of briefs will help these leaders with practical examples that will inspire both institutional and program-level changes necessary to maximize the impact of non-degree workforce training.

We recognize that community colleges often strive for excellence in non-degree workforce innovation despite not receiving appropriate support from policymakers. To address this need, we also produced a special **policy brief** to provide state and federal lawmakers 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 to 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

Speed and agility are critical if colleges want to be a top choice for workforce partnerships, but careful planning at the outset of program creation is worth the time. Our project explored both program-level aspects of high-quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges plus the institutional factors that empower college staff and faculty to build great programs.

Clarify Definitions for a Cohesive 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 prevalent 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 directly to work.

These programs are also called *non-degree credentials, micro-credentials, short-term programs, non-credit programs, alternative credentials*, and other variations that come into use due to state policies, local employers, and college preferences. Colleges also offer non-degree programs for personal enrichment or avocational

purposes, but these programs are not the focus of our project.

We settled on *non-degree workforce programs* as opposed to these other terms because not all programs colleges offer are micro or short-term (i.e., apprenticeships), they do not all end in a credential (i.e., customized training, certain boot camps), nor are they always non-credit or "alternative" options.

As a first step, presidents should clarify and standardize definitions and lexicons for non-degree portfolios—especially what constitutes a quality program. Since no ubiquitous definition exists, it is imperative that college staff are on the same page, particularly when working with employers and students. Ideally, the definition clarification and standardization process would happen at a regional or even state level and collaboratively with multiple colleges and universities, employers, employer intermediaries, state agencies, philanthropy, and the media present. We hope the framework we share here is helpful.

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

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

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 best understanding of quality non-degree workforce programs at community colleges. **Here** is a summary of five quality criteria to guide program development, plus important qualifiers college leaders should know.

3. Third-Party Credentials

Some programs result in a credential awarded by the college (i.e., certificates and badges). But increasingly, colleges offer training to help students earn a credential

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awarded by a nonprofit industry association, the government, or **companies**. Examples include industry certifications and occupational licenses, or employer-issued certificates like Google's suite of certificate programs offered through Coursera. Sometimes non-degree programs result in both a **college-awarded credential and a third-party-awarded credential**.

4. Non-Credit and For-Credit Programs
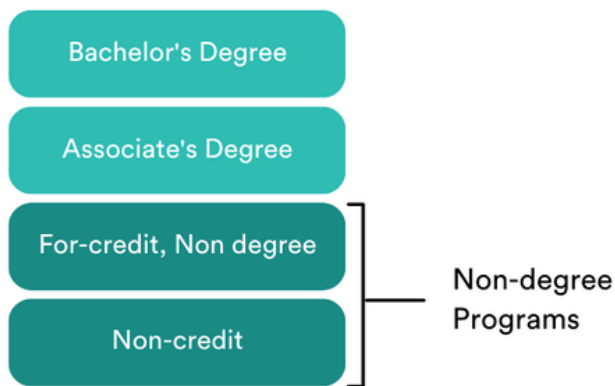
Decision-makers may assume that **all non-degree workforce programs are non-credit, but that is not true**. While many non-degree programs are non-credit, there are many credit-bearing workforce programs, including those delivered in formats like boot camps and apprenticeships.

Conflating the terms non-credit and non-degree hinders stackable workforce training, reinforces silos between credit and non-credit students, and limits synergy between non-credit and credit staff at community colleges.

5. Non-Degree Programs Complementary to Degrees

While there is a place for non-degree programs, they are not always replacements for degrees. But, as we will explain in this series of briefs, non-degree programs should be, and often are, complementary to rather than competitive with many associate and bachelor's degree programs. The most effective workforce-oriented

community colleges even use non-degree programs to help expand access to and attainment of college degrees.

Employers have steadily been dropping degree requirements for jobs, and perhaps one day degrees may only be required for a small minority of jobs. For now, these two training formats must co-exist synergistically.

6. Longer-Term Non-Degree Programs

While many students pursue non-degree programs as training options faster than traditional degrees, workforce stakeholders sometimes forget that apprenticeships are also a compelling, non-degree training option.

Most apprenticeships last a few years, so they are not short-term, but that does not make them any less valuable for a workforce-oriented community college. **Community colleges are intermediaries** for apprenticeship programs, which combine paid, on-the-job training with classroom instruction to prepare individuals for skilled careers.

These programs can be credit-bearing, too. There are **degree-apprenticeships**, in which a community college delivers the classroom component of an apprenticeship as part of a degree pathway. Bates Technical College offers credit-bearing apprenticeship programs, for example. **New America's Partnership on Advancing Youth Apprenticeship** offers community colleges resources for establishing apprenticeship programs for high school-aged youth—combining the best of dual enrollment with the best of apprenticeships.

7. Terminology Nuances

Like non-credit and non-degree, workforce stakeholders often conflate the terms *certificate*, *certification*, *credential*, and *license*, but the nuances matter for clarity in the credential ecosystem and the labor market. A credential is the umbrella term to refer to all the different awards a college or third party gives out to acknowledge skill mastery.

Certifications, licenses, and certificates are all different types of non-degree credentials that serve distinct purposes for learners and employers. The terms *credentialed*, *certified*, and *licensed* all mean different things, and as described above, most but not all non-degree programs result in a credential.

Plan for Good Data Collection, Utilization, and Feedback Loops

Institutionalize the Use of Labor Market Information

Most colleges have small institutional research departments that support compliance and accreditation reporting needs. However, strong workforce colleges know the importance of data to augment the anecdotes they hear from employers and community partners. Labor market information (LMI), from state and federal governments and private vendors, empower colleges to see how their workforce programs align with the job market, the demographics of the job market, projection data, and other information that will be discussed in depth in brief 3.

While an individual employer may not see the value of a certain skill or an industry certification, it may be in demand among other employers in the region. Without LMI, colleges might become too focused on the immediate needs of individual employer partners. Colleges can meet immediate needs but ensure that graduates are prepared to work for many employers by using LMI to see the complete picture of skill demand in their region. Broward College institutionalized LMI across its workforce programs. Broward's institutional research team **now reports to the vice president for Workforce Innovation and Education**. One staff member oversees LMI utilization as well as compliance-oriented reporting needs around industry certifications.

Combine or Make Interoperable Non-Credit and Credit Student Information Systems

A separate student information system (SIS) for credit and non-credit programs creates a host of problems for colleges. It prevents colleges from implementing effective stackable pathways, coordinating and evaluating wraparound services, evaluating enrollment, designing strategic enrollment plans for non-degree students, and following up with alumni.

Our research found that SIS varies greatly for non-degree students and degree-seeking students. Some college workforce leaders elect to have separate SIS to take advantage of more flexibility. Some states mandate siloed SIS for credit and non-credit students. Some colleges can achieve integration between credit and non-credit SIS while others cannot. Some workforce units, frustrated by the limitations of academic or legacy SIS, opt to build their own SIS separately. But after assessing these pros and cons, we believe the benefits of a single SIS outweigh the drawbacks.

Effective workforce colleges should ensure that the SIS for non-degree students, both credit and non-credit students are at least interoperable. SIS must track non-degree students' demographic data (e.g., race, gender, age, and caregiving status), so colleges can evaluate equity progress in recruiting, retaining, and graduating diverse learners.

Plan for Stackability, Economic Mobility, and Racial Equity

Institutionalize Non-Credit to Credit Pathways to Advance Careers

Non-credit workforce programs are more flexible than credit-bearing programs because they are not subject to the academic approval process of credit programs and the accrediting system. Many workforce leaders opt to make their non-degree programs non-credit. However, credit-bearing programs can more easily be stacked onto degrees. To take advantage of both formats, colleges should enable non-credit to credit pathways.

Many colleges will have at least some programs with **non-credit to credit pathways**, but effective workforce colleges aim to make this process institutionalized. For example, Mott Community College uses industry certifications to

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validate **non-credit to credit pathways** for workforce students, taking advantage of both modalities. Pima Community College starts workforce programs as non-credit and then later **transitions programs to credit**. Broward College offers **college credit** for non-credit industry certifications learners posses.

Miami Dade College **offers college credit** for those who hold the non-credit Google Data Analytics Certificate, which is awarded through Coursera—this is an important strategy **as more companies begin issuing their own non-degree credentials**. Colleges can recruit these credential holders into their credit-bearing programs as Miami Dade has.

Nested credential pathways, in which a degree-seeker earns non-degree credentials along the way, are valuable for students who stop out of college without earning a degree. **Fewer than 40 percent of community college students** earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment and that figure is worse for racial minorities.

Implement Full-Cost Budgeting

Federal and state funding for non-degree workforce training is integral for effective workforce programming (we wrote a brief about policy issues as part of this project). However, workforce-oriented colleges are not waiting for government action because they cannot.

Our research revealed that most colleges do not budget for all the expenses they need to cover, for a variety of reasons described in our report on **funding non-degree programs**. Full-cost budgeting, a technique used in the most effective nonprofits, should be adopted by the community college sector. This method helps colleges account for all the financial 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**.

What Is Full Cost?
A better way to talk about cost in the nonprofit sector

Full cost names and claims all the financial resources it takes to run an effective organization for the long haul.

- Lifts the sector out of the false dichotomy of program vs overhead.
- Captures both short- and long-term needs.
- Holistic, grounded in context, allows for nuance and change over time.
- A tool to advance racial equity
- Aligned with Trust-based Philanthropy

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.

Good Jobs: A Working Definition

Economic Stability

Stable, family-sustaining pay

Sufficient, accessible, and broadly available benefits

Fair, reliable scheduling practices

Safe, heathy, and accessible working conditions.

Economic Mobility

Clear and equitable hiring and advancement pathways

Accessible, paid training and development opportunities

Wealth-building opportunities

Equity, Respect & Voice

Organizational and management culture, policies and practices that:

- are transparent and enable accountability.
- support a sense of belonging and purpose
- Advance DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility)
- Address discrimination

Ability to improve the workplace, such as through collective action or participatory management practices

Good Jobs

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.

Acknowledgments