

Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #67: Nondegree Credentials

SUMMARY: The Technical Review Panel discussed how to clarify terminology and definitions around nondegree credentials to provide guidance to data reporters. The Technical Review Panel also explored potential avenues to collect data from institutions on noncredit credentials. Comments from interested parties are due to Amy Barmer, IPEDS Technical Review Panel Task Leader at RTI International, at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org by February 27, 2023.

On November 16 and 17, 2022, RTI International, the contractor for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) web-based data collection system, convened a meeting of the IPEDS Technical Review Panel (TRP) using videoconference technology. RTI conducts IPEDS TRP meetings to solicit expert discussion and suggestions on a broad range of issues related to postsecondary education and IPEDS data collection. As the postsecondary education field evolves, IPEDS TRP meetings are increasingly critical in ensuring IPEDS data remain relevant, informative, and at the forefront of industry advancements and legislative needs. To this end, IPEDS TRP meetings are designed to foster public discourse and enhance IPEDS data collection, products, data quality, and system user-friendliness. The TRP does not report to or advise the U.S. Department of Education.

The purpose of this TRP was to critically examine existing guidance for reporting nondegree credentials in the IPEDS Completions survey component and consider updates and changes to those terms and definitions to reflect the rapidly evolving landscape of nondegree credentials. A second purpose of this TRP was to consider options for collecting information about noncredit credentials, balancing the need to collect information on noncredit instruction at institutions with burden on data reporters. Forty-eight panelists representing institutions, researchers, higher education associations, state governments, the federal government, and other experts were in attendance.

Background

The IPEDS Completions survey component collects data on the number of degrees and certificates conferred (completions¹) and the number of students who earned these awards (completers²) in a 12-month period. Institutions report completions by field of study using the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP),³ award level, and recipient gender and race/ethnicity. Completer data include an unduplicated count of all completers by gender and race/ethnicity (in which recipients are counted only once regardless of how many credentials they earned) as well as completers for each award level by gender, race/ethnicity, and age group (in which recipients are counted once in each award level but can be reported in multiple levels).

¹ In IPEDS, “awards,” “recognized postsecondary credentials,” and “degrees and certificates” are synonyms for “completions.”

² In IPEDS, “award recipients” and “degree recipients” are synonyms for “completers.”

³ The CIP provides a taxonomic scheme that supports the accurate tracking and reporting of fields of study and program completions activity. The CIP was originally developed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1980, with revisions occurring in 1985, 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020. Information on the 1985, 1990, 2000, and 2010 CIP can be accessed on the [resources](#) page under the section heading Archive and Historical.

The awards reported range from subbaccalaureate certificates to doctorate degrees and must be recognized postsecondary credentials conferred by the postsecondary institution as the result of completion⁴ of an academic or occupational/vocational program of study. The program of study's instructional activity must be credit-bearing but can be measured in credit hours, clock hours, or some other unit of measurement.

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)⁵ commissioned research to better understand the wide variety of subbaccalaureate certificates reported to IPEDS⁶ and assess the extent to which IPEDS Completions survey data accurately reflect trends in the postsecondary certificate landscape.⁷ Between 1998–99 and 2013–14 the number of subbaccalaureate certificates reported to IPEDS had nearly doubled. Most of this growth was in certificates requiring less than one year of study and represented both an increase in new programs and changes in the certificate program structure, like stacked credentials and microcredentials.

The commissioned NPEC papers from 2012 and 2016 provided background for a March 2017 meeting of the IPEDS TRP⁸ on Subbaccalaureate Certificates (TRP #52). TRP #52 discussed potential classifications to capture the growing category of subbaccalaureate certificates in the Completions survey component and how these changes would impact the postsecondary community including institutions, researchers, and the U.S. Department of Education.

The following changes were implemented in response to suggestions from TRP #52:

- New definitions were established for “recognized postsecondary credential” and “certificate.” (Note that the term “recognized postsecondary credential” replaced the term “formal award.”)
- More specific guidance on exclusion criteria was given.
- Clarification was provided that all certificates eligible to be recorded on students’ transcripts should be included (a typical characteristic of institutionally recognized credit-bearing programs of study).
- The term “clock hour” replaced the term “contact hour.”
- Subbaccalaureate certificates that are less than one year in length were segmented into two award level categories based on length of instructional content.

⁴ Reported completions must be conferred by the postsecondary institution itself rather than a third-party vendor or partner. Credentials excluded from the Completions survey component include degrees and certificates that are earned but not yet conferred, conferred by branches of the institution in a foreign country, conferred outside of the institution (e.g., by the state or an industry), or earned for completing personal interest courses, residencies, or college preparatory or readiness programs such as basic skills, remedial, or English as a Second Language courses. Honorary degrees; certificates of merit, completion, and attendance; and noncredit credentials are also currently excluded.

⁵ NPEC was established by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1995 as a voluntary organization that encompasses all sectors of the postsecondary education community including federal agencies, postsecondary institutions, associations, and other organizations with a major interest in postsecondary education data collection. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/join-in/npec>

⁶ Sykes, A. (2012). *Defining and Reporting Subbaccalaureate Certificates in IPEDS* (NPEC 2012-835). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved November 16, 2022, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012835.pdf>

⁷ Miller, A., Erwin, M., Richardson, S., and Arntz, M. (2016). *Collecting and Disseminating Data on Certificate Awards*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved November 16, 2022, from https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/pdf/NPEC/data/NPEC_Paper_IPEDS_Collecting_and_Disseminating_Certificate_Awards_2016.pdf.

⁸ https://edsurveys.rti.org/IPEDS_TRP_DOCS/prod/documents/TRP52_Summary.pdf

- References to academic year equivalencies and to contact hours were removed from all levels of subbaccalaureate certificates.

While the 2019–20 and 2020–21 data collection cycles introduced new terminology and award level categories that allowed for greater discernment of the lengths of subbaccalaureate credentials, continued expansion of nondegree credential offerings warrant further conversation about what additional terminology and guidance might be required. Also, as noncredit programs become a larger part of instructional offerings at institutions, it is worth revisiting how to collect information on noncredit credentials, which are currently excluded from the IPEDS Completions survey component.

RTI convened TRP #67 to explore options for collecting data on this key postsecondary issue. Subject matter experts were invited to give brief presentations highlighting key points from their recent research, share with the TRP their approaches for measuring and categorizing nondegree credentials, and highlight any definitional challenges or measurement issues faced. A goal of these presentations was to learn about existing frameworks for collecting and disseminating data on nondegree credentials to inform potential future changes to IPEDS. Following the presentations, panelists engaged in a moderated discussion about updating the guidance for collecting nondegree credentials as well as possible avenues for collecting information on noncredit credentials.

Challenges and Successes Collecting and Measuring Noncredit Credentials

Presentation 1: Categorizing Credentials. One of the biggest challenges in understanding the credentials landscape is distinguishing the differences between the many types of credentials. The term “credentials” can be thought of as an umbrella term. Under this umbrella are certificates, certifications, badges, degrees, microcredentials, and licenses. Credentials can differ by the entity that awards them; activities for which they are awarded; knowledge, skills, or competencies they indicate; requirements for renewal; processes for revocation; and their legal status.

Certifications are awarded by an industry certification body and indicate mastery of skills needed to practice a specific occupation. Licenses are awarded by a government agency and are legal permits for the holder to practice in a specific field. Both certifications and licenses typically require periodic renewal and can be revoked for incompetence or ethical violations. Unlike certifications and licenses, degrees and certificates are awarded by educational institutions. They are awarded upon the completion of a course, often with an examination, and indicate education and knowledge in a particular area. There is no renewal requirement for degrees and certificates, and they cannot be revoked.

Certificates can be awarded by an educational institution for participation, completion, achievement, demonstration of competence, or performance on an assessment. Certificates can be for credit or noncredit. Further complicating the classification of certificates is the growing popularity of microcredentials, which recognize small, specific skills or learning experiences, and badges, which are digital credentials that can be earned for a variety of learning experiences or completions.

Presentation 2: Counting Credentials. Another difficulty that researchers of nondegree credentials face is counting credentials in a way that is accurate and avoids duplication. Counting credentials relies on publicly available data and partnerships with state and government entities. One challenge is that institution names and IDs may differ between entities. For example, an institution name or identifier may be different between the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Labor, and a Massive Open Online Course provider. Often, there is not enough detail available in the data to count unique credentials offered at different campuses or branches of multicampus institutions. Finally, there is no organized

system used to count noncredit credentials. Therefore, the amount of noncredit instruction is not collected, which obscures the true picture of how much instruction and student learning occurs at institutions.

Presentation 3: Issues for Measurement. Increased accessibility and access to education, lifelong learning, just-in-time training, and training needs of the workforce are all issues of interest to policymakers, explaining the rising interest in nondegree credentials. As states increase their interest in funding nondegree credentials, researchers and policymakers want to know how nondegree credentials support traditional educational credentials and if they are helping individuals meet their education and career goals. Collecting such information would help states and policymakers determine the worth and value of nondegree credentials for the purposes of allocating resources and funding.

Answering such questions requires gathering information beyond just the quantity of nondegree credentials on offer. At this time, nondegree credentials vary too much to draw meaningful conclusions about quality and student outcomes. Meaningful measurements may include the intensity versus duration of nondegree programs or courses, whether nondegree credentials are awarded for completion or competence, and what external standards of quality govern assessments or criteria for earning nondegree credentials. Understanding whether a nondegree credential is standalone or embedded or “stacked” within a degree or program is also useful information. Gathering these details to gain a more complete picture of the extraordinary variety among nondegree credentials would allow policymakers and researchers to make meaningful comparisons of quality and student outcomes.

Further complicating the landscape of nondegree credentials is the fact that while certifications and licenses are issued by industry governing bodies or government agencies outside of the educational institution, the educational institution may be doing the instructional work to prepare students for earning those credentials. While the coursework is offered by the institution, the credential itself or the examination for the credential is offered by an outside vendor or partner. This circumstance might also complicate attempts to measure all educational offerings at an educational institution.

Presentation 4: A Landscape of Options. Growing the conversation around nondegree and noncredit credentials is valuable for several reasons. First, this conversation can bring standardization, leadership, and guidance to the field, setting a foundation for data reporting, data utilization, and institutional practices such as stacking or embedding credentials. Also, validating nondegree and noncredit credentials can in turn validate institutional missions. Research shows that the amount of microcredentials is growing and that most noncredit workforce programs offered at community colleges are fewer than 99 clock hours. This may show a need for further delineating categories for nondegree credentials or for adding a minimum amount of time for a nondegree or noncredit learning activity.

Changes or Additions to Current IPEDS Terminology

Adding exclusionary definitions. One challenge of defining the term “credential” as it relates to IPEDS is that “credential” is an umbrella term encompassing many items IPEDS does not collect, such as certifications, licenses, or apprenticeship completions. The panel recognized the importance of clarifying for data reporters exactly what they should exclude. While instructions for the IPEDS Completions survey component provide a list of what to exclude, panelists suggested adding terms like “license,” “certification,” and “apprenticeship” to the IPEDS glossary to provide more explicit clarification and definition of the items data reporters are asked to exclude. Some panelists did point out that apprenticeships can be unclear because at some institutions (e.g., community colleges), completing an apprenticeship is required for completing a degree, while in other situations, apprenticeships are solely

under the purview of an outside workplace. Additional wording would need to be added to the definition of “apprenticeship” to clarify the conditions under which apprenticeships should be included in IPEDS.

Panelists also suggested adding a definition for “certificate (noncredit)” with “noncredit” in parentheses. The definition of “certificate (noncredit)” would be similar to the existing definition for certificate with the added clarification that it is awarded for completion of a postsecondary education program not offered for credit. This definition would function as an exclusionary definition, adding further clarification to what data reporters should exclude on the IPEDS Completions survey component. It would also function to lend legitimacy and validation to noncredit educational programs, if IPEDS begins collecting data on those programs.

Replacing “award level” with “credential level.” The TRP considered replacing “award level” with “credential level” in the IPEDS glossary. One reason some panelists supported this change was that “credential” connotes something that is earned while “award” connotes something that is given. Therefore, the term “credential” might be more accurate and learner-centered than “award.” Another reason there was support for using “credential” instead of “award” was to avoid confusion or overlap with other areas of higher education in which “award” is used, such as in financial aid.

Considering “undergraduate” and “graduate” terminology in definitions. Panelists suggested removing or avoiding references to “undergraduate” and “graduate” certificates or credentials in the IPEDS glossary definitions. Panelists explained several reasons why the distinction between undergraduate and graduate is becoming less important in the changing landscape of higher education. First, the “standard convention” of 2 years to complete an associate’s degree and 4 years to complete a bachelor’s degree is becoming less standard. Students may take many different paths or timelines. Also, degree requirements and distinctions are gradually becoming less important in the workforce and in hiring practices, as research shows that removing degree requirements encourages a more diverse candidate pool to apply. Many workplaces are removing degree requirements and prioritizing skills over degrees to increase equity in hiring. Finally, panelists pointed out that since certificates are often outcome-focused—indicating the mastery of a skill or competency—learners may complete them before entering any other higher education program at all, during the pursuit of an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, or after earning a degree. In these cases, the terms “undergraduate,” “graduate,” or “subbaccalaureate” would not be relevant. A suggestion was made that for those certificates in which a learner does need to be enrolled in a degree program to access that certificate, that information could be collected in other ways, such as collecting prerequisites along with the completion. In general, panelists agreed that avoiding distinctions between undergraduate and graduate is more inclusive and representative of certificate options.

Reassessing Levels for IPEDS Reporting

Reassessing current award levels. Panelists suggested the current award levels in the IPEDS Completions survey (Appendix A) component should be reassessed for several reasons. First, the credit hour “buckets” currently defined are not aligned with federal financial aid credit hour “buckets.” Educational institutions consider Pell Grant credit hour limits when designing programs, so aligning IPEDS reporting levels with the Pell Grant system could streamline reporting for institutions.

Second, the current IPEDS credit hour “buckets” are not aligned with what students experience according to their state’s policies. Several states cap associate’s degrees at 60 credit hours and bachelor’s degrees at 120 credit hours. Consequently, a growing number of community colleges offer post-associate certificates to allow students to further specialize in their fields. For example, if a student completes an associate’s degree in nursing within 60 credit hours and 2 academic years, that student may later complete a

certificate in a specialized nursing area worth additional credit. IPEDS does not currently designate an award level for post-associate certificates. In addition to being a common student experience, the availability of post-associate certificates may be interesting to consumers of higher education.

While overall there was support for further breaking down or realigning current IPEDS award levels, panelists did voice some cautions and concerns. First, data reporters are required to disaggregate each award level by gender and race/ethnicity. Adding more award levels would increase burden on reporters by adding additional gender and race/ethnicity fields.

Second, panelists cautioned that reporting credentials by hours would not necessarily capture the level of that credential. While the current IPEDS reporting structure assumes that credentials of shorter length are of lower level (i.e., subbaccalaureate), that is not always the case. Some microcredentials may be earned in only a few hours and may be accessible to both first-year bachelor's degree-level students or a postdoctoral student. Collecting these microcredentials in clock hours would not necessarily indicate a student's progress or the highest level of education attained by a student at an institution. Panelists suggested taking time to further consider which variable IPEDS is most interested in measuring: hours of time or level of education. The variable of focus should guide any revisions to current reporting levels. One possible solution could be to offer a checkbox for any prerequisites needed to enter the certificate program, such as an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree. This solution would help differentiate programs only available to students at a certain level in their education from programs available to any student.

A final consideration for creating reporting levels for microcredentials is that some microcredentials can be completed in a matter of a few minutes, for example, by watching a video. Asking institutions to report all these microcredentials may be overly burdensome. The panel suggested considering instituting a "floor" or minimum amount of time for reporting a completion.

Adding a new award level to collect noncredit completions. In general, panelists were in favor of adding a new award level for collecting noncredit completions. Panelists suggested that if IPEDS were to collect noncredit completions, a new award level, separate from the existing award levels for credit-bearing completions, would be necessary. The panel did not reach an agreement on what the new award level should be named, nor how many sublevels might be needed, but did caution against using level "0" to denote noncredit, as this label might imply that noncredit is "below" or less important than for-credit experiences.

Noncredit Completions and the CIP

Panelists discussed possibilities for and implications of updating the CIP taxonomy to offer more or different codes for noncredit completions. In the current CIP, series 32–37 are for noncredit offerings. Overall, panelists advocated against creating additional codes to expand noncredit categories for multiple reasons.

First, some institutions offer the same program for credit and noncredit at the same time. Within a single section, some students may be taking a course for credit while others may not. In other cases, the same program of study is offered for credit at one institution and not for credit at another. Panelists voiced concerns that asking data reporters to report the same academic program under two different CIP codes (one for credit and one for noncredit) would be overly burdensome and may lead to reporting errors.

Also, given what is currently known about noncredit offerings, it is likely that many available noncredit programs would not easily map to the CIP. Workplace trainings in "soft skills" such as leadership, goal

setting, or resiliency would not have a natural fit in the CIP taxonomy. Furthermore, these workplace skills apply to many different industries and would therefore be difficult to classify in a specific program. While completing such a noncredit training may result in a job that would map to the CIP, the content of the training itself would not. Panelists pointed out that the CIP was designed to classify instructional programs, not their method of delivery or later outcomes. While noncredit offerings are not limited to the workplace skills trainings illustrated in this paragraph, panelists agreed that overall, expanding the CIP to include more noncredit programs would be wrought with too much complexity.

Since the CIP plays such a large role in the IPEDS Completions survey component, other suggestions were offered as to how IPEDS might use this tool, which is already familiar to data reporters, in the capturing of noncredit completions. One suggestion was to provide a checkbox in which institutions could indicate if programs in a CIP code award level are offered for noncredit. This approach would be similar to the current IPEDS Completions component survey form in which institutions can use a checkbox to signify if a program is offered fully or partially through distance education. Another suggestion was to add an eight-digit CIP code for each existing six-digit CIP code. A two-digit suffix could be added for a noncredit offering within that CIP code. This suffix could be “00,” “01,” or another indicator.

Finally, the panel repeated a concern voiced earlier in the meeting, noting that so much is still unknown about the realm of noncredit completions due to the lack of consistent, systematic data. With this circumstance in mind, panelists suggested waiting until more data have been collected on noncredit offerings before revising the CIP. This “bottom up” approach aligns with the current process for introducing new CIP codes. Currently, new CIP codes are determined by analyzing “other, specify” responses written in when programs offered are not accurately described by existing CIP codes. Trends in these write-in responses may lead to the addition of another six-digit code for that CIP category. A similar process might be used to gradually add new CIP codes for noncredit programs as more data become available. The current CIP will not be updated again until 2030, so there is time to collect more data and consider different approaches to and implications of updating the CIP.

Considerations of Method and Burden for Collecting Noncredit Completions

How soon should this information be collected? Panelists identified a “chicken and egg” problem with starting the process of collecting noncredit completions. Currently, many institutions are not collecting data on noncredit completions. If they are, they are not disaggregating by gender and race/ethnicity. Institutions may be waiting for guidelines or standards for which data to collect and how before they undertake that burden. IPEDS can set the standard and provide institutions with guidance for how to collect noncredit completions but will need to provide institutions with time to set up systems and procedures for gathering that data. Panelists suggested providing institutions with guidance for what to report in a new noncredit award level but allowing ample time for institutions to gather the needed data before requesting reporting in IPEDS.

Where should this information be collected? Panelists advocated for information about noncredit completions to be collected on a separate form than the existing IPEDS Completions survey component or the existing IPEDS Institutional Characteristics (IC) component. One reason for keeping credit and noncredit completions on separate forms is to avoid disrupting the longitudinal comparability of IPEDS completions data. Researchers are interested in longitudinal trends in completions of degrees and for-credit programs and adding noncredit completions to the same portion of the survey may add too much complexity and potentially disrupt trend analysis. Another reason for placing noncredit programming in its own survey is to highlight its importance and give this area of instruction the attention it deserves.

What information should be collected? The TRP agreed that a gradual rollout of data collection on noncredit programming would be the best approach. Panelists suggested picking a manageable starting point and gradually growing the scope of the data collection and remarked that there is no need to have perfect categories right away. A gradual rollout would give institutions the time they need to understand what data they need to collect and to implement systems to collect them.

However, the TRP was divided on which information about noncredit completions should be prioritized. Some panelists suggested that the best starting point would be gathering accurate counts of the noncredit offerings available, while some suggested beginning with gathering information about program characteristics, such as the level, time to complete, outcomes, skills, competencies, or assessments involved with the noncredit program. Other panelists suggested beginning with gathering an inventory of programs or a simple list of noncredit offerings for the first year of rollout. These programs could then be prefilled in a survey to collect counts in the second year of rollout, similar to how previously entered programs appear on the current completions survey component in IPEDS. With support for collecting multiple important pieces of information about noncredit completions, RTI welcomes additional comments or suggestions on this topic.

What other voices should be heard on this topic? Finally, the TRP suggested gathering input from other departments interested in noncredit instruction, such as the U.S. Department of Labor. The link between higher education and workforce development is strong, and greater alignment and conversation between the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Labor may serve common interests well. The National Science Foundation, invested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instruction in all sectors, may also be a good partner.

Next Steps

Once the TRP summary comment period has closed, RTI will review comments and outline recommendations for NCES based on the outcome of the TRP meeting and subsequent public comment period. NCES will review recommendations to determine next steps and submit proposal burden estimates to the Office of Management and Budget for information collection clearance. The current collection approval extends through the 2024–25 data collection.

Comments

RTI is committed to improving the quality and usefulness of IPEDS data and to strategies that might help minimize additional reporting burden. RTI encourages interested parties to send any comments or concerns about this topic to Amy Barner, IPEDS Technical Review Panel Task Leader at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org by February 27, 2023.

Appendix A. Current Award Levels in the IPEDS Completions Survey

IPEDS Award Levels (used on CIP data screens)	
1a - Postsecondary awards, certificates, or diplomas of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - less than 300 clock hours, or - less than 9 semester or trimester credit hours, or - less than 13 quarter credit hours
1b - Postsecondary awards, certificates, or diplomas of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 300-899 clock hours, or - 9-29 semester or trimester credit hours, or - 13-44 quarter credit hours
2 - Postsecondary awards, certificates, or diplomas of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - at least 900 but less than 1,800 clock hours, or - at least 30 but less than 60 semester or trimester credit hours, or - at least 45 but less than 90 quarter credit hours
4 - Postsecondary awards, certificates, or diplomas of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1,800 or more clock hours, or - 60 or more semester or trimester credit hours, or - 90 or more quarter credit hours
3 - Associate's degree	
5 - Bachelor's degree	
7 - Master's degree	
17 - Doctor's degree - research/scholarship; 18 - Doctor's degree - professional practice; 19 - Doctor's degree - other	
6 - Postbaccalaureate certificate; 8 - Post-master's certificate	

Definitions of the award levels listed above in the left column can be found in the IPEDS Glossary (<https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/public/glossary>).