

MAKING INDUSTRY-FOCUSED PROGRAMS CREDIT-BASED

APPROACH:

The majority of industry-focused non-credit programs pursue accreditation to become credit-bearing and automatically count toward an associate's degree.

TOOLS:

Follow the accreditation process. Align curriculum and learning objectives and outcomes between workforce (formerly non-credit) programs and degree programs.

TIPS:

Have a "myth buster" or "accreditation guru" on the planning team to address questions and concerns over changes related to programs becoming credit-based.

CASE STUDY: CREDIT-BASED PROGRAMS AT THE KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

Location/ Type:

16 colleges in Kentucky

Student Enrollment by Program:

Non-credit*: 18,600

Credit: 66,400

Student Age by Program:

Non-credit average age: 36

Credit average age: 26

Student Ethnicity by Program:

Non-credit: 5% African-American, 1.8% Latino, 1.2% Asian, 0.2% Native American or Alaska Native, 76% White

Credit: 10% African-American, 5% Latino, 1.7% Asian, 0.2% Native American or Alaska Native, 77% White

Accreditation:

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

From Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) Type 1 Official Database. Snapshot data from academic year 2019-20.
Note: Many of KCTCS' shorter term credential training offerings are in credit programs rather than non-credit programs.
* non-credit numbers include all non-credit offerings, not just industry-focused workforce programs

Background

In 1997, the technical colleges in Kentucky merged with the community college system to become the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). Significant consolidation resulted in 32 colleges across two systems becoming 16 colleges. When Keith Bird was appointed as chancellor of the new system in 1999, he made it a priority to develop a process to award credit for non-credit programs.

Structural Alignment

Faculty and departments were merged or consolidated during the creation of KCTCS. The work required major changes to processes and administrative functions. Key stakeholders met regularly to manage the mergers and alignment. **"Operational processes were the biggest problem,"** shared Donna Davis, former System Director of Workforce Solutions.

For example, they used process-mapping to identify roadblocks, which led to rethinking and clarifying of policies and procedures. They streamlined operations and sought to address technology and data platforms that did not easily connect across non-credit and credit programs.

Credit Determination

Bird's goal to make not-credit programs credit-based sought to award learning where it occurred and provide long-term value for learning via a transcript, while still maintaining flexibility in non-credit training. KCTCS knew students would be better served by credit-bearing programs and employers would not be significantly impacted. Making non-credit workforce programs credit-bearing would also better align with state funding, which flowed more directly into credit-based programs.

The approach to making non-credit workforce courses credit-bearing was an evolving process. Starting in 2001, workforce programs awarded fractional credit for their classes and began to modularize courses. Over time, however, they changed their focus to embedding workforce certificates into degree programs. This led to the current approach of workforce courses being offered as traditional credit courses that build toward a degree.

The system assigned a team of faculty and staff from workforce and academic programs to develop a common language definition and process guide to manage the transition to credit programming. Faculty members in academic programs who taught workforce courses helped facilitate the change, as these faculty knew the content and quality of workforce offerings were the same as academic programs, simply taught in a different format. Strong system coordination and a standardized curriculum across the system also facilitated the transition to credit offerings. One of team leaders for this project became the "accreditation guru" and ensured the process, developed by the full team, met accreditation standards.

The initial review and process of gaining accreditation took one year. Now, when new training offerings are developed, faculty make a credit recommendation based on competencies already approved and can quickly gain credit approval. "We now work ahead with SACS [the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools], which has tried very hard to make certificates less onerous, while also working to meet industry needs," shared Kris Williams, chancellor of the system.

Pathway Development

KCTCS developed stackable credentials in their workforce programs and honed, over time, what could be categorized as a credential of value. Faculty began embedding certificates into degree programs when they realized students were learning just enough to get employed, but not completing the degree. Providing credentials for those courses was a way to build pathways and encourage students to complete the degree. Each KCTCS college has developed market-driven pathways based on their institution's service area, meaning not all certificate and degree pathways are offered by every college, but are still accessible through other colleges in the system.

Results

Currently, 54 percent of KCTCS' workforce credit-based courses lead to a degree and the majority of their technical degree programs have certificates embedded in them, which range from five credits to more than 30 credits. More students are gaining certificates, which are awarded along the way toward a degree. While not as many students are continuing directly toward degree completion, the credit structure makes it easier for certificate holders to go to work and return at a later time to complete the degree, which some students are doing.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

CREDIT-BASED OFFERINGS FOR RURAL COLLEGES, RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALLIANCE

There are 600 rural community colleges in the U.S., which comprise nearly two-thirds of all community colleges, but serve only one-third of all community college students. Many of these small institutions do not have sufficient faculty, staff, or funding to sustain a non-credit workforce model. "Rural colleges cannot afford to offer technical programs without external assistance and most rural students cannot afford critical

workforce training without help", says Penny Wills, interim President of Rural Community College Alliance. As such, many rural colleges make their workforce program certificates set at 15 credits so students are eligible for financial aid. Many certificates do not link to degree programs, as students are just coming for the job skills, Wills shared, though students would be likely eligible for higher wages with a degree.