RUTGERS–NEW BRUNSWICK
Education and Employment Research Center
School of Management and Labor Relations

Capturing Noncredit Workforce Student Experiences and Perspectives

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Jennifer Merrill, Student Services Manager, Northern Virginia Community College Workforce Development
Eliza Peterson, Education and Employment Research Center, Rutgers University
Katherine Hughes, American Institutes for Research

Overview

- Introduction and background
  - Landscape of noncredit education

- NOVA CC context

- Prior Research on Community College Noncredit Quality and Students

- Noncredit student perspectives

Introduction and Background

Types of Noncredit Education

- Four broad types of noncredit education:
    - Occupational/workforce
    - Sponsored Occupational (Contract) Training
    - Personal Interest
    - Basic Skills / Pre-College Remediation
- Our focus: Noncredit workforce courses and programs
    - These courses and programs can lead to nondegree credentials such as:
        - Certificates, badges, industry-recognized certifications, licenses
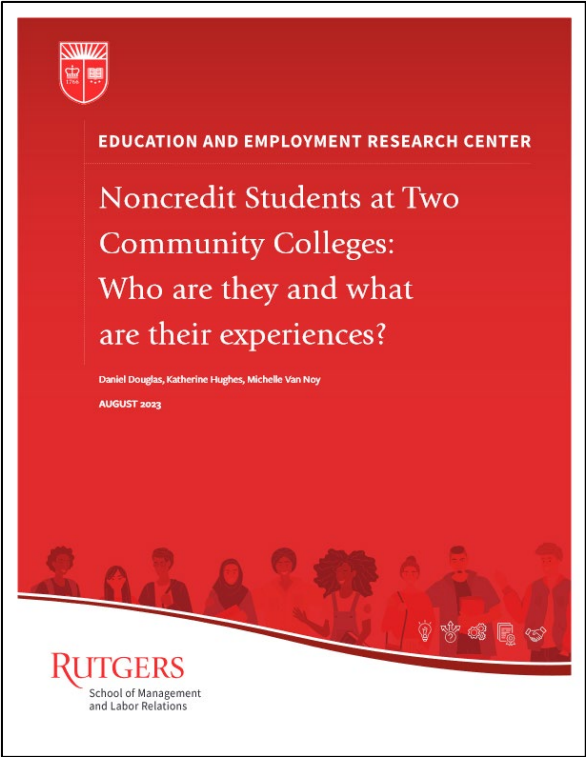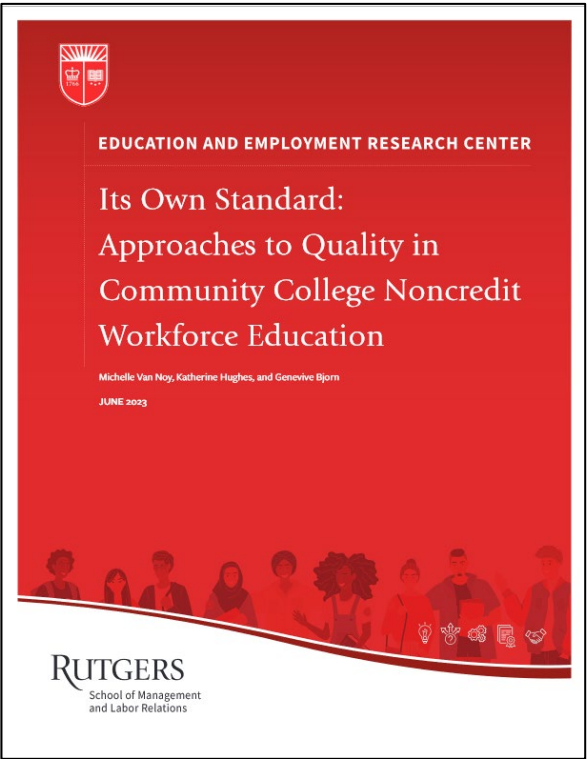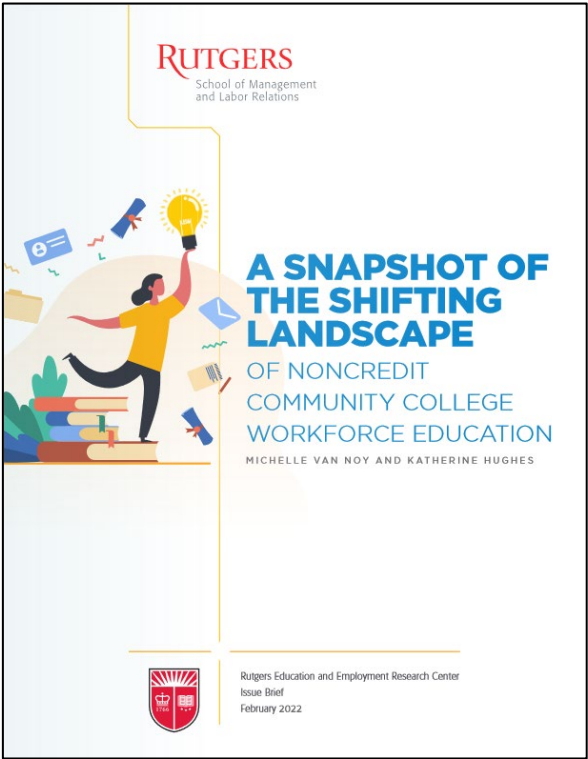
Types of Noncredit Education

- Individual preference
  - A recent survey found that, for the first time, a majority of Americans believe that a 4-year college education is not worth the cost (WSJ).
  - Over 2/3 of adults considering education prefer nondegree, up from 1/2 pre-pandemic (Strada, 2020).
  - Among "great resigners," 72% are enrolling in programs that are 6 months or shorter (Cengage, 2022).

- State funding investments, like VA Fast Forward
- Federal Workforce Pell proposals

https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-are-losing-faith-in-college-education-wsj-norc-poll-finds-3a836ce1?st

https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-september-16-2020/

https://cengage.widen.net/s/78hrkqgfj7/cg-great-resigners-research-report-final

EERC Research on Noncredit WF Education

A "Shifting Landscape"

- **Study and report (2022)**
  - Provides a snapshot of essential issues and trends in community college noncredit workforce education
- **Data:**
  - Interviews of 29 colleges across 22 states in spring 2021; topics included:
    - focus of noncredit
    - organizational home and structure
    - target student population
    - mechanisms for offering programs and ensuring quality
    - connections to credit-bearing programs

Findings: Noncredit in the College Context

Focus of Noncredit Education
- Shift from a comprehensive noncredit offerings to a focus on workforce
- Reconsideration of target student population

Organization of Noncredit Education
- Dramatic variation and shifts in organizational location
- Increased partnerships to increase capacity and reach (e.g., course outsourcing)

Structure of Noncredit Education
- Offerings driven by skill and credential needs in the labor market
- Offerings marketed according to length
- Interest in developing pathways to credit, variability in progress
- Few supports for noncredit students

NOVA Community College Context

ABOUT
Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)

- NOVA is Virginia's largest public educational institution, comprised of approximately 70,000+ credit and non-credit students enrolled in 120 credit and **146 continuing education and workforce programs** (2022-23 academic year).
- NOVA is also one of the most internationally diverse colleges in the United States, with a student body consisting of individuals from more than 100 countries.
- NOVA is located near Washington D.C., with 6 campuses and 1 center spread across Northern Virginia.
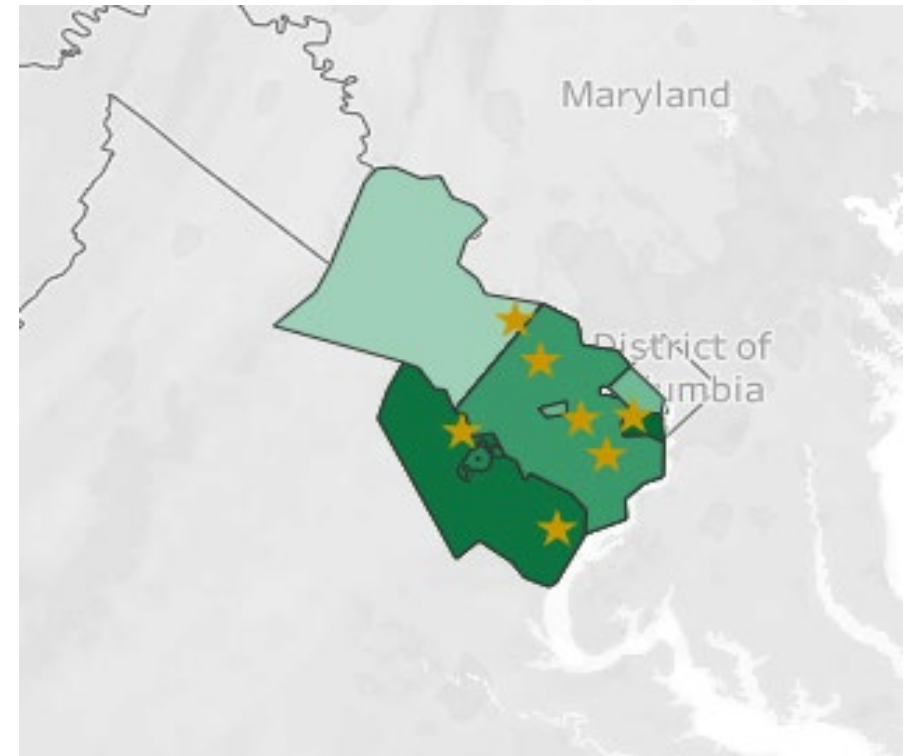
ABOUT
Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)

- Offer work-relevant skill-building training for high-demand fields (upskilling and reskilling)
- Utilize labor market information to build employer-driven training programs
- Engage with businesses to understand employer needs
- Offer Open Enrollment and customized training
- Offer in-person, hybrid, and online classes
- Award Continuing Education Units (CEUs)
- Serve students with various educational backgrounds and demographics

NOVA WORKFORCE

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At a Glance (2023-24 Academic Year)

- 34 staff members
- 5 office locations (AL, AN, LO, MA,WO)
- 162 course offerings, including 18 FastForward courses
- 5,835 enrollments (dup)
- 4,119 students (undup) enrolled in 643 classes
- 123 instructors
- 90% overall course satisfaction rate
- New programs and initiatives, including
  - Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN)
  - Google Skilled Trades (STAR) Readiness
  - Grow Manassas Tuition Assistance Fund
- Trailblazer Award from CompTIA!!!

NOVA Workforce - Student Services

- **Coordinators**
  - Student Support
  - Retention
  - Instructor Support
  - Community Engagement & Career Readiness (NEW)
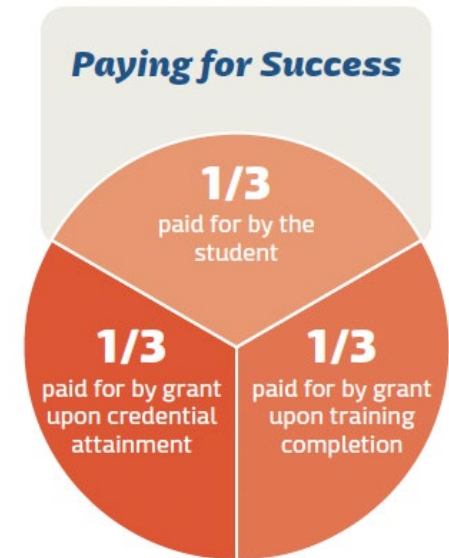
- **Student Support Specialists**
  - 5 full-time staff
  - 3 part-time staff
- **Other Supports**
  - Credential Coordinator
  - Advisors – academic and career
  - Technical Team

FastForward: Growth and Impact

- Funded by Virginia's Workforce Credential Grant (WCG)
- Helping Virginia residents get industry-recognized credentials for high-demand occupations
- Permits students to use financial assistance
  - Financial Assistance for Noncredit Training for Industry Credentials (FANTIC)
  - Get a New Skill, Get a Job, Get Ahead (G3)
- At NOVA
  - Over 56% of all FastForward enrollments are G3 funded – a 38% increase over FY23
  - The majority of students served are from minority populations
  - On average, NOVA students increased their wages by 71% after earning a FastForward credential

Paying for Success

1/3 paid for by the student

1/3 paid for by grant upon credential attainment

1/3 paid for by grant upon training completion

G3

FastForward
CREDENTIALS FOR A CAREER THAT MATTERS

FastForward: Growth and Impact

- 18 FastForward-approved courses offered

- 1,219 students served – a 30.51% increase over FY23

- 1,367 enrollments – a 32.08% increase over FY23

- 95% of students completed their FastForward program (preliminary)

- 57% of students earned an industry credential to date (preliminary)

- **Top 5 FastForward programs based on enrollment:**
  - Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA)
  - CompTIA A+
  - Commercial Drivers License (CDL A)
  - CompTIA Security+
  - SHRM Certified Professional (SHRM-CP)

What's on the Horizon?

- **Enhance training facilities:**
  - New Trades Center to be located at the Manassas Campus (2025)
  - Flex labs

- **Expand training opportunities:**
  - New FastForward programs
  - ACLI classes at the Woodbridge campus
  - Upskill Fairfax City Tuition Assistance Fund
  - Micro-pathways with embedded durable skills
  - Develop pipelines from high schools and community-based organizations

- **Strengthen support to students:**
  - SNAP 50/50 grant
  - Grocery gift card pilot
  - Online Orientation

- **Invest in new positions:**
  - New Associate Director
  - Program Manager for Skilled Trades
  - ACLI Adm Support
  - Student Support Specialists
  - Community Support & Career Readiness Coordinator

Prior Research on Community College Noncredit Quality and Students

Noncredit Students at Two Community Colleges Survey Report

- Sites:
  - Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC)
  - Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA)
- Data & Analysis
  - Online survey of noncredit students, program-unit data analysis; supplemented with interviews with admin and staff
    - N = 182 at Mt. SAC
    - N = 159 for NOVA

- Substantial non-response to demographic items at both institutions
- Most popular reasons for enrollment related to changing the work they do
- Most typical challenges students faced were related to program cost and family responsibilities

Mt. SAC:
- 49% over 35
- 54% prior college
- 37% prior employment

NOVA:
- 40% over 35
- 58% prior college
- 45% prior employment

Reasons for enrollment, NOVA respondents

	% of respondents
New skills to escape low-wage work	26
New skills to keep doing current job	9
New skills to advance in current line of work	26
New skills to change to a new line of work	33
Wanting to explore a possible career change	37

Noncredit Student Perspectives Study

Student Interviews Study

- Funded by the Lumina Foundation
- 3 Partner Colleges
  - LaGuardia Community College (NY)
  - Mt. San Antonio College (CA)
  - Northern Virginia Community College (VA)
- Research Questions
  - How do students experience noncredit workforce offerings?
  - What draws students to these programs?
  - How do these programs fit into students' education and career journeys?
- Data collection
  - Pre-screening survey and in-depth interviews with noncredit workforce students
  - Currently, 37 participants in sample
    - 11 from LaGuardia, 5 from Mt. SAC, and 21 from NOVA

Student Interviews – NOVA Sample, as of March 2025

Program Industry	Number of Students
Business	2
Healthcare	13
IT	5
VESL	1

Gender	Number of Students
Female	15
Male	4
No Answer	2

Gender	Number of Students
Age Range	18-55
Avg. Age	32

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Students
Asian	3
White	4
Black	6
Hispanic	1
MENA	1
Multiracial	1
No Answer	5

Methodology: Challenges and Developments

- Originally…
  - Pre-screening survey to create contact list, then email to schedule interviews
  - Limited survey participation, even harder to schedule an interview
- Tweaks… mixed results
  - In-class recruitment
  - Flyers and handouts
  - Posting on LMS
- Most effective changes
  - Increased recruitment incentive from $25 to $50
  - Using peer-to-peer texting (i.e. Google Voice) to schedule interviews
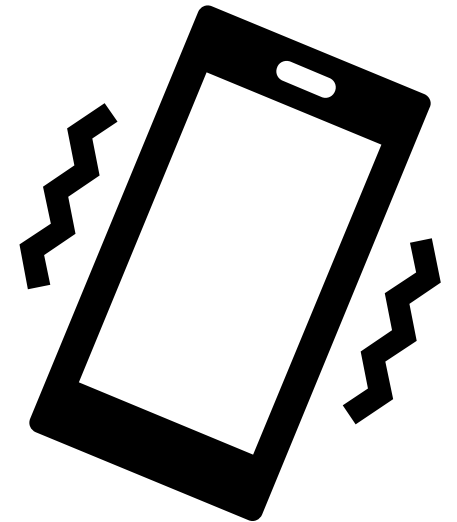
Student Example 1 - IT

- 55 year old male in IT
- Goal: enter into new field
- Work history: business, military
- Unemployed for long period of time
  - Has taken 4+ noncredit IT certification programs
- No experience and little interest in IT
  - But thinks certifications will improve job prospects
- Has become somewhat disillusioned

"[There's a disconnect] in terms of salary because all the research and **all the hype is you're going to make 90 grand when you get these certifications to start**, versus, oh, well, go to a help desk for 45,000 or something and stay there a year or two, and then get another certification, because now you're in the field, and then you can get the cybersecurity job or something else and work your way to it. Then**, in that essence, there's no reason for those certifications until you have the work experience**, and then on the job you get the certificate. So definitely need to have a high, high emphasis on the employment connection..."

Student Example 2 - Healthcare

- 22 year old black woman
- Goal: To progress in career
- Work history: Amazon Fresh, then sitter at VA hospital (very similar training to CNA program)
- Enrolled in Associate of Health Science program, stopped out, then entered CNA program

"Well, I feel like for me, that started with my mom because she also worked in healthcare when I was younger, and I just like the idea of helping people. That's always who I've been. So, I decided at a young age like, oh, I want to do healthcare. **At first, I wanted to become a doctor, but then, in all honesty, that's a lot of schooling. So, I dumbed it down.** I decided that my end goal is to become a registered nurse."

Student Example 2 - Healthcare

- 49 year old white woman
- Goal: To progress in career
- Work history: Mostly office administration work, retail jobs
  - Experienced disability discrimination and retaliation at prior job, inspired entry into HR
- Earned Society for Human Resources Management, Certified Professional certification
- Helped her get $7/hr raise at job, positioned her for further growth at company

"I've tried going to school. I've tried in my 20s. I tried in my 30s. I can't do- like, I need something quick**. If I can get some quick knowledge and get my foot in the door, I hit the ground running**, but to go to school for two years or four years for a degree, I just never see the end of it, and **I get impatient, and I've dropped out so many times**."

Emerging Takeaways

- In this sample…
  - High level of variety in terms of age, background, and goals
    - Relationship to schooling
  - Nonlinear enrollment pathways
    - Many students have tried and stopped out of college (community colleges and universities) before
  - Some feel a disconnect between the job market and their expectations
    - Others use it as a launchpad to enter new field, improve their current job
  - Unique considerations for NOVA
    - Commute time for in-person classes
    - Role of state funding
  - Potentially developing a typology
    - "Career Explorer", "Career Transitioner," "Career Student" are potential groupings
  - Recruitment and scheduling strategies

For More Information...

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