



EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH CENTER

A Snapshot of State Practices and Plans for Collecting Industry and Certification Data

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APRIL 2024



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About The Authors

Eliza K. Peterson is a researcher with the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations.

Justin Vinton is a researcher with 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.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many people who contributed to this paper. They particularly appreciate the contributions of the State Noncredit Data Project as participants in the survey. At EERC, Tracy Cangiano and Anjali Srivastava provided support through various phases of the research, and Angel Butts of The Word Angel LLC provided excellent and efficient editorial assistance. The authors are solely responsible for any errors. The authors are grateful to the Strada Education Foundation for their financial support of this work.

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Introduction

As interest grows in alternative pathways to careers, so, too, does the importance of understanding the nature of non-degree credentials—e.g., certificates, industry certifications, licenses, and badges—along with their impact on both learners and the labor market. States are becoming increasingly aware of the critical importance of data on alternative credentials to better inform policy. Yet there is no centralized source of noncredit data, nor a unified strategy to bring together the data that are available. States across the country have begun searching for ways to address this issue, and efforts are now under way to build the infrastructure necessary to collect and analyze noncredit data.

Since it was established in 2022, Rutgers’ Education and Employment Research Center’s State Noncredit Data Project (SNDP) has been working closely with a growing number of states to help foster the sharing of information and to guide states in their ongoing efforts to build noncredit data collection systems. SNDP’s focus to date has been on noncredit education offered by educational institutions—often community colleges. Because community colleges are a leading provider of the types of programs that lead to non-degree credentials, data from these institutions reveal a substantial portion of the landscape of state-level noncredit education.

The goal of SNDP is to help states arrive at a complete picture of noncredit education, which requires a wider focus—one that extends across the spectrum of non-degree credential providers. For example, states seeking information about industry certifications must look beyond noncredit data collected from educational institutions. Because certifications are aligned with industry standards and associated industry-validated assessments, this form of non-degree credential is offered by a range of external entities, including industry-related professional societies, organizations, and institutes, in addition to educational institutions. Because data on these credentials are scattered across a decentralized group of organizations, obtaining critical information such as certification attainment rates and learner outcomes poses a challenge. As states seek to better understand the outcomes of the full spectrum of learners in noncredit education, gathering data from these providers is key.

To set the stage for further collection and exploration of industry certification data, EERC conducted a survey among participants in the SNDP National Learning Community that was designed to answer two main questions:

- » What is the current state of industry certification data in terms of what states collect and what infrastructure is in place for data collection?
- » What industry certification data would states be most interested in collecting in the future?

Methods

Noncredit data are housed in different offices, departments, or organizations depending on each state's noncredit governance and funding structures. To gather information on current and future state practices around industry certifications, we conducted a survey of state leaders involved in collecting noncredit data. These respondents, hailing from community and technical college systems, state community college boards and advocacy groups, and education, workforce development, information technology, and labor departments, are major contributors to the noncredit data ecosystems in their states.

At the time of the survey, most participants were involved in the SNDP, a multifaceted effort to support state efforts to collect data on noncredit education via research and network-building. SNDP seeks to document the noncredit data collected by states with the ultimate goal of creating a shared taxonomy of noncredit data. To that end, SNDP convenes quarterly virtual learning community meetings during which presenters share research and strategies around noncredit data. This learning community consists of participants from over 30 states and more than 72 organizations across the country.

The survey consisted of questions designed to address our two core topics of interest. The first set of questions sought to identify the current state of industry certification data—what states are collecting and the infrastructure they had in place for doing so. The second set of questions sought to identify states' future plans for collecting industry certification data as well as their industries and areas of interest for future data collection efforts. (See Appendix A for the survey instrument.)

The survey was conducted using Qualtrics survey software and distributed via a QR code to attendees at the December 2023 meeting of SNDP's learning community. Research team members followed up with learning community members who did not fill out the survey via a follow-up email in mid-January 2024. In an effort to capture information from the largest number of states, research team members identified other contacts in the noncredit education space in states that were not already members of the SNDP learning community. These state contacts were also invited via email to take the survey in mid-January 2024. Ultimately, the survey was sent out to 140 individuals across more than 80 organizations: 122 individuals in the SNDP learning community and 18 contacts from other states not yet involved in the SDNP. Since surveys were sent to individuals within the same state as well as within the same organization, our main unit of analysis is the organization; however, our analyses also provide a top-level view on the broader state of noncredit data collection across states.

At least one respondent from a total of 30 states completed our survey. (See Appendix B for a list of those states.) Although the extent of responses varied, we received 40 responses that could be used in at least one of our analyses, translating to a response rate of 29 percent.

The mixed and incomplete nature of survey responses reflects the lack of information on what kinds of noncredit data are being collected, who is collecting them, and how they are being used to help develop programs and address employer interests. Noncredit data may have multiple homes in the same state and, as

noted above, are not located at the same agency or organization in every state. This variety contributes to some idiosyncrasies in the dataset, but also allows us to begin to capture the trends across the range of organizations that share control and management of these data.

With regard to incomplete surveys, respondents or their organizations may simply not have known the answers to certain questions about this relatively nascent practice of collecting data on industry certifications. Alternatively, they may not have wanted to indicate something they felt might risk misrepresenting the work of their organization or state. We retained partial survey responses in the analysis for respondents that answered one or more questions of interest. Though this approach caused variation of the sample size between various items of analysis, it allowed us to maximize what we could learn from the data.

We analyzed the open-ended qualitative responses on a question-by-question basis. Responses to each question were then sorted into categories based on their content. These categories emerged from the data and were not identified in advance. Thus, developing the categories was an iterative process that was informed by the data being analyzed.

The goal of this report is to offer a brief snapshot of what actors involved in noncredit education development in the United States know and think about this kind of data collection and how they may be planning to improve this infrastructure. This snapshot can help contribute to the broader picture of how organizations and states value, pursue, and prioritize data on non-degree credentials.

Data Availability

At the time the survey was administered, few states were collecting information on which industry certifications were offered through noncredit programs, but many had plans to collect that information in the future. One-quarter of respondents (10 out of 40) reported that their state entity had information on the industry certifications offered as part of noncredit programs. This measure does not capture whether they had student-level information on the attainment of these certifications but rather focuses on basic descriptive information: which certifications were associated with their noncredit education. Of the respondents who indicated their state tracked industry certification information, seventy percent (7 out of 10) reported that their organization collected these data. Among the 26 respondents saying their states did not currently collect industry certification data, 15 indicated that their state plans to track information on which industry certifications are offered as part of noncredit programs.

In addition to data on noncredit program offerings, a slight majority of states had at least some data on industry certification outcomes more broadly. When asked if their state was collecting any data on industry certification outcomes (e.g., student attainment of certifications), 19 out of 30 respondents shared that their state was, in fact, collecting these data at the time of the survey. Unlike the survey item analyzed in the paragraph above, this particular survey item asked about all outcomes data associated with industry certifications, not just those connected to noncredit program offerings. Fifteen of those respondents shared the processes they used to collect these data. Of the nine respondents who indicated that their states did not collect data on industry certification outcomes, four indicated that their state had plans to collect data on outcomes from noncredit programs in the future.

Industry certification outcomes data collected by the respondents was often self-reported by students or sent directly from credential issuers, but there were several other potential sources of these data. Respondents from states that collected outcomes data reported varying approaches to the collection process. Respondents could select multiple options to capture all the ways their state collected this information. Table 1 summarizes these approaches to the collection of industry certification outcomes data. Of the 15 respondents who specified their states' data collection mechanisms, the most popular method indicated was self-reported student data, followed by data received directly from credential issuers. A small number of respondents indicated that their state received data directly from employer surveys. Seven respondents indicated that their state collected data from sources other than the three options presented in the survey. Respondents generally did not name specific partners or vendors from which their state received industry certification outcomes data. Of the respondents who selected Other, three indicated that these data were collected by colleges. One such respondent noted, "the colleges do this, if it's done at all." Two respondents who mentioned other sources for outcomes data reported that they collected data from training providers, with one specifically mentioning the Eligible Training Providers list (ETPL). Another respondent said they used wage data to gather information on industry certification outcomes. Interestingly, one respondent said their state used other sources to collect industry certification outcomes data but that they "don't know them all," which may also be reflective of the disjointed nature of these data collection processes.

Table 1. Processes for Collecting Outcomes Data, by Number of Respondents

Process for Collecting Outcomes Data	Number of Respondents*
Self-reported from students	8
Other	7
Directly from credential issuers	6
Employer surveys	3
N	15

*These counts are not mutually exclusive; respondents could select as many of these options as applied.

Many respondents reported their states were still in the developmental stage of collecting industry certification data. Some respondents mentioned the nascence of procedures for collecting these data. For example, one respondent said that industry certification data collection in their state was in the “infancy stage”; another said that they were “in the process of trying to answer this question as we speak”; and another shared that in their state, “we have a long way to go.” Of the many respondents who indicated that their states were in the process of planning to collect industry certification data, several reported barriers and challenges to these efforts.

A lack of central oversight and coordination was a barrier to collecting industry certification data. Many respondents noted that efforts to collect industry certification data collection were uncoordinated. For example, one respondent said certification data collection in their state “varies from community college to community college and is tracked differently from school to school,” and another succinctly responded by simply writing that the data collection process in their state was “siloeed.” Respondents mentioned roadblocks to cohesion such as state governing bodies that highly value local control, or a proliferation of “random instances of data reporting, but no overarching strategy.”

Partnerships, funding, and mandates were important facilitators of industry certification data collection in states where those data were reported. Several respondents mentioned the importance of partnerships with other organizations to their industry certification data collection efforts, including other departments at the state, industry organizations, and data collection entities. For example, one respondent mentioned a partnership with their state’s Office of Education and Workforce Statistics. Many respondents also emphasized that the disbursement state or federal funds as well as the fulfillment of certain government mandates necessitated that state officials or community college staff collect data on the outcomes of their noncredit offerings. For example, one respondent wrote that their state had recently changed their community college funding model in a way that made these data crucial: “For noncredit programs, reimbursement is now based on certifications.” Respondents often noted that the collection of industry certification data was mandate-driven. Reporting requirements and mandates related to funding include state funding formulas and WIOA. Other mandates include requirements for inclusion on the ETPL, Perkins funding, and some state-specific policies.

Motivations

The most common reason for tracking industry certification data was to learn about program

outcomes. Nearly half of respondents expressed that they wanted to develop a deeper understanding of industry certification outcomes such as completion rates, in-field employment, as well as completer wages, earnings, and upward mobility. For example, one respondent wrote that they wanted to collect these data “to better understand completion rates and design student success efforts to hopefully increase those rates.” Some of the less common reasons for interest in tracking industry certification data were program design, improvement, and selection, and to respond to fluctuations in local supply and demand. Even fewer respondents mentioned the following topics: stackability, brain drain, state attainment goals, promotion of noncredit, duplication, and data centralization.

A prominent reason for tracking outcomes data on industry certifications was to document the success of these programs to determine return on investment.

Success measures included the following: program completions, matriculation to degree programs, employment, and improved wages. One response phrased the need for these data succinctly: “It is crucial to be able to tell the story of the value of industry credentials.” Another wrote that collecting outcomes data “provides additional [information] for students and demonstrates the value add [of] certain trainings.” A few respondents mentioned that these data could be used to solicit or secure funding from the state. One response summed this relationship up nicely, stating that “As we seek more funding to scale up these opportunities, we know that we will need data to support and inform those requests.” Some respondents also mentioned how important outcomes data were in demonstrating the value of noncredit programs. For example, one respondent wrote that collecting these data “would allow us to talk to funders, industry partners, other agencies such as the employment department, and communities about the value of our noncredit programs.”

Some respondents expressed interest in tracking industry certification outcomes data to inform program planning and growth.

Respondents mentioned several possible applications of these data with regard to program planning, including student recruitment and program selection as well as employer engagement and demand. One respondent wrote that outcomes data would help the state “identify the most successful educational pathways that lead to employment outcomes and economic gains for individuals and the state as a whole.” Another respondent wrote that collecting these data would allow the state to “construct a more robust supply and demand model, identify areas that need more education and training opportunities, [and] attract industry.” Less frequently cited applications for outcomes data in this arena included credit articulation, preventing duplication, and state attainment goals.

Industry Certification Data of Particular Interest

Of the 40 respondents, 16 shared information on the industry certification data that were the most important for their state to collect. A common theme among these respondents was their lack of confidence in their knowledge about what data their state was most interested in collecting, with one even writing that we should “stay tuned” for that information. A few respondents mentioned that their state was in the process of determining what type of industry certifications were to be deemed priorities.

Data on industry certifications were central to transparency efforts seeking to highlight high-demand credentials in a way that informed individuals and employers.

One respondent wrote that industry certifications in high-demand occupations “are the most important for [their] state to have data on,” while another hoped those data would help in “understanding highest demand.” One respondent emphasized the importance of collecting data on all non-degree credentials, noting that current efforts in their state aim “to make all credentials known and transparent.” Another wrote that they were especially interested in “the [non-degree credentials] chronically low-income people spend time/money/capacity obtaining.” Finally, one respondent summed up both the importance of collecting these data and the issues involved in their collection this way: “Our colleges do a lot of business and industry training for people entering the workforce, for incumbent workers, for journey-level trades, and small business development. We work with industries to meet their needs—for new employees and current employees. But it needs to be more systematic.” The need for greater systemization of data collection was a recurring theme for some respondents throughout the survey.

Some states prioritized high-demand credentials aligned with employer demand and provided publicly available information to guide choice.

Thirteen out of 22 respondents indicated their states prioritized certain industry certifications that were aligned with employer demand. Employer demand is often considered in the criteria for inclusion on lists of state-approved credentials. These lists, which are often created by state workforce agencies, departments of education, or similar entities, may be referred to as a state’s “promoted,” “industry-recognized,” or “industry-valued” credentials list. Among the 13 respondents who indicated their state prioritized employer alignment, nine said they had information available on employer demand for industry certifications and other non-degree credentials. Some provided us with links to their state’s version of an approved credentials list, but our team also searched for these lists across all states that responded to the survey to capture as many of these documents as possible. A table with links to the state-approved credential lists we were able to locate is included in Appendix C.

Among the few respondents who noted industries of interest, healthcare was most commonly reported.

A few respondents noted their states were interested in data on certifications in specific industries. Of the four respondents who shared a desire for industry-specific data, all mentioned that they were particularly interested in data on certifications in healthcare/health sciences, and two mentioned a special interest in data on information technology certifications. Finally, one respondent noted an interest in data on certifications in each of the following fields: early childhood education, manufacturing/transportation, construction, and emerging technologies.

Conclusion

Analysis of our survey data reinforced the sense that data on non-degree credentials—in this case, on industry certifications—are decentralized and challenging to capture. From the perspective of our respondents, many states are interested in collecting industry certification data, including their associated outcomes, but they lack the means to capture these data in a systematic fashion. Some respondents indicated that their state has prioritized certain industry certifications data or that they are in the process of determining these data priorities. This may provide an avenue for partnering with specific certification bodies within those fields of interest, particularly in states where a small number of industry certifications comprise the majority of industry certifications granted in the state.

This snapshot may serve to guide future research about the potential of industry certification data for the greater mission of helping to build up states' noncredit data infrastructure. One objective for future research efforts in this area would be to collect data from respondents in each of the 50 states. Focusing on a specific agency type or types could be one beneficial approach because it would allow for broader inferences to be made about industry certification data in that type of agency rather than provide the snapshot captured by this exploratory research project. Granted, such an effort would be complicated by the often-idiosyncratic nature of higher education governance structures across different states. Alternatively, including multiple types of agencies could provide a better understanding of the governance structures (existing and emergent) surrounding these data. By opening up new avenues for future research and providing a snapshot of part of the current industry certification data landscape, we hope that this memo can help inform the discussion around the collection and use of data on industry certifications, to bolster the noncredit data infrastructure and noncredit programs, and, ultimately, to lead to the best outcomes for students pursuing these pathways.

Appendix A

Survey Instrument

1. Your state
2. Your agency/organization
3. Does your state track information on which industry certifications are offered as part of noncredit programs?
Y/N

If yes to Q3:

- » Does your agency collect data? Y/N ... If No, which agency collects these data? If yes, does any other agency also collect data?
- » Which programs does your state work with to collect information on noncredit industry certifications? (Select all that apply) K12, Perkins, community college, 4 year
- » Which entity in the state collects this information?
- » What is the purpose of tracking information on industry certifications?

If no to Q3:

- » Does your state plan to track information on which industry certifications are offered as part of noncredit programs? Y/N; If yes, which agency would collect these data?
- » Which programs in your state would seek to collect information on noncredit industry certifications? (Select all that apply) K12, Perkins, community college, 4 year
- » Which entity in the state would collect this information?
- » What is the purpose of tracking information on industry certifications?

4. Does your state currently collect any data on industry certification outcomes (i.e. student attainment of certifications)? This may involve tracking what certifications are offered, what programs certifications are associated with, and whether or not students obtain these certifications. Y/N

If yes to Q4:

- » How does your state collect these data? Offer these options: Directly from credential issuers, self-reported from students, employer surveys Ask: please describe the process for collecting these data/

If no to Q4:

- » Does your state currently plan to collect any data on industry certification outcomes? Y/N
 - » Which programs in your state would seek to collect information on noncredit industry certifications? (Select all that apply) K12, Perkins, community college, 4 year
 - » Which entity in the state would collect this information?
 - » Why is tracking industry certifications outcomes important/valuable for your employer and/or state?
5. Has the state prioritized certain industry certifications as aligned with employer demand? Y/N
- » If yes: Is there information available on employer demand, e.g. a website link?
6. Which industry certifications are / would be most important for the state to have data on? For what purpose?
7. Any other information to share on data collection efforts related to industry certification or industry certification outcomes data in your state?

Appendix B

States Represented in Survey Responses

State	Number of Respondents
Alabama	1
Arkansas	1
California	1
Connecticut	2
Georgia	1
Hawaii	1
Indiana	1
Iowa	2
Louisiana	1
Maine	1
Maryland	1
Massachusetts	1
Michigan	1
Minnesota	1
Missouri	2
New Jersey	1
New Mexico	1
New York	2
North Carolina	2
Ohio	2
Oregon	1
Pennsylvania	1
Rhode Island	1
South Carolina	2
Tennessee	2
Texas	1
Utah	1
Virginia	1
Washington	3
Wisconsin	1
Total	40

Appendix C

List of States with Prioritized Certifications List, with Links

State Name	Link to Prioritized Certifications List
Alabama	ACCCP – AlabamaWorks!
Hawaii	Promising Credentials in Hawaii
Indiana	Indiana’s Promoted List of Industry Certifications
Louisiana	Jump Start Industry Credential Fact Sheets
Michigan	Career Training Programs
Missouri	DESE-Approved Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRC)
North Carolina	NC Workforce Credential List
New Jersey	Industry-Valued Credentials List - Career Services
Ohio	Industry-Recognized Credentials by Career Field
Oregon	Oregon Department of Education : CTE Industry Recognized Credentials
Pennsylvania	Industry-Recognized Credentials for Career and Technical Education Programs
Rhode Island	RIDE-Approved CTE Program
South Carolina	Industry Recognized Credentials
Tennessee	Tennessee Promoted Industry Credentials

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Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center

Janice H. Levin Building

94 Rockefeller Road

Piscataway, New Jersey 0885

smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc | Email: eerc@smlr.rutgers.edu



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