ADVISING FOR OPPORTUNITY

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Perspectives and Considerations for Supporting Movement Across Workforce and Academic Programs in Community Colleges

As the wages of high school graduates plummet, postsecondary education and training has become critical to obtaining a living-wage job.[1] Obtaining an associate's degree or higher has the greatest potential to produce long-lasting increases in individual earnings. However, recent studies have shown that shorter-term credentials, which may take only a few months to earn, can also help people enter the labor force with higher earning potential, particularly in certain high-tech career fields like information technology and advanced manufacturing.[2]

Career and technical education (CTE) and workforce programs have long been important avenues for community colleges to respond to labor market and employer needs. Additionally, the shorter time commitment that these programs demand is particularly attractive to those who are already working or who want or need to enter the labor force quickly and do not have the time to earn a college degree—a fact that is borne out by the large populations of older or displaced workers who enter these programs.[3] Recently, the federal government and large philanthropic organizations, such as the Lumina Foundation, have been promoting these and other nontraditional training programs as pathways for further opportunity and have committed millions of dollars to develop and support these programs.[4]

While shorter-term credentialing and training programs have promise, many also present challenges for schools and students. Because these programs operate under a different system of governance from colleges' academic programs and have traditionally been divorced from those pathways, students can encounter challenges applying their noncredit training toward academic degrees.[5] Additionally, while shorter-term certificate and training programs often provide an initial boost in earnings, research has shown that these wage increases tend to stagnate over time, prompting questions about their promise as longer-term pathways to living-wage jobs.[6] The potential wages for available jobs following shorter-term training programs also vary by career field and by the type of institution where the training is completed. For instance, shorter-term credentials in male-dominated fields like machining and information technology provide more substantial income returns than those in traditionally female-dominated fields such as nursing and hospitality. Finally, credentials earned through short-term training programs at for-profit colleges, which account for a substantial proportion of such credentials, tend to be less valued in the marketplace and offer fewer income returns than those earned at nonprofit public and private colleges. For-profit colleges also serve disproportionate numbers of students from families with low income and students of color, highlighting further equity challenges in boosting such students' opportunities and earnings.[7]

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These issues suggest that while short-term credentialing programs can be beneficial, there might also be ways to improve them so that they can create pathways for longer-term success. Recently, some practitioners and policymakers have begun developing promising linkages across colleges' noncredit CTE training and their academic pathways. Traditionally, individuals who take noncredit courses or earn a credential through a noncredit pathway have been unable to count those courses toward the credits needed for an academic degree and often must retake similar academic courses to earn the credits needed for their degrees.[8] The additional cost and time they must expend as a result may explain in part why many adults who earn short-term credentials never return to complete a longer-term degree program.[9] As such, many colleges, policymakers, and community college networks have begun advocating for new policies and systems to help students overcome barriers between the academic and nonacademic sectors.[10] However, little is currently known about how individuals embark on these separate pathways, what advising they receive about potential noncredit and credit opportunities, and whether and what they are told about how the training they receive could be applied in other contexts.

To learn more about potential on-ramps to academic and nonacademic paths and cross-sector possibilities at community colleges, MDRC researchers investigated the recruitment, advising, and support for students in workforce programs at eight colleges with innovative CTE programs. MDRC identified these schools as part of the iPASS evaluation, which used technological tools to try to improve advising for students, as well as an ECMC Foundation–funded scan of promising CTE programs that integrated industry-specific career-readiness supports with short-term training and certificate programs as described in Box 1. In this study, MDRC investigated recruitment, advising,

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BOX 1

THE IPASS INITIATIVE AND THE ECMC SCAN

INTEGRATED PLANNING AND ADVISING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS (IPASS): The iPASS initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, provides technology tools and data about students' academic performance to both students and advisors to better inform, support, and guide students on their academic progress. iPASS achieves its objectives by integrating student data on such measures as academic performance in current classes, progress toward a degree, and risk or early alert indicators. The iPASS study aims to increase the capacity of institutions to engage in high-quality iPASS practices and to build the evidence base on the potential impact of technology-mediated advising. MDRC, in partnership with the Community College Research Center, worked with the study institutions in an initial planning phase through 2016 and launched randomized controlled trials at three iPASS postsecondary institutions in 2017.

ECMC SCAN: In 2018, MDRC received funding from the ECMC Foundation to conduct a scan of six community college–operated sectoral training and CTE programs. The goal of the scan was to learn about the potential of community colleges to implement innovative features of sectoral training programs operated by community-based nonprofit organizations that have increased the employment and earnings of adults with low incomes, such as Per Scholas.

and support for students in credit and noncredit programs; college leaders' perspectives on connecting noncredit and credit programs; and whether—and how—those opportunities were made known to students, both before they entered such programs and once they were participating in them. The college leaders included administrators in academic and nonacademic programs as well as student services coordinators and employer associations. This brief provides an overview of the findings from this work as well as potential strategies for further connecting and promoting noncredit and credit pathways for students.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE CREDIT—NONCREDIT DIVIDE

College leaders differed on the need to connect noncredit workforce and for-credit academic programs. Some said that the two sectors should remain divided, arguing that they serve different needs. At other schools, leadership sought creative ways to allow the two sectors to support one another. Here are the rationales for these different approaches.

THE TWO SECTORS SHOULD BE CONNECTED. Some senior college administrators believe that credit and noncredit programs should be connected for the students' sake. As one leader said, "There's a lot of noise about it all being about skill. But if we can get them credit and eventually an associate's degree, we believe we've given them something that has currency. Credit is currency that people recognize." Another administrator saw possibilities for employer-based noncredit programs to feed into their credit programs: "If I have an employer [who] sends 12 employees to the college and [they] end up liking it, you would want them to continue from the noncredit to the credit side. [We need to] create a pathway so they can achieve their career goals as soon as possible."

THE TWO SECTORS SHOULD REMAIN SEPARATE. One senior administrator said he believes that noncredit and credit programs "shall not meet" because students in workforce programs have different goals from those in academic programs and are likely to be put off by the idea of pursuing an academic degree. In his view, individuals' need for short-term training and employment necessitates a focus on the immediate rather than the long term. He said the college is trying to "train [workforce students] in a skill set in a certain number of weeks, [after] which they're almost guaranteed employment. If you start convoluting that message and say, 'You can go seek your degree,' you're going to lose them. Because they need a job, and they need it now." He said he saw little need to connect short-term training with for-credit programs because those longer-term academic programs do not serve those individuals' primary interests—getting training that leads to immediate employment.

USE NONCREDIT PROGRAMS AS OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP FOR-CREDIT PROGRAMS. Leaders at another college said they believe connections between noncredit and credit programs are important and discussed using the college's workforce programs to develop new for-credit academic programs. While the college typically creates programs customized for specific employers (who also support the program development costs) and their employees, it also explores whether the program may be attractive to other, non-employee students. If there's interest, the college begins developing a similar,

for-credit pathway on the academic side. An administrator at this college said, "If we believe it will have some staying power and will be relevant to multiple businesses and industries, then we start the rigorous process of establishing courses for credit." While most of its noncredit programs are employer-focused, the college actively considers how those opportunities could further improve its academic programming. The school prioritizes finding ways to provide academic credit for those who have completed noncredit training courses—developed through relationship-building efforts with specific employers and industry associations—even if similar training is eventually offered for credit in the college's academic programs.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF RECRUITMENT, ADVISING, AND SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS IN NONCREDIT CTE PROGRAMS

Perhaps not surprisingly, college leaders' varied perspectives on the need to connect noncredit and credit programs also translated into diverging views on the need for recruitment and advising in workforce programs. Few colleges had systematic methods for advising noncredit CTE students. Some college staff members saw this need being met by outside agencies or other college departments while others suggested that advising was not necessary for students in short-term workforce programs. The highlights of these perspectives follow.

EMPLOYERS SEND STUDENTS TO THE COLLEGES, AND WORKFORCE PROGRAMS ARE TAILORED TO THE EMPLOYERS' NEEDS. Several college leaders pointed out that employers played an important role in recommending and referring students to their programs. They told researchers they developed strong partnerships with local employers and designed programs customized to those companies' training needs. For example, one senior administrator said his school's workforce program offered a popular safety certification for restaurant employees and that workers from restaurants throughout the area sought out the college specifically to get this certification. Another said nearly all his college's workforce and noncredit programs were customized for employers, who send their employees for specialized skills training. He suggested that some individuals do occasionally find their way to the college's workforce programs independently, but that these individuals were not the program's principal focus.

OUTSIDE COMMUNITY AGENCIES DO THE ADVISING. One college leader noted that individuals who are seeking workforce training at the college may have already received some advising elsewhere. The leader emphasized how the college's partnership with its local workforce agency had helped it bring in students: "We partner with local unemployment offices, so they know what our training would be. Unemployment offices might advise people to [get] either academic or workforce" training.[11] The availability of those services within the community, according to this leader, reduces the need for advising in workforce or noncredit programs at the college.

WORKFORCE PROGRAMS CAN RELY ON ADVISORS FOR THE COLLEGE'S ACADEMIC PROGRAMS. Leaders in some workforce and noncredit programs discussed how they depended on the advising services within their academic programs or at other external partners to serve these students. As one senior

administrator said, "If they're not sure what they need, we tell them to go to academic" (the for-credit side of the college).

STUDENTS CAN LEARN ABOUT NONCREDIT OFFERINGS ON THEIR COLLEGES' WEBSITES. Several colleges whose leaders were interviewed for this brief developed websites presenting noncredit and credit offerings side by side, allowing students to see the range of available training and educational opportunities. One college presented different short-term certificate opportunities in career fields such as architecture or cybersecurity, in conjunction with its associate's degree programs, explaining how these shorter-term programs can lead to a longer-term degree. Another college created a graphic on its website with information about career fields (and salary information) and the various pathways the college offers to prepare for each of them. A senior officer of the college called it a "great recruitment tool" and said it attracted many students to these credit and noncredit pathways.

STUDENTS ENTERING NONCREDIT PROGRAMS DO NOT NEED ADVISING. Finally, some college leaders said they believed students entering workforce programs did not need further advising. In their view, some students did not need advising because "people who come in for workforce alignment (noncredit training) know what they need. They are coming in for a specific skill." Others suggested that the short-term durations of these programs and relatively simple enrollment processes meant students did not need as much assistance. As one leader said, "There are no prerequisites [for example, other course or educational requirements], and sometimes these are very short programs" compared with the college's academic programs.

CHALLENGES TO LIMITED ADVISING IN WORKFORCE PROGRAMS

While some colleges saw little need for advising, other school leaders mentioned several challenges students encountered because they lacked substantive advising services within their workforce programs. These included:

STUDENTS DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE GETTING. Some administrators acknowledged that minimal advising meant that students often signed up for courses online without speaking to someone about the pathways or requirements. One college official stated directly, "We know who's enrolling, but we don't know who is looking," which suggests that more students could potentially enroll in their programs if they received more support. The leader of the college that developed the career and salary tool that improved recruitment also said many students enrolled in programs without knowing the preparations those programs entailed. Some started an academic track and failed a course before asking the college's academic advising department for help. As she noted, students might, for example, "see that radiation therapy [pays] $60,000 a year [and] get fixated on the program" even though they did not like science or working with people. She had difficulty deterring students from some career programs even if they said they did not like or feel qualified to undertake the training involved.

FUNDING AND ADVISING CAN WORK AT CROSS-PURPOSES. Leaders at two colleges said funding for advising—and the lack of it for workforce programs—could also create awkward pathways and information sharing with students. For instance, one college offered training for medical coding, a shorter-term credential that is not eligible for federal financial aid tuition support, as part of the school's health care associate's degree pathway. Embedding the program in a degree pathway allows students to use federal financial aid to support tuition costs while also boosting the college's longer-term enrollment numbers, which is positive for the college. But the administrator acknowledged that students can have successful careers with only the shorter-term medical coding training, which creates challenges for advisors' messaging to students. College leaders also had differing views on how to handle this challenge. For instance, one leader pushed to have students complete the longer-term degree program: "It makes me want to scream when advisors say you can earn that credential and then leave," as dropouts from the program could have a negative impact on the college's completion rates and funding. Another leader noted a similar issue with the college's electrical lineman training degree pathway but took a different approach. While the program is offered as a two-year associate's degree, students received all the training they needed for employment in one semester and then left. The college leader said this pattern affected the program's completion rates, but the school chose not to discourage students from leaving.

STRATEGIES FOR ALIGNING RECRUITMENT AND ADVISING TO SUPPORT PROGRAM ENTRY AND TRANSITION

Some colleges that were interested in bolstering the connections between workforce and academic programs were also working to find creative ways to support students across the divide. These strategies ranged from efforts at better communication and policymaking between the two sectors to further building on partnerships within and outside of the college to support students.

Developing Cross-Sector Pathways and Crediting Prior Knowledge

Some colleges are attempting to address the structural barriers presented by the division between academic and workforce programs to provide students with an easier and clearer set of choices and learning experiences. At one college, two deans from the academic programs and an associate vice president in the workforce program meet regularly to overcome the separation between the two sides of the college. They consider how to support people in workforce training programs who traditionally enroll for short periods of time, such as those sent by an employer, if those students want to pursue their academic credit programs. The college developed several mechanisms to ensure students get academic credit for the knowledge that they already have, so that they are not required to duplicate previous training or work experience. The school assesses how students' prior learning relates to their individual goals within academic programs and offers credit for students' demonstrated knowledge. The college also considers how an industry-recognized credential may align with academic credit pathways—for example, which learning modules might be comparable across the noncredit and credit credentials and could be waived if the student continues a credit pathway. One of these admin-

istrators said the objective was to "create a pathway so that students can achieve their career goals as soon as possible."

Using External Partners to Recruit Students

While some leaders suggested that outside agencies reduced the need for advising, other colleges sought to actively engage external partners in their program recruitment and design process. For instance, several colleges discussed their strategy to share recruitment responsibilities with their community partners, relying on local workforce boards, Goodwill, state and local workforce agencies, churches, adult education programs, and other nonprofits to support their recruitment and enrollment efforts. In the words of one college leader, "community partners become instrumental" in helping them reach underserved or "undersought" populations. In some cases, those partners also became important informants in the design of their programs and in supporting potential students. For instance, one college leader discussed the importance of listening to those community partners because "they hear the real stuff" and can help colleges adapt to these needs. This college used advice from its external partners to consider when to schedule classes and had external staff assist potential students with finding funding to support their training and education.

Cross-Sector Advising to Unite Academic and Workforce Programs

Some colleges have found creative ways to provide a limited amount of advising within their workforce programs that helps students learn about opportunities across college sectors. For instance, one leader discussed his college's education and training specialists, or "career coaches," who work across the entire life cycle of the education and employment process. In the college's noncredit and credit programs, the coaches help students apply to and enroll in a program, complete the pathways, and get a job. Another college employs student advisors to help recruit other students. The college employs two student advisors who focus on recruiting and retaining prospective students who are interested in going into fields where they are not traditionally hired or are underrepresented (for example, women in male-dominated fields and vice versa). In some cases, colleges have relied on federal grants, such as Perkins, a U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant, or other specialized grant programs, like the Healthcare Professions Opportunity Grants (HPOG), to provide financial supports for such staff positions.

CONTINUING CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVISING AND SUPPORT IN NONCREDIT-TO-CREDIT PATHWAYS

While many colleges are developing innovative ways to connect their workforce and noncredit pathways with academic programs and advise students about these programs, some issues deserve more attention for their potential to further strengthen noncredit-to-credit pathways and students' knowledge of them.

HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF FURTHER EDUCATION AND STRENGTHEN SUPPORTS FOR ADVANCING THEIR EDUCATION IN THE LONGER TERM. Recent research studies demonstrate that many earning short-term credentials are not seeing strong advancements in their labor market earnings in the longer term.[12] For instance, an analysis of the earnings using unemployment insurance data as well as multiple other labor market databases found consistent returns to two-year and four-year degrees over time, but few returns to certificates within a few years of credential receipt.[13] Longer-term evaluations of programs such as the HPOG programs showed similar wage stagnation three years after program completion.[14] These studies reveal that few students who earn short-term credentials return to college for further education, even when programs are nested within a career pathway model. When paired, these findings suggest that colleges should consider both the short-term and long-term benefits of short-term workforce credentials and explore ways to support individuals' knowledge about their differential returns. While many students taking noncredit courses may not have time to complete a longer-term degree program in the immediate term, creating easy-to-understand, navigable pathways from short-term to longer-term pathways could help students consider how the work they are doing now may apply to future education and career opportunities. Additionally, training advisors to help students understand their potential future earnings after pursuing various pathways would help students make more informed decisions.

ADVANCE EQUITY. While postsecondary institutions may have fewer resources for advising and support in noncredit pathways, they are also losing millions of students to higher-cost, lower-success educational pathways at for-profit colleges. These colleges attract students with sophisticated marketing and attentive recruitment processes that focus on getting enrollment (and financial) commitments from students.[15] While some public colleges may see little need for recruitment and advising in workforce programs, for-profit schools have benefited heavily from these techniques and now pump out more than 25 percent of the country's certificate holders each year.[16]

The equity implications for these certificate holders are staggering. For-profit colleges enroll disproportionate numbers of low-income, Black, and female students as well as single parents, populations that have traditionally been less well served in college settings.[17] Tuition at for-profit colleges is two to four times that of public schools, while graduation rates at for-profit colleges are nearly half those of students in public colleges. Finally, graduates of for-profit colleges see fewer economic benefits from their certificates and degrees, with many having lower incomes and higher incidence of unemployment than traditional college graduates.[18]

These issues raise major equity concerns for improving the educational attainment and economic outcomes for people who have traditionally been underserved in postsecondary education—a challenge that could potentially be ameliorated with stronger recruitment, advising, and cross-sector support systems in community colleges. Ironically, research suggests that the rise in enrollments at for-profit colleges has been at least in part due to the increasing demand for postsecondary training and nonprofit colleges' inability to fully meet this demand.[19] This situation underscores the importance of increasing student enrollment at public institutions—and making it clear how those colleges' pathways provide the best economic and educational benefits.

IMPROVE DATA AND TRACKING ACROSS NONCREDIT AND CREDIT PROGRAMS. The lack of systematic data necessary to track students' entry, persistence, and success in and across noncredit and credit pathways creates a substantial barrier to understanding who enrolls and persists in these programs, whether—and how—students may cross these lines, and how successful they are. Nationally, 14 million adults hold an industry-recognized credential or noncredit or credit certificate; another 16 million adults hold an associate's degree.[20] Additionally, analyses of nationally representative population databases reveal that nearly 33 percent of certificate holders also have an associate's, bachelor's, or graduate degree—a finding that seemingly contradicts other research suggesting that those in short-term training programs do not return for longer-term degrees.[21]

Despite this apparent conflict, few opportunities exist to explore these issues, as very few databases exist to be able to track these trends more systematically. Currently, only 13 states track some or all noncredit certificates and only nine track industry-related credentials, often because there are few federal or state requirements to track these awards.[22] However, such data could provide valuable information about barriers to and facilitators of students' entry into different pathways and their success rates. The data could also shed light on *who* enters and succeeds or does not succeed—which may allow college leaders to consider more closely how different types of skills training and preparation relate to one another. Such information would also aid colleges and policymakers interested in developing more systematic mechanisms for providing credit for noncredit training and education. Policymakers and postsecondary leaders interested in supporting individuals' attainment of post-secondary credentials and degrees—and promoting more equitable access and completion—should prioritize developing data systems that can track and improve these credentialing pathways.

REMOVE BARRIERS TO PROGRAM ENTRY AND CREDIT ATTAINMENT. While some colleges are strengthening their noncredit-to-credit pathways, students still face barriers to entering these programs. At the same time, many college leaders said they had challenges recruiting students to fill these programs. Several rigorous evaluations of shorter-term career pathway programs showed that many colleges had skill-level requirements that prevented many students from entering the programs—for example, the short-term certificate and training programs that were included as part of the HPOG programs, many of which were run by community colleges. Researchers found that over 75 percent of those programs had minimum skill requirements and that programs often relied on standardized assessments, such as the ACCUPLACER—a national standardized test widely used for course placement at community colleges—or the Test of Adult Basic Education to assess students' skills.[23] Similar screening mechanisms exist for other short-term credentialing programs, such as those in the Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education project.[24] Many of these programs also had challenges with recruiting enough students.

Some colleges in this study had similar requirements. For instance, one college used the ACCU-PLACER to assess whether students had sufficient skills to enroll in the accelerated precision tooling program. Students who scored below the cutoff could not enter the program. While this college developed an innovative 11-week bridge program to serve students with lower skill levels, it also required those students to enroll for an additional three months of training before entering the pro-

gram—a particular challenge when many individuals are entering workforce programs because they have little time to commit to longer-term academic degree programs.

These practices echo the high-stakes testing, placement, and developmental education practices students encounter when beginning community college academic programs. Many of these practices create unnecessary bottlenecks to students' academic progress. Research shows that using other criteria for academic placement, such as high school grades, is a better predictor of students' success.[25] Additionally, research has shown that students can successfully co-enroll in for-credit academic courses, particularly when those courses are paired with co-requisite supports.[26] Noncredit workforce programs could adapt these effective practices for program entry and support, which could allow more students to enter and succeed in these credentialing pathways.

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