



Education
Strategy
Group



NON-CREDIT AND CREDIT ALIGNMENT LAB

FRAMEWORK SPOTLIGHT:

TREAT ALL STUDENTS AS STUDENTS

In 2022, **Education Strategy Group (ESG)** and the **Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT)** launched the **Non-Credit and Credit Alignment Lab (NCAL)**, a two-year initiative to support 20 community colleges and four community college systems in developing new or improved pathways between non-credit and credit programs. To help learners achieve actualized economic mobility, now is the time for community college leaders to build [*A More Unified Community College*](#) and eliminate the silos that too often exist across non-credit and credit divisions, deeply impacting the student experience.

In an effort to better understand desired outcomes and aspirations of learners, Education Strategy Group conducted focus groups with over 80 learners enrolled in non-credit programs. The [results](#) of the interviews were clear: **Many students enrolled in non-credit programs have the goal of earning a degree.** Yet conversations with these learners also revealed an alternate and inequitable experience that individuals pursuing non-credit training face in postsecondary education as compared to their degree-seeking peers. Through NCAL, participating sites made firm commitments to uplift the voices of learners enrolled in non-credit programs, increase student access to critical support services on campus, and scale advising practices to more equitably serve all students.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Institutions that have prioritized getting to know their learners in non-credit programs recognize this divide and are striving to address the gaps in the student experience across non-credit and credit. For example, all sites participating in NCAL reported “to improve student equity in opportunity and outcomes,” as their top motivation for participating in the initiative. Currently, students in non-credit programs often do not have a direct pathway to continue their education in longer-term, credit-bearing certificate or degree programs. Further, these learners rarely have access to critical resources on campus that promote their social and academic well-being, such as tutoring, the library, fitness facilities, and mental health services. This results in a student experience in non-credit workforce programs that is far different from that of credit programs. Given that many non-credit programs are overrepresented by racially marginalized and post-traditional learners, this creates serious inequities for colleges focused on improving outcomes for those populations. Now is the time for community college faculty, staff, and administrators to double down on serving all learners, including those enrolled in non-credit programs.

ACTION STEPS

Treating all students as students requires significant organizational, operational, and institutional policy modifications. NCAL provided postsecondary leaders an opportunity to test new strategies and solutions to better serve learners in non-credit programs. While implementing these new action steps requires time and a deep commitment to addressing organizational culture, they are necessary to help more learners successfully transition from non-credit to credit. **These steps include:**

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| 1. | Surveying learners in non-credit programs to assess their educational aspirations and specific needs; |
| 2. | Evaluating and improving the access to current support services offered to learners enrolled in non-credit programs on campus; and |
| 3. | Expanding access to advising services to provide all learners an equitable experience. |



STRATEGY #1:

Survey or conduct focus groups with learners in non-credit programs to assess their educational aspirations and needs.

There is much to be learned from students enrolled in non-credit programs, including their educational aspirations and specific needs. Through NCAL, ESG learned that few colleges quantitatively and qualitatively investigate the experiences of learners in non-credit programs to inform institutional policy and practice. For postsecondary leaders to truly meet students where they are, they must first get to know them. Faculty, staff, and administrators can begin by surveying or interviewing learners in non-credit programs to gain a better understanding of critical supports they need to be successful in the classroom and in their transition to credit-bearing coursework. Interviewing or surveying students can help identify gaps on campus and assist leaders in evaluating their current service offerings.

SAN DIEGO COLLEGE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION:

Smoothing the Transition from Non-Credit to Credit through the Student Voice

San Diego College of Continuing Education (SDCCE) leveraged the expertise and capacity of institutional research staff to conduct a series of student focus groups with learners in non-credit programs. These focus groups provided insight into students' needs and aspirations for transitioning from non-credit to credit coursework. More specifically, the college's research objectives were to:

- Explore students' awareness and motivation for enrolling in non-credit coursework;
- Understand how students received information about the opportunity and gain insights from their experiences;
- Develop insights on the experience of students who have successfully completed the program and leveraged non-credit training into credit-bearing pathways;
- Identify areas of improvement for student awareness and participation in non-credit training; and
- Discover if and how non-credit education prepares learners for credit coursework.

In total, 30 students participated in focus groups at SDCCE and their voice has been used to shape the development of articulated pathways between non-credit and credit. Moreover, student voice has been leveraged to increase access to support services offered to learners in non-credit programs. For example, prior to these focus groups and NCAL, learners in non-credit did not receive a campus-issued identification card, which is key to access many campus resources. Now, all students, regardless of their program, are able to access necessary support.



STRATEGY #2:

Increase access to critical resources on campus to students in non-credit programs.

By evaluating current service offerings, assessing students' needs, and taking steps to expand service offerings (e.g, tutoring, basic needs support, campus identification cards, childcare, library, fitness center, etc.) postsecondary leaders will create the conditions necessary for a sense of belonging and learner self-efficacy, both of which are necessary to improve the student experience in non-credit programs. It is paramount that these learners are able to bring their fullest selves and identities (e.g, working adults, parenting students, etc.) to campuses and be supported throughout their academic journey. One way campus leaders can better support learners is by increasing access to support services on and off campus for individuals pursuing non-credit coursework and training.

HUDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

One Campus Committed to Serving All Learners

Hudson County Community College demonstrates a commitment to providing exceptional services to students enrolled in non-credit programs through continuous improvement of their service offerings. The institution currently provides an array of resources and support services to non-credit program learners, including campus-issued IDs, tutoring services, access to the [student resource center](#), and the [Single Stop screening](#) to alleviate basic need insecurities. Additionally, students can receive one-on-one financial counseling and mental health services, as well as access to the Chromebook loaner program to support their technological needs. This holistic approach to student support ensures that learners have access to the resources they need to succeed in their academic pursuits.



"FROM ADMISSIONS TO REGISTRATION, HUDSON STAFF HAVE BEEN VERY HELPFUL. THEY ARE GUIDING ME THROUGH THIS JOURNEY."



STRATEGY #3:

Scale advising services to learners in non-credit programs.



It is no secret that high-quality advising and coaching has an important role across the student journey in postsecondary education. Students often rely on advisors to help them navigate their next steps, including registering for courses and making a smooth transition into the labor market; yet for learners in non-credit programs, access to advising services tends to be inconsistent. ESG and ACCT found that students in non-credit programs want and are in need of advising services. One student specifically noted, **“I just need somebody that is in my corner to help me figure out things and get stuff done.”** Expanding access to advising services, communicating to students that such supports are available to them, and upskilling advisors to help learners make the transition from non-credit and credit is not only beneficial to students, but can help sustain enrollment campus-wide.



“[MY ADVISOR] ASSISTED IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY, AND REALLY BENT OVER BACKWARDS ON AN INDIVIDUAL BASIS TO HELP PEOPLE GET INTO, YOU KNOW, CREDIT COURSEWORK. SO, MY ADVISOR HANDLED ALL OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE SIDE OF IT AND REALLY SUPPORTED ME.”

(Strategy #3 continued)

VANCE-GRANVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

Expanding Advising to Strengthen Pathways Between Non-Credit and Credit

Vance-Granville Community College's new job posting for a [*Continuing Education Registrar and Advisor*](#) reflects a best practice for community colleges seeking to expand access to advising support for learners in non-credit programs. By hiring an individual dedicated to meeting with learners one-on-one, the college is demonstrating a commitment to providing personalized support that can help learners achieve their educational and career goals. This new position is part of the college's plan to design and implement a one-student service model that will integrate enrollment processes for credit and non-credit programs.

In addition to providing advising support, the job description also emphasizes the importance of collecting and reporting better data on learners enrolled in non-credit programs. This is a critical step in improving access to support services for these learners, as it can help institutions better understand the needs and challenges facing this population. By collecting and analyzing data on learners in non-credit programs, institutions can identify where additional support is needed and make informed decisions about resource allocation. Additionally, the position will provide comprehensive advising for students as they decide how to begin and complete their studies at VGCC. In the one-student service model, the Continuing Education Registrar and Advisor will be part of a team dedicated to helping students determine whether credit or non-credit programs will best serve their immediate and future needs and how to transition from one type of program to the other if needed. Through integrated advising, students will be able to plan for near and far-term goals using existing and emerging non-credit-to-credit articulations. The new model will serve as an information and support hub that will improve student access and success outcomes in all programs of study.



CONCLUSION

The aforementioned strategies provide a necessary starting point for postsecondary leaders seeking to create a more equitable experience for learners pursuing non-credit training. By conducting surveys or focus groups with learners in non-credit programs, expanding access to critical support services, and scaling advising practices, leaders can help more individuals make the transition from non-credit to credit coursework and reach their fullest potential.