ISSUE BRIEF | November 2023

The State Noncredit Education Data Project Journey: Two-Year Project Summary

Anjali Srivastava, Michelle Van Noy, and Mark D'Amico

Over two-thirds of adults considering further education prefer a nondegree option, an increase over the one-half of adults who preferred that option before the pandemic.[1] Data about nondegree programs and credentials are essential as higher education institutions expand their noncredit offerings, states engage in conversations about nondegree credential quality and funding, and federal policymakers consider relevant proposals. Since 2023, the State Noncredit Data Project (SNDP) has worked with three state partners to understand and report on the state of existing noncredit data and share findings with a broader community. This process revealed varying and complex systems and a need for common language and schemas that would allow state leaders to better understand their own noncredit data and discuss noncredit education with actors in other states. This white paper summarizes the first two years of the project and lessons learned.

The SNDP began by forming a team to consolidate noncredit research. Research team members from Rutgers University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of Michigan, and University of California, Irvine, brought noncredit education research expertise to the project. Researchers served as liaisons, partnering with department of education specialists in Iowa, community and technical college system leaders in Louisiana, and community college system leaders in Virginia. All team members and state partners met monthly in a working group and conducted analyses of program-level noncredit data. Through these partnerships, researchers and state experts gained greater understandings of noncredit education within state systems and contexts.

Each state's data infrastructure evolved over time due to state and local priorities and histories of practices. Drivers for noncredit data collection included Virginia's legislative mandate for data collection; noncredit data being tied to performance-based funding in Virginia and formula funding in Iowa; partnerships with state agencies in Iowa and Virginia; Iowa's participation in the American Association of Community College's Voluntary Framework of Accountability national-level initiative; and Louisiana's adoption of a definition that allowed noncredit education to count toward a state educational attainment goal.

---

1   Strada. (2020, September 16). Public viewpoint: Interested but not enrolled: Understanding and serving aspiring adult learners. https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-september-16-2020/

The project's data dictionary[2] and taxonomy[3] provide a framework within which state variations can be reconciled and analyzed together. For example, some states collect noncredit data by "courses" while others collect data by "programs." Noncredit programs are not necessarily groupings of courses: for example, in Iowa, a program can consist of only one educational offering. Because states vary in how they use these terms—and because data within a state may encompass several formats, lengths, or numbers of contact hours for either "courses," as in Virginia, or "programs," as in Iowa and Louisiana—the SNDP used the term "offering" to make comparisons across states in a relatively consistent way. The taxonomy builds from the data dictionary, providing a common language for future data collection and analysis across states.

The SNDP produced single-state reports for Iowa,[4] Louisiana,[5] and Virginia,[6] as well as a cross-state report[7] that presents each state's noncredit data inventory; course/program-level data; student demographics; and student outcomes. Project team members and partner states analyzed available data elements until they had a clear understanding of each one and how it was being used, categorized them, then developed operational definitions that would be consistent statewide when such definitions were not already in place. The cross-state report found that the states' commonalities included a high prevalence of occupational/vocational offerings among other types of noncredit education; low numbers of contact hours for many offerings; and the practice of tracking student completions as defined by states or institutions. Missing demographic data for race and ethnicity was notable across states, with 58 percent or more of occupational/vocational enrollments having unknown or not specified student race and ethnicity.

The SNDP convened a learning community through which three state partners could present their program offerings and student demographic data and discuss their processes for building noncredit data infrastructures. Representatives from over 30 states asked questions and shared where they were in considering or undertaking noncredit data journeys. States were at a range of stages with regard to their data, including many taking early steps. Highlights about processes and contexts from the three partner states demonstrated that partnerships were key to building a comprehensive system in Iowa. The state did not mandate noncredit data, and the process of building a data infrastructure was long and iterative. Louisiana transitioned from the Xenegrade data storage system to Banner relatively quickly because colleges were required to make this change. Virginia's New Economy Workforce

2   D'Amico, M. M., & Van Noy, M. (2022). State-level noncredit data definitions. Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center. https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/EERC/Data%20Definitions%20Report_Final%208.16.22tc.pdf

3   The taxonomy will be available on the State Noncredit Data Project publications webpage once released. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/publications/

4   D'Amico, M. M. et al. (2022, August). Iowa noncredit data snapshot [Issue Brief]. Education and Employment Research Center. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2023/05/Iowa-State-NDC-report-final-5.1.23.pdf

5   Bahr, P. et al. (2023, March). Louisiana noncredit data snapshot [Issue Brief]. Education and Employment Research Center. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2023/05/Lousiana-State-NDC-report-final-5.1.23.pdf

6   Xu, D. et al. (2023, March). Virginia Community College System noncredit data snapshot [Issue Brief]. Education and Employment Research Center. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2023/05/Virginia-State-NSC-report-final-5.1.23.pdf

7   D'Amico, M. M. et al. (2023, August). The State Community College Noncredit Data Infrastructure: Lessons from Iowa, Louisiana, and Virginia. Education and Employment Research Center. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/wp-content/uploads/sites/794/2023/08/The-State-Community-College-EERC-8.2023.pdf

Credential Grant created a bi-furcated system that required institutions to collect data for Fast Forward workforce programs while not applying the same requirements to other noncredit offerings.

SNDP findings have implications for future discussions of noncredit education at federal, cross-state, state, and institutional levels:

- The how-to-guide[8] that SNDP researchers developed will be useful to state leaders considering engaging in processes to examine or build upon their noncredit data infrastructures, like those of Iowa, Louisiana, and Virginia. The guide, in conjunction with the noncredit data taxonomy, provides steps for institutions and states to consider as they develop these processes, highlighting areas of potential variations across states.

- National-level data collection efforts, such as those of the National Center for Education Statistic's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, could create noncredit data definitions and collection efforts that are consistent across all states.

- Findings across states may be relevant for national policy. For example, findings of relatively low numbers of contact hours across many noncredit offerings have implications for federal discussions of short-term Pell grants.

Going forward, SNDP's work will continue with five new state partners. All three state partners from the project's first phase are continuing their participation as mentors to other states. The new state partners either have an established state noncredit data infrastructure they are seeking to update and further develop or a more emerging data system. Working with new state partners will provide opportunities to further refine the noncredit data dictionary and taxonomy as they bring new data and insights. The SNDP learning community will continue to build connections across states. SNDP researchers envision several promising next steps for the project, including engaging with more states to understand their noncredit data; documenting and helping to share promising practices for noncredit data across states; extending lessons from states to expand upon cross-state products moving toward a national-level noncredit data framework; further delving into the policies that require or prompt states to collect noncredit data; and linking student-level data to the program-level data the project is collecting to learn about student trajectories and outcomes. The project seeks to be a central resource for states around the country to support the development of a robust noncredit data infrastructure.

---

8   The how-to guide is part of the taxonomy. The taxonomy will be available on the State Noncredit Data Project publications webpage once released. https://sites.rutgers.edu/state-noncredit-data/publications/

About the Authors

Anjali Srivastava is a researcher at the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations

Michelle Van Noy is the director of the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

Mark D'Amico is a Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Acknowledgements

The Education and Employment Research Center

Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) is housed within the School of Management and Labor Relations. EERC conducts research and evaluation on programs and policies at the intersection of education and employment. Our work strives to improve policy and practice so that institutions may provide educational programs and pathways that ensure individuals obtain the education needed for success in the workplace, and employers have a skilled workforce to meet their human resource needs. For more information on our mission and current research, visit smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc.

EERC Areas of Focus

| Community College Innovation | Student Choices and Pathways | STEM and Technician Education | Noncredit Education and Non-Degree Credentials | Education and Labor Market Connections |

Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations

Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) is the leading source of expertise on the world of work, building effective and sustainable organizations, and the changing employment relationship. The school is comprised of two departments—one focused on all aspects of strategic human resource management and the other dedicated to the social science specialties related to labor studies and employment relations. In addition, SMLR provides many continuing education and certificate programs taught by world-class researchers and expert practitioners. For more information, visit smlr.rutgers.edu.

NSF NCSES

The U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) is an independent federal agency that supports fundamental research and education across all fields of science and engineering. In Fiscal Year 2022, its budget is $8.8 billion. NSF funds research in all 50 states through grants to nearly 2,000 colleges, universities and other institutions. Each year, NSF receives more than 50,000 competitive proposals for funding and makes about 12,000 new funding awards. The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) is a principal statistical agency located within the National Science Foundation (NSF). NCSES was re-authorized from the original mandate in the National Science Foundation Act of 1950 by Section 505 of the America COMPETES Reauthorization Act of 2010.