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BLENDING CREDIT & NON-CREDIT COURSES: BEST PRACTICES, OPPORTUNITIES, BARRIERS

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges provide access to postsecondary education for 12 million students annually representing approximately 41% of all United States (US) undergraduates (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2017). Community colleges offer an array of programs designed to help students meet different goals. Transfer associate degrees offer an accessible and lower cost option for students seeking a path to a bachelor's degree. Occupationally focused associate degrees are designed to prepare students for immediate employment in a specific industry. Noncredit education provides training for students seeking targeted, often shorter, courses for personal and professional enrichment (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Many community colleges are now increasingly emphasizing noncredit workforce education as they support regional workforce development efforts and strive to meet the needs of their local industry partners (Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, & Hughes, 2008).

According to the AACC (2017), 5 million students were enrolled in noncredit courses in 2015. They represent 41% of total community college enrollments, and the revenue generated by noncredit offerings is becoming an important funding stream for many community colleges (D'Amico, Morgan, Robertson, & Houchins, 2014). Despite the millions of students enrolled in these courses and their potential to generate revenue for the institutions delivering programs,

Voorhees and Milam (2005) refer to noncredit community college education as the “hidden college” and existing research on noncredit offerings is limited. Within this context, in 2016, the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) implemented the performance-based Workforce Credential Grant (WCG) Program. The WCG may help reveal the “hidden college” in the Commonwealth of Virginia (VA).

Blending community college credit and noncredit programs with thoughtful and intentional strategies will benefit the students and the institutions. Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, and Hughes (2008) made five recommendations for strengthening noncredit education based on their research. They included the need to expand state funding with clear goals, to increase coordination of credit and noncredit offerings, to promote articulation of noncredit courses into credit programs, to establish non-degree forms of validation for noncredit programs, and to capture more information regarding employment outcomes resulting from noncredit training. These recommendations provide the framework for an analysis of current VCCS programming.

EXPAND STATE FUNDING WITH CLEAR GOALS

In order to stay competitive, it is essential for the Commonwealth of VA to continue to expand its commitment to noncredit coursework and credentials. According to Holzer (2015), California Community Colleges (CCC) currently fund non-credit education at a rate comparable to what school districts receive for adult education. That is the equivalent to approximately \$2000 per full-time equivalent (FTE) student. Beyond lump sum investments from the Commonwealth, it is important to examine the possibilities for sustained noncredit funding to support workforce development. Because VA appropriations are based on FTEs rather than by

credit hour, one possible suggestion is to include noncredit enrollment (either at equivalent rates or by using a formula) in calculating full time enrollments. It is also important to utilize grant funding in ways that will support sustainable efforts to increase noncredit to credit transitions. For example, offer grants to colleges for outreach/marketing or grants to employers. Tax credits can also be offered as incentives (Holzer, 2015).

In 2016-17, the VCCS began to integrate a performance based formula into its funding model. Because we expect the percent of funding based on outcomes to increase over time, we should consider how this model can support noncredit education and potentially reward transitions from noncredit to credit courses. While the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant Program has established an innovative pay-for-performance funding model for noncredit workforce training, integrating funding support for noncredit community college courses within regular revenue streams rather than drawing from a separate funding source will provide both philosophical integration and long-term sustainability (Soares, 2010; Eyster, Durham, & Anderson, 2016). Points could be awarded for noncredit to credit transitions, for all credentials/degrees earned rather than highest credential/degree earned (to support a stackable credential pathway), and/or for employment outcomes similar to transfer programs (VCCS Student Success Center, 2015).

Other areas to consider in relation to funding for noncredit to credit transitions is marketing available funds and low-cost programs to students. The state of Texas has focused on jobs and education for adult students, which involves two areas of noncredit coursework, workforce training and developmental/literacy education. One piece of Texas's 60x30TX plan involves the development of a statewide information and funding portal for adult students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2016). This portal would be a partnership among institutions of

higher education, workforce development organizations, and adult literacy/learning organizations, and would direct students to resources. These resources include funding, training, and education opportunities. We recommend a similar initiative for VA. Our portal could also adhere to the Guided Pathways model, with credential attainment leading to possible degree attainment. It could highlight the total cost to the student and the financial assistance available.

INCREASE COORDINATION OF CREDIT AND NONCREDIT OFFERINGS

Organizational structure matters as it affects opportunities for collaboration and internal communication. Some institutions manage and deliver noncredit programs using an entirely separate division within the institution. The separate division may be led by a vice president or a director who reports directly to the president of the college. Workforce leadership reporting directly to the president provides visibility for noncredit programs and may promote greater collaboration with academic peers. Managing workforce noncredit education through a separate, dedicated division can also help to solidify the importance of noncredit education within the larger institution and help ensure focused attention on critical noncredit programs. However, managing noncredit programs through a separate division can create organizational boundaries that may hinder communication and negatively affect collaboration. Thus, intentional steps must be taken to promote collaboration and coordination including regular meetings and open communication among divisions.

Institutions may choose to integrate noncredit programs within academic program disciplinary units. Integrating programs can promote improved communications and shared resources. These resources include facilities, equipment, knowledge, and relationships. Facilities and equipment can be scheduled to support both credit and noncredit programs. Faculty experts are available to

support all programs and employer interaction is based on disciplinary expertise rather than program type. However, integrating programs could also threaten the necessary focus for noncredit programs that target specific populations, seek different outcomes, and employ alternate funding models.

Regardless of governance structure, institutions must capitalize on the strengths of each program model and minimize internal competition in an effort to support their regional workforce. Noncredit training provides a tenuous response to address emerging workforce needs. Credit programs provide a longer-term strategy to meet sustained workforce requirements.

Institutions must use the right tool for the job based on the desired outcome. Competition among noncredit and credit programs, real or perceived, diminishes the performance of both. Institutions should address concerns regarding competing priorities directly and take steps to strategically align noncredit and credit programs to meet the needs of regional employers. Identifying college resources available to support all programs will reduce inefficiencies and maximize return on investment which is especially important in an environment with lower enrollments and shrinking budgets.

PROMOTE ARTICULATION OF NONCREDIT COURSES INTO CREDIT PROGRAMS

The research points to several methods to better assess student needs and support efforts to recruit noncredit students into credit programs and to articulate noncredit and credit programs to promote student transfer. Literature and interviews suggest opportunities for the award of advanced standing within credit programs for noncredit participants, the potential for noncredit programs to serve as postsecondary onramps for minorities students, and the need for improved

advising for students taking advantage of these options. D'Amico, Morgan, Katsinas, Lucas Adair, & Miller (2017) found that 17 states have guidelines to grant credit retroactively through assessments and other methods and 15 states had ways to give credit for non-credit work. Those methods included placement tests, credits for certifications, and other college level processes. Unfortunately, according to D'Amico, et al. (2017), only 7.2 % transitioned into credit courses within 6 years. This low transition rate may suggest the need for more advising to help students negotiate the advanced standing process when entering a credit program.

Garza-Mitchell (2017) looked at online career and technical education in community colleges. He found that community colleges have the highest participation in distance education across institutions at 22% for undergraduates. He also found that 76.3% of colleges offer CTE courses via distance learning of some kind and 46.6% of those classes are non-credit. Because distance education reaches more non-traditional students, reduces time constraints, reaches bigger audiences, and allows increased access to courses, schools should consider increasing their online distance education CTE courses. Furthermore, community colleges need to capitalize on the appeal of noncredit online education to nontraditional students by developing strategic onramps to credit programs from these courses.

Arena (2013) looked at the rise of non-credit courses in higher education and found that minority students may avoid credit classes because of the cost, the perceived sacrifice required to complete an academic credential, and the lack of perceived benefit. In addition, many students do not recognize immediate employment benefits associated with degree completion. Rather, minority students feel the cost now outweighs the benefit of degree completion. According to Arena (2013), minority students want careers and better jobs. Partnerships with businesses are very important as are internships that lead to immediate employment. Students in Arena's

sample population also wanted classes that were more innovative and flexible. However, proper advising and incentives can result in greater transfer into credit programs. Active recruitment, simplified registration, thoughtfully offered course locations and class times can also contribute to improved transition outcomes.

ESTABLISH NON-DEGREE FORMS OF VALIDATION FOR NONCREDIT PROGRAMS

When exploring the development of non-degree forms of validation for noncredit workforce education as well as systems for recording outcomes, one must consider the portability of student skills and credentials. The accountability within the VCCS as well as the United States should also be recognized.

In reviewing the literature as well as conducting regional research, currently the VCCS is working with a system of both performance-based assessments within classrooms and work settings as well as assessment through third-party nationally accredited organizations such as NCCER, Comp Tia, Microsoft, CISCO, and Oracle. In essence, a combination approach of first course and setting work is completed, and then nationally accredited organizations validate the student's credentials as well as knowledge and skills. Currently, the VCCS uses the above methods to track and fund non-degree credits and non-credit workforce education.

When considering examples of what other states have implemented to correct the issues of not only portability of workforce credentials, but also validity of workforce credentials, the research shows several interesting trends. Buckwater (2017) reports that Colorado created within the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) a “suite of micro-credentials for the manufacturing industry” that was created in 2015. This suite morphed into digital badges, which allows students to digitally create an online portfolio of their personal achievements and

credentials. This not only provides a standardized, uniform location for the student to display earned credentials, but it also provides direct access to any potential employers wishing to hire and/or to educate their employees. It should be noted the CCCS digital badges system is visually appealing and easy to manipulate allowing for greater student and potential industry employer usage. The program was so successful that CCCS plans on expanding this model to include healthcare and cyber security (Buckwalter, 2017).

Additionally, Lumina created a National Credential Registry called the Credential Engine in 2013. This website acts as a collection agency for reliable data about the different types and the number of credentials as well as who and how these credentials are used. Colleges can contribute their own personal data. Industry employers also participate in the website, making it beneficial for both. Not only is information shared, but also transparency is achieved (Buckwalter, 2017).

Specific recommendations to aide in portability and validity include first creating a state and national transcript, which would unify all individuals obtaining non-credit credentials. This strategy would allow for better record keeping, a repository of data collection, as well as create a system of uniform, accepted credentials. Second, the creation of a VCCCs Badge System similar to Colorado's whereby earned credits can be digitally tracked and marked as an individual's progress report or resume. This strategy would allow not only for ease of record keeping for the earner, but recognition as well. Employers could also use this website to view potential employees as well. Third, participation in the Credential Engine website would allow individuals to see what credentials are needed to obtain specific jobs and track trends for both employers and educators. This strategy needs to be a state-driven mandate. However, it should be noted that

currently, due to privacy concerns, the VCCS does not share individual information regarding students' credentials with employers.

CAPTURE MORE INFORMATION REGARDING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

The consistent recommendations of different states are to create more funding for institutions to support noncredit education for students. Currently 35 out of 49 states provide funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity grant. On July 22, 2014, President Obama signed Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIOA) into law, which Congress passed with strong bipartisan support. WIOA represented an effort to align the needs of the nation's businesses with those of job-seekers. Two of the WIOA's contributions were the creation of one-stop employment centers, where individuals could gather information and resources on available job training, education, and employment services, and the introduction of individual training accounts, which offered eligible job-seekers more autonomy in choosing and accessing job-training. Virginia's local workforce development boards and One-Stop Career Centers have access to federal WIOA funds that can be directed to supporting employer costs for registered apprenticeships for a broad range of occupations and industries.

The workforce grant supports noncredit funding to institutions as it customized educational training to meet the needs of the employers. To support WIOA efforts, agencies collected data on how many students completed the training program, the number of students that maintained their certificates and credits that was received by the student for prior learning or experience. It was recommended that the data should be collected yearly from students in survey

form or by utilizing focus groups to detail training performance and completion. Each state took different approaches to data collection. The research shows that in the future, providing empirical data on noncredit workforce information can help justify state funding for community colleges and state institutions.

CONCLUSION

Blending community college credit and noncredit programs will provide several benefits to all involved. Based on their research, Van Noy, Jacobs, Korey, Bailey, and Hughes (2008) made five recommendations for strengthening noncredit education. They pointed out the need to expand state funding with clear goals, to increase coordination of credit and noncredit offerings, to promote articulation of noncredit courses into credit programs, to establish non-degree forms of validation for noncredit programs, and to capture more information regarding employment outcomes resulting from noncredit training. These recommendations provided the context for an analysis of current VCCS programming. Several innovative solutions have been suggested based on research, interviews, and models from other states.

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