

## **Noncredit to Credit: The Journey Continues**

A key element of the mission of Continuing Education units is to provide access and pathways to higher education in non-traditional ways and in so doing to serve adult learners. Continuing Education departments fulfill the need for quality education and practical training that is focused and customizable, and provides a path to career advancement and self-fulfillment. Recently these goals have expanded and now include giving adults access to college credit by recognizing that some training programs are equal to credit courses in terms of knowledge learned. By allowing non-credit courses to be eligible for credit, colleges recognize that credentials earned in one way may equal another.

In a recent study (CEANY KISS Survey, 2017) members of the Continuing Education Association of New York State indicated that their top area of interest was in learning more about how non-credit courses can be recognized in degree programs. The webinar, **Non-credit to Credit: An Evolving Journey**, was the most watched of the CEANY webinars in 2016-17. In this white paper, three continuing educators, Jill Pippin, Dean of Extended Learning at SUNY Oswego, Kim Kendall, Executive Director of Workforce, at LaGuardia Community College and Jane MacKillop, Interim Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at Lehman College, CUNY, review the origin of credentials, discuss their experiences, describe some of the issues and suggest approaches when considering the establishment of non-credit to credit pathways.

### **The History of Credentials**

During the Middle Ages in Europe the credential was used by guilds to signify permission to learn and then practice a trade. These credentials was overseen and granted by senior guild members. They were closely connected with religious groups and involved “fellows” (hence “fellowships” at universities).

The rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution began to break up the control of guilds in the early modern period, but there was no common measurement of learning until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when, in the United States, the Carnegie Unit classification was

designed to standardize the educational experience and provide a common measurement of credit, based on 120 hours of seat time studying one subject. Colleges across the country adopted and abide by this measurement to this day.

The Information Age has shifted society to an economy based on information technology and computerization in which centralized governments and institutions of higher education are no longer the only sources for education and professional development. This has provided unprecedented access to information, individual mobility and professional flexibility and has resulted in high demand for college-level learning and skills from non-traditional sources as people navigate the rapidly changing work environment.

Colleges can continue to serve, not only in the traditional sense, but by providing certificates, courses and other non-credit pathways to jobs and career ladders. There is a need for college-level learning, skills and credentials in order to be prepared for positions and industries that were unimaginable a few years ago. There is, therefore, an increasing need to acknowledge and classify college-level learning acquired through means other than traditional credit courses, while maintaining the integrity represented by the Carnegie Unit. The Lumina Foundation describes this an important part of the “Global Knowledge Economy,” in which the credential has emerged as a transnational, interdisciplinary signal of capability and skill.

Credentials have proliferated to meet the needs of our diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy. Credentials attesting to what people know and are able to do include traditional degrees, diplomas, licenses, and industry certifications. These credentials are documented awards by responsible and authorized entities that have determined that an individual has achieved specific learning outcomes relative to a given standard.

There is also an evolving world of alternative credentials, badges, certificates, licenses and assessment methodologies, which can be evaluated as qualifying for college credit. According to the American Council on Education’s study: *Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials*, over 26,000 educational programs in the US now offer

certificates and that sub-baccalaureate certificates represent over 25% of all US postsecondary credentials. A shared understanding of the value of these credentials is needed for students, educational institutions and employers.

The following is an overview of various different sorts of credentials and how they might be used to recognize learning and accelerate degree completion.

## **1. Micro-Credentials and Badges**

A Micro-Credential is a certification offering evidence that an individual has mastered a specific skill or area of knowledge with links to detailed criteria, endorsements or demonstrations of their learning. They may be credit or non-credit, and may be offered online, in person or a hybrid of both and take numerous forms. Badges, for example, are a denotation that signifies accomplishments such as the completion of a project, the mastery of a skill, or experience and can be used in numerous ways. Badges can represent granular competencies as well as deeply linked, rich experiences and complex learning. They can connect traditional accredited credentials, professional and industry-recognized credentials and non-traditional experiential credentials. (*Demographic Shifts in the Rise of Alternative Credentials, 2016*; UPCEA & Pearson Education). Digital Badges are online representations of skills learned by students and can be shared via social media and mined for detail and credibility.

As the success of each college is increasingly judged by its graduates' transition into the workplace, according to Pearson, "establishing a digital ecosystem around badges to recognize college level learning, skill development and achievement is an opportunity." Badging systems can help motivate learners and connect, articulate and make the learning that happens inside and outside classrooms transparent to employers to explain the value of the learning acquired. National organizations like Pearson, UPCEA and CAEL are great resources in the area of alternative credentials.

Closer to home, SUNY created a Micro-Credentialing Task Force in 2015 that considered whether there is an opportunity to introduce SUNY as an affordable, quality option for new credentials and if micro-

credentials could be a way to attract the non-traditional or adult learner to SUNY. The group reported to SUNY Provost Cartwright and included representatives from numerous offices and college types. The group reviewed current literature and the growing national dialogue on micro-credentials, examined work currently underway across SUNY's 64 campuses to develop and/or implement micro-credentials and reviewed SUNY policies to ensure a supportive environment for micro-credentials. A formal document addressed to campus leaders and all SUNY faculty and staff documenting definitions, benefits, guiding principles and suggested steps SUNY should take to ensure a successful adoption of micro-credentials was released for comment to SUNY institutions in the fall of 2017. One of the recommendations was to create a task group to compile tools, develop frameworks and educational resources and to create a community of practice for all SUNY institutions to support the cultivation of micro-credentials. The group has been actively meeting and plans to present these resources at SUNY's Conference on Instructional Technology (CIT) in May of 2018.

## **2. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)**

“Prior Learning” is a term educators use to describe learning that a person acquires outside of a traditional learning environment. Examples include internships and experiential learning (both paid and unpaid); research; military training; volunteering and community service; work experience and independent study attained through life experience or other avenues, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). “Prior Learning Assessment,” or PLA, is the process by which an individual's extra-institutional learning is assessed and evaluated for the purpose of granting college credit, certification or advanced standing toward further education or training.

Prior knowledge may be demonstrated in a number of ways and can be integrated into a student's educational trajectory. Granting credit for prior learning involves evaluation of that learning and determination of the equivalence of that learning to the outcomes in college coursework and is another way to connect non-credit activity to college credit. This can be done through standardized exams such as Advanced Placement (AP) Examinations, the College Level Examination Program (CLEP,

Excelsior College Examinations (UExcel) and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST). Others include the International Baccalaureate Exam (IB) and the Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (TECEP), the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview, the NYU Foreign Language Exams, etc.

Individualized assessments, such as portfolios, can also be used to evaluate learning. For example, as part of Lehman College's Adult Degree Program, students take a portfolio course for 3 credits during which they create a portfolio that can be eligible for up to 15 credits, thereby earning up to 18 credits for the cost of 3.

In addition to portfolio assessment, there are three generally accepted approaches to PLA that may grant students credit.

1. Skill simulation/demonstration or interview-based assessment;
2. College faculty developed challenge examinations – often a final examination which allows people to exhibit college-level learning in an equal way to college students;
3. NCCRS and ACE provide evaluations, for a fee, of training that is offered by employers or other non-accredited provider training. ACE regularly makes credit recommendations for military training and occupations as part of a contract with the Department of Defense. Many employers also work directly with their local postsecondary institutions to evaluate their company's training. Other institutions may offer credit based on performance assessment or a formal review of apprenticeship training, professional licenses, badges or other forms of micro-credentials.

### **Non-credit Certificates Articulating with Credit**

Aligning non-credit certificates with credit courses is another way for certificates to be used for credit, thereby creating a career pathway from continuing education/workforce development training into degree programs. This pathway is created by formally establishing non-credit-to-credit articulation agreements between traditional academic departments and Continuing Education programs. An articulation agreement equates a non-credit course offering to a specific degree, course or courses, thereby ensuring academic quality and agreement on-campus, incentivizing students to transition from non-credit to

credit programs and providing an established rather than an ad hoc pathway between them. Below is an example of an MOU from LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, indicating equivalent credit in the Human Services major for a non-credit certificate as a Community Health Worker.

**LaGuardia Community College  
Memo of Understanding  
Non-Credit to Credit**

The Division of Academic Affairs has reviewed the following courses offered by the Division of Adult and Continuing Education. Academic Affairs will accept the following courses as credit for prior learning, to students who enroll in the degree program at the college.

Degree Program: Human Services

ACE courses	AA courses	Credits
<i>Foundations for Community Health Workers</i>	<p><i>HSS101 Introduction to Human Services</i></p> <p>Students awarded prior learning credits for this course are responsible for creating an <u>ePortfolio</u> using the website tutorial or the services of the <u>ePortfolio</u> studio technicians.</p> <p>Prior learning credits will be awarded for HSS101, once the student's <u>ePortfolio</u> is reviewed by the program director of human services.</p>	3
<i>Health &amp; Wellness</i>	<p><i>SCH160 Health &amp; Wellness</i></p> <p>Students will be awarded prior learning credits for this course as taught in ACE.</p>	3
<i>Community &amp; Public Health</i>	<p><i>SCN195 Community Health</i></p> <p>Students awarded prior learning credits for this course are responsible for completing the Writing Intensive assignments required for this Urban Studies/WID course.</p> <p>The assignments are a Research Report and a Community Health Report that must be uploaded into <u>ePortfolio</u> assessment areas and will be reviewed by the coordinator of the Community Health Course.</p>	2
<i>Internship</i>	<p><i>HSS204 Human Services Fieldwork and Seminar</i> (one of which is one credit for prior learning)</p> <p>Students with Community Health Worker certificates will have met the requirements of the human services fieldwork and therefore will be awarded one (1) college credit.</p> <p>The other credit of this two credit course is earned by registering for the course and completing the assignments in the seminar portion of the course.</p>	2
<b>Total credits:</b>		<b>10</b>

Example: Community Health Worker Certification Articulation Agreement (MOU) between ACE and Credit Department (Sept 2016) LaGuardia Community College. 176 hours) = 9 credits towards Human Services Associates Degree.

Note that this is an example of an internal document that the academic chair, program faculty, Adult and Continuing Education Administration and ACE Program director all approve. The following table illustrates additional examples of non-credit certificates, the equivalent credit-bearing courses and the number of credits for which the certificate is eligible once the student enrolls in at LaGuardia college.

<b>Non-Credit Certificate Program</b>	<b>Non-Credit Course Hours</b>	<b>Degree Bearing Program</b>	<b>Credits</b>
Microsoft Office Certificate	78 Hrs	Business & Technology	3 credits BTC 100
Computer Service Technician Certificate	80 Hrs	Computer Science	4 credits MAC 293
Community Healthcare Worker Certificate	176 Hrs	Human Services	9 credits
Medical Billing Specialist Certificate	150 Hrs	Business & Technology	9 credits
The English Language Center	45 Hrs	Business & Technology	3 credits BTM 101

Other examples across CUNY and SUNY exist such as a similar articulation agreement at Hostos Community College in Health Information Technology (6 credits) and Community Health Worker (9 credits). SUNY Dutchess Community College allows 4 credits for Construction and Finger Lakes & Monroe Community Colleges waive up to 15 credits for Advanced Manufacturing Machinist Training in partnership with G. W. Lisk Company.

The key to success in articulating non-credit to credit, is collaboration between both areas of the college. In order to align the non-credit courses to the college curriculum the following must happen: evaluation of students' academic skill levels to determine that they align with program requirements; adequate support services; and faculty and staff support and buy-in. Reviewing the articulation agreement annually is recommended and student wrap-around support services should be part of program design.

The benefits of an articulation agreement are numerous; there is clarity of aligning program to specific course or course, which prevents confusion and ensures academic rigor, it clearly indicates faculty buy-in on campus; it can be used in marketing and acts as incentive to students to seek a degree; finally, it creates established pathway for students rather than each student fighting their own fight.

There are many strengths in this model, for example, students have flexibility and control over their schedule; it is easier for them to transition into an academic environment; non-credit courses are less expensive than their credit-bearing counterparts (and sometimes free if the training is grant-funded), the shorter timeframes for program completion can lead to faster employability.

There are also challenges, such as university registration systems that compromise the extraction of data to track student progress, and the non-credit calendar, which is often not synchronized with the academic calendar. Negotiation with faculty and department chairs must be done one at a time. It may be necessary to rewrite some training curricula in order to align with credit courses.

### **Lehman Forward (“90 by 30”) – A New Initiative**

The then new President of Lehman College, Dr. Jose Luis Cruz, challenged the college community in his *State of the College* address of March 2017, to double the number of degrees and high quality credentials by 2030. (If the college continued its current trajectory that number would be 45,000 by 2030 so the challenge is to double that number to 90,000.) President Cruz reminded the college faculty and

staff of their responsibility to provide opportunities for education, employment, and advancement that are grounded on principles of social equity. (Lehman is the only 4-year CUNY college in the Bronx, one of the most impoverished counties in the United States.) *Lehman Forward* is a call to urgent action based on local conditions. The Bronx is the poorest borough of New York City; it is consistently is rated number 62 of the 62 counties in NY State by the County health rankings. Only 28% of the population have associates degrees or more; 452,000 of people aged 25+ have only a high school diploma or its equivalent, or some college and the largest group living in poverty is that of women aged 25-34. This is the first time in CUNY that high quality certificates (defined as industry-recognized credentials validated by an external agency or institution, which lead to a job or a better job) have been included in this kind of college goal and it will unquestionably affect the way that non-credit certificates and badges are perceived and recognized. It is expected that including non-credit credentials will also increase retention, persistence, employability and, ultimately, the college's graduation rate.

There is the potential for certificates to become part of the curriculum for many different subject areas (e.g., the NYS financial planning certificate for Business majors, Cisco networking certification for Computer Science majors, CASAC for Social Science majors, etc.). But implementing a change of this magnitude raises many questions. For example, how will certification courses be paid for? How much credit will departments permit? Will credits for certificates be general? Can they count towards the major or are they electives? Will they continue to be decided by departmental curriculum committees, the college's curriculum committee and ultimately the university or can they be agreed through memoranda of understanding as at the two-year colleges? This has yet to be decided but nonetheless, including non-credit credentials is an integral part of President Cruz's vision.

So far we have mostly discussed how non-credit certificates can become eligible for credit but there are also situations where credit students want to receive certification that will enhance their employability. One example of this is the CISCO Networking certification, which is popular with Computer Science majors at Lehman College and which is not currently eligible for credit.

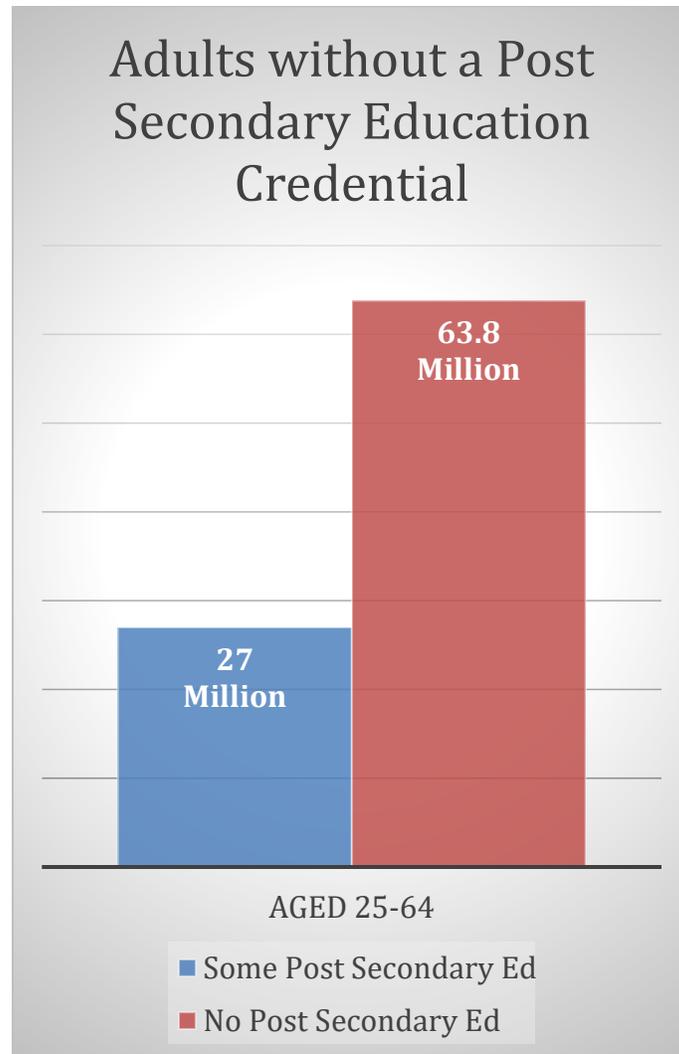
## **Non-credit to credit – The Impact**

According to the Lumina Foundation, 27 million Americans have some postsecondary education but lack a high-quality credential (degree or postsecondary certificate). A further 63.8 million Americans between the ages of 25 and 64 have no recognized postsecondary education and therefore little chance to obtain high quality credentials that lead to employment. Giving credit for prior learning, noncredit certificates or other micro-credentials will allow those Americans to accelerate degree completion and move up the career ladder or be qualified for their chosen profession. Colleges can serve most of these people with training, leading initially to postsecondary certificates and industry-recognized certifications, which are pathways to good jobs and further education: the first step on the ladder to better lives.

These pathways are important because they connect just-in-time training and industry skill sets with traditional higher education; they acknowledge learning acquired through non-traditional means and indicate that the student can successfully complete college-level work; they recognize college-level learning outcomes and most importantly, decrease time to graduation. In terms of enrollment from a college perspective, they assist advisors and recruiters in attracting students, save students money, promote the “One College” concept and can lead to new funding opportunities.

From a student perspective, the benefits in regards to retention and degree completion are conclusive. A 2010 CAEL study found that of more than 60,000 students at 48 institutions, 56% of students with PLA credit earned a post-secondary degree within 7 years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so at the associate degree level. This trend holds true across institutional size, level and control, regardless of student demographic characteristics or socio-economic status. The same study found that even among students who did not earn a degree during the 7 year period, over half of the non-graduating PLA students had 80% or more of the credits needed to graduate while only 22% of the non-PLA students had made similar progress. Other studies have similar findings:

Hayward & Williams in 2015 found the degree completion rates for PLA students were 28% compared to 12% for non-PLA students. And the Tennessee Board of Regents and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission found that students with **any** PLA credits had significantly higher retention, GPAs and credit accumulation. (Schutz & Gibson, 2012)



Having a degree boosts lifetime earnings exponentially. Thinking outside of the Carnegie Unit box, taking into account prior learning, non-traditional training and micro-credentials is a powerful way to lift American adults out of poverty and provide them with the opportunity to increase their earning power and follow the career of their dreams.

## **An Evolving Commodity**

US post secondary credentials include thousands of different certificates, certifications, licenses and badges and new micro-credentials and pathways emerge every day. But the diversity of credentials is not always meeting the needs of students, educational institutions and employers because the growth in types of credentials is creating confusion. Companies must be nimble and move at ever increasing speeds and their workforce must be prepared for the next innovation, which means there is demand and opportunity for higher education institutions to evolve at the same fast pace.

It is widely acknowledged that clarification of the credentialing ecosystem is necessary and timely. There is a need to identify, understand, and offer the right credentials for the right people at the right time. There often are no reliable ways to compare the quality of credentials, what makes them valuable, their transferability, their relationship to other credentials and to employment opportunities.

**Colleges** need to communicate the value of their credentials for employment, career advancement and civic engagement in order to attract students. **Employers** need to understand the competencies potential employees have through the credentials they have earned – credit or non-credit, traditional or non-traditional, which may not be evident from a college transcript.

Higher education institutions can improve the value of their credentials while meeting the needs of students and employers by crafting solid non-credit to credit pathways and connecting credentials to degrees for higher education and employability.

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