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Contextualizing Student Decision-Making

The Influence of Work Histories on Noncredit Workforce Education Enrollment

Nicole Sandelier Boyd

Noncredit workforce education is increasingly being thought of as a pathway to equip workers with the skills needed to advance in middle-skilled jobs and provide career mobility.¹ Yet little is known about the work experiences of students who enroll in noncredit workforce education, including their work experiences prior to and during their noncredit enrollment, where those experiences position them for career advancement, and how their enrollment in noncredit workforce education fits into their employment pathways.

Although noncredit workforce education enrolls millions of students annually,² research on those students has been sparse until recently. An Education and Employment Research Center report based on interviews with 83 students at three community colleges,³ *Why Now? Understanding Pathways to Enrollment in Community College Noncredit Workforce Programs*, paints a picture of a diverse and complex noncredit student body.⁴ The report describes how the unique life circumstances of the students in the study, as well as their varying goals, education backgrounds, and constraints, influenced their decisions to enroll in noncredit education.

¹ State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). (2026, January). The noncredit mobility academy: Realizing the potential of noncredit education. https://postsecondarydata.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/NMA_Overview.pdf

² American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). (2026). AACC fast facts 2026. <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>

³ Community Colleges included in study: LaGuardia Community College (LaGuardia) in New York, Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) in California, and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) in Virginia.

⁴ Hughes, K., Sandelier Boyd, N., Luz Espino, M., & Van Noy, M. (2026, January). Why now? Understanding pathways to enrollment in community college noncredit workforce programs. Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center.

<https://www.eerc.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Why-Now-Understanding-Pathways-to-Enrollment-in-Community-College-Noncredit-Workforce-Programs.pdf>

This brief, drawing on the same data, further contextualizes student decision-making by exploring students' work histories and the influence of work experiences on their decisions to enroll in noncredit workforce education. The brief focuses on the labor-market contexts from which students entered their noncredit workforce programs. It examines the types of jobs students have held, whether they were employed at the time of program participation, if employment was related to their field of study, and how their work experiences influenced their decision to enroll in their selected program. In total, 80 students had work experiences prior to enrolling in their selected noncredit workforce programs, nearly all of whom had held multiple jobs. The majority of our sample was employed at the time of program participation, but only half of those employed were enrolled in programs that related to their fields of work.

As expected, no two work resumés were the same, or even similar, reinforcing both the diversity and complexity among noncredit workforce students. Students reported a wide range of jobs across various sectors, and many held multiple and unrelated positions over time. Despite these various roles, students' employment histories were similar in that they tended to involve low-wage, service-oriented work or, as various students stated, "get-by jobs."

Students' Employment Histories

As noted, almost all of the students interviewed had held multiple jobs. Across the study's sample, the most common areas of prior employment were the retail (40%), healthcare (33%), and food and beverage (30%) industries. Retail work was the most commonly cited area of employment among noncredit students. When context was provided, roles in retail included cashier, merchandiser, and salesperson in shopping malls or at big-box stores.

The next-largest area of employment among noncredit students was healthcare-related work. These students worked in settings such as hospitals, medical offices, assisted living facilities, group homes, and mental health facilities, as well as for in-home care and health agencies. Their roles included:

- Administrative/Secretary
- Applied Behavioral Analysis
- Certified Nursing Assistant
- Clinical Technician
- Direct Support
- Doula
- Home Health Aide
- Sterile Processing
- Manager
- Medical Assistant (certified & uncertified)
- Patient Transporter
- Patient Sitter
- Pharmacy Technician
- Receptionist

The third-most common industry of employment cited by respondents was food and beverage services, with students discussing experiences at fast food chains, bars/restaurants, and coffee shops, where they worked as cooks, bartenders, servers, dishwashers, expeditors, hosts/hostesses, waiters/waitresses, managers, and baristas.

Though less common, students also reported prior work experiences in customer service, caretaking,⁵ non-healthcare administrative and assistant roles, warehousing, trades (often under-the-table), cleaning services and housekeeping, non-profit/community-based work, delivery services, hospitality, military/government, finance, and information technology. In addition, three in ten students reported having work experiences that did not align with coding, warranting classification under an 'other' category. Examples of 'other' jobs included illegal marijuana clinic, lifeguard, makeup artist, meter reader, parking/bus attendant, security, small business owner, truck driver, tutor, unspecified work at an airport, and working at a summer camp.

As shown in Table 1, students' prior work experiences varied by institution.

Table 1: Distribution of Reported Student Work Experiences by Institution

LaGuardia (n=20)	Mt. SAC (n=30)	NOVA (n=33)
Retail: 60%	'Other': 47%	Healthcare: 38%
'Other': 45%	Retail: 40%	Customer Service: 29%
Healthcare: 40%	Food & Beverage: 37%	Food & Beverage: 29%
Food & Beverage: 30%	Healthcare: 23%	Retail: 29%
Cleaning Services & Housekeeping: 20%	Warehousing: 20%	Caretaking: 18%

Note: The table captures multiples position for most students

Employment at the Time of Program Participation

The majority of students (65%) were employed at the time of program participation, with employment rates varying by institution. As shown in Table 2, employment at the time of program participation hovered around 75 percent at both LaGuardia and NOVA. A smaller percentage of Mt. SAC student interviewees were employed; this difference could be attributed to a number of factors, such as students needing to focus on advancing their English in ESL courses while enrolled or being simultaneously enrolled in other courses (e.g., both credit and noncredit).

Table 2. Student Employment by Institution

Institution	# Employed	# Not Employed	# Employment Status Unknown	% Employed
LaGuardia (n=20)	15	4	1	75%
Mt. SAC (n=30)	15	14	1	47%
NOVA (n=33)	24	9	0	73%
Total (N=83)	54	27	2	65%

⁵ Caretaking is defined as unpaid, in-home labor performed for children, older adults, family members, or others requiring support. Although this work may build relevant skills and shape occupational interests, it is typically not formally recognized as employment because the work occurs within the household or family context and is typically uncompensated.

Employment Related to Noncredit Program Field of Study

Students' experiences varied in terms of whether their employment was related to their noncredit program fields of study. In total, 28 students (34%) were employed⁶ in fields related to their noncredit programs. We defined this relationship broadly to capture both direct and adjacent forms of alignment. Direct alignment occurred when a student was employed in the same field as their noncredit program. Adjacent alignment occurred when a student worked in the same sector or environment as their program field of study, but in a different type of role than they were training for. For example, several students enrolled in healthcare programs were working in healthcare settings in healthcare-adjacent roles, including a receptionist in a medical office, a care manager in a home health agency, and a concierge in a hospital. These roles provided exposure to the range of opportunities available in the healthcare field.

As shown in Table 3, alignment varied greatly by institution, with linkages between employment and noncredit program enrollment most common at NOVA. Of students whose employment related to their noncredit fields of study (n = 28), 20 students (71%) were enrolled in healthcare programs. Examples of related employment and noncredit program field of study are as follows:

- Working as a sterile processing technician in a hospital ~ enrolled in pharmacy technician program
- Working as a care manager in-home health agency ~ enrolled in central service technician program
- Working as a medical receptionist ~ enrolled in phlebotomy technician program
- Working as a mechanic ~ enrolled in HPA 608 technician certification course
- Working in finance ~ enrolled in accounting and SHRM course

The remaining students who were employed at the time of program participation were not in roles that were related to their noncredit workforce programs.

Table 3: Employment Alignment with Noncredit Program Field of Study

Institution	# of Students w/o Employment and Noncredit Alignment (%)	# of Students with Employment and Noncredit Program Alignment (%)	# of Students Both Employed & Enrolled in Healthcare (as % of students with alignment)
LaGuardia (n=20)	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	6 (86%)
Mt. SAC (n=30)	9 (30%)	5 (17%)	3 (60%)
NOVA (n=33)	8 (24%)	16 (49%)	11 (69%)
Total (N=83)	25 (30%)	28 (34%)	20 (71%)

Note: One student at Mt. SAC discussed being employed but did not reveal their job or the field they were working in.

* % of students both employed and enrolled in healthcare = # of students both employed and enrolled in healthcare / # of students with employment and noncredit program alignment.

⁶ At the time of program participation.

Student Voices: The Influence of Work History on Enrollment in Noncredit Education

We asked students if and how their past work experiences influenced their decision to enter their noncredit workforce programs. While some students said there was no connection between their program enrollment and work experiences, many students did express connections. Students enrolled in a noncredit program related to their employment commonly reflected on these connections. For example, a 41-year-old Black female discussed how she was using her noncredit workforce program to get back into the workforce. She explained having only held one job, as a receptionist in a medical office, prior to leaving the workforce to raise her children and serve as the family's homemaker. After 11 years, she enrolled in the medical billing and coding specialist program at NOVA.

Well, I have previous experience in a medical office as a front-end person, meaning the receptionist or patient service specialist. I think because of that background, I would be good in the medical billing ... I know the ins and outs, and I've seen the workings of it. So, it would be something that I didn't have to know nothing about. I knew something about it.

A 26-year-old Hispanic female at LaGuardia described having had various jobs, including working as a cashier, at a laundromat, in retail, at a home health agency, as a receptionist, and, at the time of program enrollment, as a care manager. She discussed how her experiences working in client-facing positions influenced her decision to enroll in the central sterile technician program.

I feel like this kind of work [central sterile technician] has less customer-facing roles. That's something that I want to step away from because as a care manager, that's pretty much all I do. I talk to clients all day. So, I think I just wanted to make a switch.

In addition, a 23-year-old Hispanic male working as a patient transporter in a hospital discussed his desire to be challenged on the job, which influenced his decision to enroll in Mt. SAC's EMT program. When asked whether his work experiences influenced his decision to enroll at Mt. SAC, he explained how his varied work history led him to his noncredit program.

Lifeguarding wasn't too bad, but Target was the same thing every single day. It wasn't a challenge at all. It was super easy. I would just restock shelves, fix the shelves, keep them maintained, and answer questions. It was super easy, but it was very monotonous ... When I started working at the hospital, it satisfied my need for a change and being a little bit more challenged compared to Target and lifeguarding. It did help push me into wanting to be more challenged in this program.

Though less common, some students who were employed in fields unrelated to their noncredit programs also discussed connections between their work experiences and enrollment in noncredit education. For example, a 27-year-old Black male at LaGuardia discussed having had multiple jobs in retail and working as a barista and a delivery driver. At the time of program enrollment, he was working as a parking attendant. He

described a work history spent “bouncing around” a series of “get-by jobs.” When asked about the influence of his work experiences on his decision to enroll at LaGuardia, he stated:

I was kind of getting overwhelmed because I’m not in a structured enough field. I don’t have a solid job where I’m in a field with a career or something. You know, these jobs are not careers. You could move up in them, but I wouldn’t consider them careers. [The jobs are] not something I’m proud of; it’s just to get by.

These student voices shine light on the varying employment experiences that lead students to enroll in noncredit workforce education. Whether the goal for enrollment was to build upon existing interests or skills or to embark on something entirely new, their voices also highlight the diverse ways in which employment history influences student decision-making.

Conclusion

This issue brief closely examines students’ work experiences and the influence of those experiences on noncredit enrollment. Our goal was to expand upon a larger study that sought to better understand the enrollment decision-making processes of noncredit workforce students, particularly in terms of which enrollment considerations played a crucial role in their decision to enroll at that time (Hughes et al. 2026). Students discussed a wide range of jobs across various sectors and often held multiple and unrelated positions over time. Students rarely framed their previous work experiences within a career context; they were more likely to describe their work histories as patchworks of “get-by jobs.” The majority of our sample was employed at the time of program participation, most commonly in jobs that could be characterized as low-wage and service-oriented. Only half of those employed were enrolled in programs that related to their fields of work. Students enrolled in healthcare programs were more likely to discuss their program’s alignment with their employment compared to those enrolled in other programs. These students were also more likely to draw connections between their work experiences and enrollment in noncredit workforce education. They also reflected on what they learned from those work experiences when deciding on a new direction within the healthcare field.

Regardless of alignment between employment and program enrollment, students were seeking to gain new skills, most commonly in pursuit of more stable employment, in programs that felt feasible to them. Overall, the varying influence of student work experiences on the decision to enroll in noncredit workforce education underscores the complexity and diversity within the noncredit student body. Their voices and personal stories also reinforce how their own unique life circumstances and experiences led them to noncredit workforce education.

About the Author

Nicole Sandelier Boyd is a Research Project Manager at the Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

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