



Education  
Strategy  
Group



NON-CREDIT AND CREDIT ALIGNMENT LAB

FRAMEWORK SPOTLIGHT:

## BUILD PATHWAYS BETWEEN NON-CREDIT AND CREDIT

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.

To address bifurcation across non-credit and credit divisions, community college leaders must build pathways between non-credit and credit credentials, allowing learners to earn stackable credentials that provide a **clear path** to degree programs and in-demand, quality jobs. This means proactively communicating to learners opportunities to transition from non-credit to credit and providing navigational support to help them through the process. This brief highlights NCAL sites’ focus on ensuring student-facing resources communicate opportunities to transition from non-credit to credit, faculty and instructors have the support necessary to assist students in transitioning to credit coursework, and information on financial aid and course registration is readily available to all learners.

**WHY THIS MATTERS**

Building automatic and seamless pathways between non-credit and credit credentials is critical for promoting equity and increasing access to education and career opportunities. Yet learners who begin their educational journey in non-credit programs face a range of barriers to accessing credit-bearing coursework, including ineffective communication from postsecondary leaders about non-credit to credit pathways. Creating stronger linkages between non-credit and credit requires that leaders—from executive-level administrators to advisors—clearly communicate opportunities for upskilling and make necessary resources available. Building strong pathways between non-credit and credit goes beyond mapping curricular pathways; it requires ensuring that pathways are functional and clear so the burden is not placed on the learner for uptake. By establishing **clear and accessible pathways** between non-credit and credit programs, community colleges can help more learners achieve their educational and career goals.

**ACTION STEPS**

It cannot be overstated that timely and accurate information in the hands of learners is necessary for them to seamlessly navigate the transition between non-credit and credit and leverage their training for stable employment. Postsecondary leaders determining ways to build stronger linkages between non-credit and credit should:

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| <b>1.</b> | Ensure all student-facing promotional materials clearly communicate opportunities to transition between non-credit and credit; |
| <b>2.</b> | Support all faculty and instructors in communicating opportunities for continued education and training to their learners; and |
| <b>3.</b> | Make information on financial aid and course registration readily available.   |



**STRATEGY #1:**  
Redesign student-facing promotional materials to communicate pathways between non-credit and credit.

Often, the materials on websites, in brochures or pamphlets, and pushed out through paid media advertising is biased toward credit programs or fails to acknowledge opportunities to transition between non-credit and credit even when they exist. Students need information readily available to them in a variety of formats to draw the connection between their non-credit training and options to transition into credit-bearing coursework and degree programs. For example, in postsecondary education, leaders often discuss credit for prior learning as a tool to increase learner access, and yet learners do not know such opportunities are available to them. Cross-institution teams—from faculty, administration and marketing leads—should prioritize communicating learner-centered messages to increase engagement, uptake, and transitions from non-credit to credit.

### PRINCE GEORGE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

#### Communicating Pathways from Non-Credit to Credit through Website Redesign

Prince George's Community College is prioritizing the communication of non-credit to credit pathways to learners through a website redesign. The website is scheduled to launch July 1, 2023. By ensuring that non-credit to credit pathways are clearly communicated, learners will have a better understanding of the educational opportunities available to them and be able to make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. This includes providing clear and concise information on program cost and labor market outcomes. To inform the design, Prince George's staff conducted a series of student focus groups to identify the messages that most resonate with their learners.

In addition to the website redesign, the college is planning a series of communication campaigns to communicate opportunities for upskilling to learners. This approach reflects a best practice for community colleges seeking to promote equity and student success by ensuring that learners are aware of the resources available to them. By proactively communicating with learners about educational opportunities, Prince George's Community College is creating a culture of support and engagement that can help learners achieve their goals. This work comes alongside efforts to increase learner uptake of credit for prior learning.



"PLEASE MAKE SURE TO HAVE SOMETHING ON THE WEBSITE FOR NONCREDIT TO CREDIT PROGRAMS, BECAUSE THERE'S NOT REALLY ANY INFORMATION ON HOW TO MAKE THAT TRANSITION AND IT WOULD BE HELPFUL..."





## STRATEGY #2:

Support faculty and instructors in communicating about pathways directly to learners.

Faculty and instructors in non-credit programs are often the first individuals learners approach when they are interested in pursuing additional coursework or a degree. Equipping faculty and instructors with the resources, tools, and knowledge to support learners in their transition from non-credit to credit is a strategy that benefits learners and sustains enrollment in key programs. Institutions should prioritize professional development and shared learning opportunities for faculty and staff to collectively build stronger communication channels and pathways across non-credit and credit.

### VANCE-GRANVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

#### Training Faculty and Instructors for Learner Success

**Vance-Granville Community College (VGCC)** has been highly effective at cross-training faculty, instructors, and staff to align non-credit and credit programs. In the past year, deans, academic chairs, and instructors engaged in joint training sessions to gain new understanding and promote a cohesive pathway for students across both non-credit and credit programs. By training faculty and instructors together, VGCC has begun eliminating silos on campus and strengthened relationships necessary for student success. This alignment has allowed instructors to gain a deeper understanding of the college's resources, enabling them to better advise and guide students. With a comprehensive and streamlined support system in place, VGCC is committed to providing its students with the best possible learning experience.



"[INSTRUCTOR NAME] WAS REALLY HELPFUL IN GETTING ME INTO THE DEGREE PROGRAM. SHE HELPED ME SELECT MY MAJOR AND MAKE SURE THAT I WAS ON THE RIGHT TRACK. SHE WAS LIKE, 'YOU CAN START IN NON-CREDIT AND THEN TRANSFER INTO THE DEGREE. YOU COULD COMPLETE YOUR ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE.' SHE TOLD ME MULTIPLE TIMES, 'WE CAN DO THIS IN STEPS FOR YOU TO REACH THE ULTIMATE GOAL, WHICH IS COMPLETING YOUR DEGREE.'"



### STRATEGY #3:

Provide ample information on financial aid and registration for credit coursework to learners pursuing non-credit credentials throughout the learning experience.

Through focus groups with learners in non-credit programs, it is clear that additional information on financial aid and registration for credit coursework is desired but often insufficient. Institutional leaders have a responsibility to communicate these opportunities clearly and often to learners, from the time they begin their non-credit training and as they prepare to complete. Considering learners do not often complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for non-credit training, encouraging FAFSA completion is a start to highlight student eligibility for various sources of aid for both non-credit and credit training. As the cost of higher education continues to rise, learners are concerned about their ability to afford credit coursework. Helping them navigate financial aid, registration, paying for textbooks, and ensuring they have access to critical support while they are on campus will help sustain the institution's bottom line and see that learners reach their full potential.

## NORTH IOWA AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE & NORTHWEST ARKANSAS COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

### Informing Students of Non-Credit to Credit Pathways through Programming

**North Iowa Area Community College** is prioritizing the creation of clear pathways for learners in the High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) program to transition to credit. The college is launching a series of internal workshops that provide HSED learners with important information on financial aid, registration, and course structure. By meeting these learners where they are, North Iowa Area Community College is ensuring that HSED learners have the knowledge and support they need to navigate the transition to credit-bearing coursework. Students in the HSED program at NIACC have expressed that the sense of belonging and support provided by the college has propelled them forward, highlighting the impact of these efforts on learner success. One student explicitly shared, ***“I think the HSED program helped a lot. I was kind of thinking about [starting credit coursework] beforehand, but then after I got that diploma in my hand, it really changed things around for me and that’s kind of when I took, you know, a little bit of time to really think about it and then chose my path forward to continue with NIACC.”***

(Continued on page 6)

*(Informing Students of Non-Credit to Credit Pathways through Programming continued)*

Similarly, **Northwest Arkansas Community College** hosted a ‘career and transitions fair’ that goes beyond the traditional format of a career fair. This event provided students in non-credit programs with an opportunity to connect with employers and college staff to identify opportunities to continue their education along credit pathways. NWACC’s career and transitions fair is an excellent example of the kind of innovative programming that community colleges can provide to support learner success, as it presents the range of options learners have following the completion of non-credit training. By creating opportunities for learners to connect with employers as well as financial aid personnel, credit faculty, registrar staff, and others, Northwest Arkansas Community College is helping promote greater access to employment and credit coursework.



## CONCLUSION

Taken together, **these strategies** provide a roadmap to clearly communicating pathways between non-credit and credit to learners. Whether through promotional materials, faculty and instructors, or programmatic efforts, students are interested to learn more about opportunities to leverage their non-credit training into credit-bearing coursework and degree programs. Navigating postsecondary education can be cumbersome, but institutional leaders can build ecosystems of support to help students avoid dead ends and pursue lifelong learning.