

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges are an important provider of the skilled workforce essential to so many of America's employers. However, college programs are not always structured in ways that best prepare students for the workforce. Most institutions offer non-credit workforce programs and credit-based programs that operate separately. Many employers primarily value the skills and competencies built within those programs and may not focus on the distinctions between these programs. Students value access, flexibility, and opportunity to reach their educational goals. While it may largely go unnoticed, the bifurcation across non-credit programs and credit programs is impacting both students and employers.

Despite operating within the same institution, distinctions between non-credit programs and credit programs in structure, educational approach, faculty, and student resources compound to make programs feel worlds apart. While there are reasons for the separation of programs and some distinctions are in fact beneficial, other differences are simply default or arbitrary. And so, the two systems often exist separately, causing potential content duplication, lack of communication, and missed opportunities to collaborate and build pathways.

Students enrolled in these programs are particularly impacted. Students in non-credit programs do not often have a direct pathway to continue their education on the credit side toward a degree. They are unlikely to receive credit for the learning that occurred in their non-credit program and unlikely to have access to financial aid or other means of funding for their education. The student experience in non-credit workforce programs is inequitable to that of students in credit programs in terms of their access to services, visibility, and representation across the institution.

Institutions must turn their attention to these inequities and disconnects. Now is the time to create a more unified community college that **aligns industry-focused non-credit programs to credit programs that lead to degrees**. The economic and health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic heightens the urgency for such change. The needs of today's students and workforce demand such change. To be clear, non-credit can cover a wide range of offerings, but the focus of alignment should be on workforce programs.

A new framework for alignment is needed. This framework offers five key tenets, all of which must be implemented to realize a more unified community college. This framework is based on research, evidence in the field, and conversations with institutional, system, and policy leaders. Framework tenets include:

- 1. Treat all students as students.** Make the student experience across non-credit and credit programs more equitable. Address structural inequities that disadvantage students in non-credit programs over those in credit programs. Begin to think of students in non-credit programs and students in credit programs as two parts of the whole, which must be considered together. Ensure every institutional decision or action with student implications includes consideration of students in non-credit programs. Remove labels attributed to students in non-credit programs.
- 2. Build clear pathways between non-credit and credit credentials.** No program should be an educational dead end. Make non-credit program completion for credentials of value a seamless transition to an associate's degree program. For students in degree programs, incorporate non-credit certificates or certifications into the program. Non-credit programs continue to thrive and employers benefit from the resulting cohesion. Pathways are made clear through prominent communications and strong advising.
- 3. Align departments and governance.** Establish strong coordination across non-credit and credit departments. Consider organizing relevant non-credit and credit programs into the same department or establishing joint leadership. Be prepared to modify the institution's overall curriculum development and design process to achieve alignment.

4. **Make programs credit-worthy or credit-based.** Ensure that learning in industry-focused non-credit programs counts for credit. Credit-worthy programs award credit for learning when students transition into credit programs through the use of bridge tools, such as credit matrices, articulation agreements, or equivalency agreements. Credit-based programs go through the process to become accredited, while maintaining labor-market orientation, putting students on a direct pathway to an associate's degree.
5. **Remove barriers to transition.** Make transitioning easy for students by reducing the number of forms and processes required to transition, providing navigational assistance, and similar course schedules across programs. Make transitioning as automatic as possible. Make transitioning facilitated and incentivized by providing scholarships or other funding.

All components of this new framework require significant organizational, operational, and policy modifications. Implementing the framework requires time and commitment necessary to address shifts in organizational culture.

Starting points offer different ways to build toward the new framework. Case studies and additional examples represent existing efforts. At the time of this report, no single institution or system has completely implemented the new framework or achieved full alignment. Yet, those who are doing this work are leaders in the field, demonstrating the need for further alignment and showing how change in this area is both possible and essential.

Starting points include:

Removing the Structural Divide. Institutions create a new or merged division to encompass non-credit and credit programs and facilitate pathway development. See case study on the new division of Teaching, Learning, and Student Success at Prince George's Community College.

Developing Bridge Tools to Award Credit. Institutions use bridge tools to develop pathways from non-credit programs into credit programs and to award credit when students transition to credit programs. See case study on equivalency agreements at Salt Lake Community College.

Making Industry-Focused Programs Credit-Based. Institutions pursue accreditation for the majority of industry-focused non-credit programs to make them credit-based. See case study on non-credit programs becoming credit-based at the Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

Reorienting for Demand-Driven Pathways. Institutions rethink the delivery and function of non-credit training to address the current and future needs of employers and the broader community in a way that is adaptive, partnership-based, and data-infused. See case study on re-envisioning workforce development at Monroe Community College.

Getting Started Guides offer tangible steps to begin alignment, with accompanying templates and samples.

Guides are oriented around three core principles: **be student-centric, be labor market-driven, and build for innovation.**

The **GETTING STARTED GUIDE FOR INSTITUTIONS AND SYSTEMS** includes:

1. Choose a starting point.
2. Articulate the vision.
3. Engage stakeholders.
4. Tackle the elephant in the room – culture.
5. Understand the data.
6. Align student services and administrative operations.
7. Identify initial pathways.
8. Make it known.

The **GETTING STARTED GUIDE FOR STATES** includes:

1. Connect to other state priorities.
2. Create the enabling conditions.
3. Develop statewide tools for alignment.
4. Incentivize with funding.
5. Provide financial aid and other supports to students.
6. Change policy to address barriers.
7. Employ legislation if needed.
8. Institute accountability

The **GETTING STARTED GUIDE FOR ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY, AND STAFF** includes:

1. Start where you are.
2. Be a voice for students.
3. Make connections.
4. Create alignment in your area.
5. Collect and share data.
6. Promote pathways.

Creating pathways to align non-credit and credit programs opens the doors of opportunity to students, faculty, employers, and the regional economy. Now is the time for community colleges to effect this change.