



# Non-degree Credentials Research Network

## **DISCUSSIONS OF THE NON-DEGREE CREDENTIAL RESEARCH NETWORK: RESEARCH ON INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND IPEDS UPDATE**

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George Washington University's [Non-degree Credentials Research Network](#) (NCRN)<sup>1</sup> hosted a webinar on December 1, 2021: *Innovations in Community Colleges and IPEDS Update*. [Workforce Monitor](#) featured an [article](#) on the complementary presentations by Tamar Jacoby of Opportunity America, and Tara Lawley of the National Center for Education Statistics. Jacoby presented findings from a [study](#) of more than 1,200 community colleges asking about workforce education courses and programs offered by the colleges (see [slides](#)). Lawley presented the U.S. Department of Education's efforts to collect more information about non-credit course and program enrollments at all colleges through IPEDS, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (see [slides](#)). Since a unique feature of the NCRN's webinars is coupling timely presentations on research with discussion among researchers and users of research, the NCRN is sharing its discussions following Jacoby's and Lawley's presentations (edited from webinar transcript).

### **Discussion following Jacoby presentation (TJ)**

**NCRN** What has been the response to the new workforce research?

**TJ** As anyone here from a community college well knows, there's usually the academic side and the workforce side, and the workforce side is usually the red-headed stepchild of the campus. So workforce educators - especially noncredit workforce educators - are thrilled to have their story told. It's like finally someone's recognized us - we've been doing this important work - finally somebody is saying it matters. So we're finding great enthusiasm in that constituency. The states are similar. Many states do not collect enough data on noncredit workforce education, and they appreciate any information. This is just the beginning of what we need. The report I presented is still a crude tool. This is self-reported data from a relatively small sample - 40% of community and technical colleges. But many institutions and states are very appreciative to have even this much - that's one of my takeaways.

**NCRN** How are people thinking about this research given the various terms used such as work-based learning, and job-focused programs. From a researcher's point of view, do these words mean the same thing?

**TJ** One of my biggest takeaways is the next step of research has to clarify these definitions and systematize - standardize- the data collection. For example, the Texas data is pretty good, but it's very different from Virginia's, which is also pretty good, but it's very different from what they have California. Better data are needed. Better definitions are needed - that's where the work has to go. Many researchers are wanting to go in that direction but there's a lot of work to be done.

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**NCRN** I have a question about categories, particularly the category having to do with workforce-based and not-for-credit. As researchers, it is sometimes difficult to make that distinction clearly because what would be an accounting course for one person might be recreational but career-focused for another. How does research with the colleges distinguish –or does it?

**TJ** We knew there would be problems nailing down definitions. On the credit side, we used the U.S. Department of Education classifications, and on the non-credit side we just asked our questions and waited to see what the colleges answered. We didn't get queries to clarify the distinction you're talking about –whether that cooking class was for hobby cooking or training to become a chef. One the most important questions we asked was about categories of non-credit education. We asked colleges to estimate what share of their non-credit enrollments were job-focused vs. recreational vs. remedial? Some of them had trouble with the categories but most seemed to understand what we were after. The definitions were defined by the colleges' standards.

**NCRN** What about their understanding of certifications and certificates?

**TJ** The colleges used their own definitions for terms.

**NCRN** Quite a few states have pretty good data on non-credit enrollments but it's not consistent, by definition, which is important. Say, you get good data from places like Iowa, North Carolina, New York, etc. and you can see it by the college as well, and in those data sets you have to get them from the state agencies and not the college's themselves. What about the impact that these non-credit courses and enrollments have on IPEDS data? Any research or benchmarking that uses expenditures or revenues per FTE using IPEDS is a problem because the colleges report the expenditures and revenues from non-credit courses to IPEDS because they're in the college budget. But they do not report the enrollments in the denominator to IPEDS because they're asked to only report credit enrollments. This leads to quite a distortion in the IPEDS data and in some states –in research I have been involved in, expenditure revenue per FTE could be a 25% difference. Now we convert all the IPEDS to headcounts that you're dealing with into contact hours which the states often collect. Or even if they have contact hours, we convert those to FTE so that they're made comparable. It seems like the data in your report is headcounts and, as you pointed out, the headcount number is high because a lot of the students are only taking a few hours of coursework.

**TJ** Right, and I'm not sure if they're repeats. We're just beginning to understand what's going on here and how the data have to be systematized. But the truth is even when we asked a question that was hard for the colleges to answer, they tried to answer it. People want the story told. And we found that many appreciated our questions precisely because of the way we helped them think about definitions and categories they could use to collect better data.

**NCRN** Do you have a cost estimate to do this type of data collection? And if you don't and you're moving in that direction, I suggest also putting together a benefit analysis, because that's going to move the needle to incentivize people to do this.

**TJ** We don't have a cost estimate.

**NCRN** How has the data been helpful to colleges who received their own data back? Is there anyone in the NCRN that can share one or two ways your college is using this data?

**NCRN** The data returned to our college gave us a picture of what's going on in our own state because we've never had this data. We're a state of independent community colleges so we all silo our data and there's no requirement to roll up any non-credit data to our state. So it gave us an actual picture of where we are in relationship to each other and as a state that has been helpful in understanding what we do in non-credit. The other thing is the process of answering the survey questions. We realized we have to figure out how to tighten up our use of terms so that we are collecting the same types of information at different workforce units across the state.

**NCRN** Do you have insights on what is causing the state variation on non-credit?

**TJ** Some community college leaders have a theory about this – that the colleges emerged differently in different parts of the country. The Southeast was in a very different place than the Northeast in the late 40s, early 50s, into the 60s. In the Northeast, the GI bill was much about getting people to a college, while the Southeast was just coming into the modern industrial world and was more focused on workforce education. In North Carolina, it was statutory, for example. In the 70s, maybe later, only a certain percentage of offerings at North Carolina community colleges could be academic, and the rest had to be workforce. So these different missions go back one hundred years ago – academic vs. job-focused. And there has been a lot of discussion over the years about whether they are complementary or opposing. Then in non-credit, I don't know that we have any longitudinal understanding of non-credit, how much of it early on was workforce vs. recreational/hobby.

For states, credit and non-credit are useful tools for workforce, useful tools in different circumstances. But as more states discover the potential of the non-credit workforce, they have been adopting it more quickly – grabbing that tool to grow it, do something with it. There are multiple players in this – college administrators, state education agencies, legislators – and they're moving at different rates.

**NCRN** There's been a lot of talk about either stackable certificates or stackable credentials – programs that sequence things in a way and have potentially multiple exit points that can be useful from an economic perspective. Did this come up in the study?

**TJ** That is covered on one of the slides and we had several questions about it on the survey—can you convert your non-credit to credit, and how many students actually convert non-credit to credit? What we found: there's not a community college workforce educator in America who doesn't use the word *stackability*. But the point is, it's still mostly aspirational. It's aspirational at the schools – they haven't built the bridges yet at most places. And although some states like Florida are way ahead, others are way behind. But it's also not clear how many learners want to walk across that bridge. It's not clear that they want to come back and stack. I think everyone in this room hopes students want to take advantage of stackable pathways and on- and off-ramps. But we're just not sure if they are doing it yet. Our data suggest not so much. What's not clear: is the problem that the bridges don't exist yet— or that learners really aren't that interested in stacking? We don't know. In the study we asked how possible is it at your school to do this, and the answer was, it was possible only around 20% of the time. And this was likely an exaggeration, so it's probably not 20%.

**NCRN** That's the internal perspective but I was also thinking about this from the employment side – the value to the employer to see these progressive steps as meaningful from their perspective in terms of better training for a person on a trajectory that is useful for the workforce development side.

**TJ** Some do and some don't. That is a whole other line of work – potentially the next project.

**NCRN** What about the leveraging of prior learning and what that specifically is referring to on the open-ended question on the survey? What type of answers did the colleges give? Like is the PLA individualized assessments or industry crosswalks or articulation agreements?

**TJ** We promised the colleges that we would not publish their identifiable institutional answers, so I can't share specific answers on anything. But I'm happy to share what I can – and of course I can share any additional insights one on one.

### **Discussion following Lawley presentation (TL)**

**NCRN** This presentation demonstrates both the changing market and the importance of the non-credit world and more job focus by higher education, especially around shorter-term credentials.

**NCRN** Change at the federal level around data collection is a slow process and we recognize this. This is progress and it will be really important to improve data collection for IPEDS.

**TL** I encourage you to respond to the OMB clearance even if you're not providing feedback on things that could be changed. Just saying you think these data need to be collected will be helpful, because we are going to get some pushback from people who don't want the data to be collected or think it's too burdensome to collect. It will be helpful to have feedback from people who do want this data to be collected so we can weigh both sides.

**NCRN** What is the timeline for this?

**TL** If we get OMB approval, there would be a one-year preview of the data collection during NCES/IPEDS 2022-23 data collection. Institutions will just see the screens and the instructions and have a chance to get ready to report for the data collection that would be for the 12-month enrollment period of July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023. We cannot really collect it next year because that would be telling people to report something that's already happening right now, without knowing that they were going to have to report it. So by giving them at least a preview year, they'll have a better chance to wrap their minds around the data.

With any study, the first couple of years of the data collection there's going to be stuff happening that we're going to try and keep an eye on – data quality checks, as much as we can. We're hoping to learn enough from these initial collections that we can then move on to thinking about the next steps. This gets into some of the questions that people have asked about today, like looking at FTE and how that relates to our finance data collection – that's something that came up in our Technical Review Panel.

**NCRN** Would there be any double-counting somebody both in a credit and non-credit course/program? It's important is to find out the extent to which some of these courses are part of a related trade for a good apprenticeship program, either registered or unregistered.

**TL** We don't have a way to say someone is in both non-credit and credit at this point, so there's definitely going to be double counting between those two. We will have to give people guidance to not just add these two categories together. Comments can be added to an OMB comment to give us some impetus to include that when we start looking at details like this.

**NCRN** Apprenticeship is becoming big and will be a driver.

**TL** Agreed.

**NCRN** We appreciate the long struggle to get better data and the OMB clearances needed. Thank you for your work on this.

**TL** Thanks, but we have to remember, this is not our first push on collecting non-credit – we've been looking at this for more than 10 years. It is a slow process but we hope once it gets going, it will help researchers using IPEDS data as well as other studies. We're looking forward to seeing what we find out with better data.

**NCRN** Even though these may look like baby steps, they will really help us get a clearer picture of what's going on with non-credit. We need to answer questions about what we mean by partnerships, what we mean when we're talking about non-credit which is job-related. We have so much work to do as a community to iron out these definitions, collect the data, and then start interpreting it and making the right policies to make the system work better.