



Education
Strategy
Group

New Report Offers Strategies to Align Non-Credit and Credit Community College Programs to Advance Equity

Washington, D.C. (October 6, 2020) — Today, Education Strategy Group (ESG) released a new report detailing the critical importance of aligning non-credit and credit programming at community colleges and outlining a new framework to facilitate the alignment process for systems and institutions. [*A More Unified Community College: Strategies and Resources to Align Non-Credit and Credit Programs*](#) offers research, strategies, and examples of success in the field to support community colleges in pursuit of more equitable student experiences and outcomes.

Community colleges have long held dual missions of preparing workers in their local communities and preparing students for transfer to bachelor's degree programs at four-year institutions. However, as community colleges developed, these two missions diverged into separate tracks, with one focusing on non-credit workforce training and the other focusing on degrees and transfer. While each mission is important to sustain, it has resulted in a bifurcated institutional structure that does not equitably serve and prepare all students for workforce opportunities and career advancement.

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. Consequently, the two systems often exist separately, causing potential content duplication, lack of communication, and missed opportunities to collaborate and build pathways. While it may largely go unnoticed, the bifurcation across non-credit programs and credit programs is impacting both students and employers.

“Community colleges are positioned to be engines of economic recovery and help people get back to work in a post-pandemic economy, but the division between non-credit and credit programs threatens to do a serious disservice to both students seeking training and employers seeking qualified new hires,” said Matt Gandal, President and CEO of Education Strategy Group. “Intentional and strategic alignment of the non-credit and credit sides of the house is the only way to ensure equitable student opportunity and consistent, high-quality outcomes. This was true before the pandemic struck, and the need for integration is even more urgent now.”

Students in non-credit programs often do not 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 or 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. This problem is particularly significant given that students of color make up a higher percentage of students enrolled in non-credit offerings than in credit programs.

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.



A More Unified Community College offers a new framework for alignment comprised of 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.
2. Build clear pathways between non-credit and credit credentials.
3. Align departments and governance.
4. Make programs credit-worthy or credit-based.
5. Remove barriers to transition.

Additionally, as no single institution or system has achieved full alignment, the report includes case studies and other examples to illustrate different starting points for the field. Finally, Getting Started Guides for institutions and systems; states; and administrators, faculty, and staff offer tangible steps to begin bringing about alignment.

“*A More Unified Community College* combines a very clear argument with important practical tips from the field for colleges to unify their credit and non-credit activities,” said Jim Jacobs, President Emeritus of Macomb Community College and member of the expert workgroup that provided input into the publication. “This will serve as an important guide for colleges who want to implement this important change.”

“We have a responsibility to foster environments where students from each walk of life are successful from pre-application to post-graduation. This is often done in a binary approach with non-credit and credit often in competition with each other,” said René Cintrón, Chief Education and Training Officer at the Louisiana Community & Technical College System and expert workgroup member. “The playbook provides valuable and actionable guiding principles for leaders to develop their strategies that provide aligned educational experiences in which each individual student can reach their dreams, hopes, and aspirations.”

Access the full suite of materials on ESG’s website [here](#).

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About Education Strategy Group

Education Strategy Group is a mission-driven consulting firm that works with K-12, higher education and workforce leaders to achieve greater impact. We work across sectors and across the aisle to move the needle on issues that are critical to improving student success and increasing economic mobility for all.