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State Noncredit Data Project: Promising Practices from Iowa

Eliza Peterson

Project Background

As nondegree credentials rise in prominence, state policymakers sense the need to capture the educational and workforce outcomes associated with earning them and to share these findings with the public. Despite their rising popularity and potential labor market value, nondegree credentials and their associated outcomes are challenging to capture in state and institutional datasets. Iowa stands out as a noncredit data leader for its innovative practices, particularly with regard to the strong relationships cultivated between state agencies and credentialing organizations to collect and analyze these often difficult-to-capture data. The Iowa Department of Education (IDOE) has played the lead role in these efforts, leveraging its public and private partnerships to develop a robust noncredit dataset in key industries. These data feed a series of online dashboards that supply up-to-date information to students, prospective students, and other stakeholders.

This policy-and-practice brief is one in a series of briefs the Education and Employment Research Center will release on promising strategies that policymakers and practitioners are undertaking to strengthen noncredit and nondegree education at the state level.

State Policy Context

Action on noncredit data in Iowa started in the governor's office. In 2016, then-Governor Terry Branstad set a goal of getting 70 percent of the state's workforce to educational attainment or training beyond high school by 2025[1]. To help drive Iowa toward that goal, Governor Branstad established the Future Ready Iowa Initiative and Alliance, which brought together a group of key education and workforce stakeholders and spawned a number of state initiatives to promote attainment of postsecondary training for Iowans. After

[1] Iowa Exec. Order No. 88. (2016). https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/EO/966074.pdf

Branstad left office in 2018, his successor, Governor Kim Reynolds oversaw the various efforts under the Future Ready Iowa umbrella. These efforts included providing last dollar scholarships, funding grants for Commercial Driver's License (CDL) programs, registered apprenticeships, and childcare, and other postsecondary initiatives.

Partnership Building

In 2018, as part of the Future Ready Iowa initiative, the state charged IDOE and the Iowa Department of Public Health (later renamed the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services, or Iowa HHS) with exploring ways to promote Iowa's health science workforce[2]. With help from industry partners, the two agencies published the "Opportunities in Health Science: Iowa Career Pathways" report in 2018, which shares information on career opportunities, their training requirements, and associated labor market outcomes in the field of health science. The team behind the Career Pathways report felt the need to develop stronger work-based learning opportunities in the field, so the following year they collaborated to create the "Iowa Health Science WorkBased Learning Toolkit." The toolkit provides schools and employers with resources to promote health science careers to students and to facilitate the identification of new, local opportunities in the field[3]. The connections between IDOE and Iowa HHS facilitated by these initiatives fostered a strong culture of data sharing between the two agencies.

IDOE and Iowa HHS have worked together to develop several valuable noncredit data resources. Most notably, they designed a set of web-based dashboards to provide Iowans with a wealth of information about health occupation licenses. The Iowa Student Outcomes website provides information about industry-related topics such as supply and demand for specific health science licenses, the number of license holders in each county, and demographic information for licensees[4].

In addition to its work with Iowa HHS, IDOE has forged creative partnerships with other state agencies and a prominent credential provider. For example, IDOE partners with the Iowa Department of Transportation and Iowa Workforce Development to collect data on enrollment, completion, and outcomes for CDL holders across the state. Another initiative, launched in partnership with the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA), enables IDOE to collect and analyze data on students who receive a CompTIA certification after completing an Iowa community college program. IDOE currently has a dashboard based on its CDL data and is preparing one for its CompTIA data as well.[5]

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[2] Collins, J., Bassis, V., & Matsuyama, K. (2023, October 5). Forging partnerships on the high seas for a treasure trove of data. National Conference for Workforce Education.

[3] Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Department of Public Health. (2019). Iowa health science work-based learning toolkit. https://educate.iowa.gov/media/6095/download?inline\

[4] Iowa Department of Education. (2024b). Iowa health occupation licenses. Iowa Student Outcomes. https://iowastudentoutcomes.com/health-occupations

[5] Iowa Department of Education. (2024a). Iowa commercial driver's licenses (CDL). Iowa Student Outcomes. https://iowastudentoutcomes.com/professional-licensescdl

Key to the success of these projects was the provision of state and federal funding. The Career Pathways report and the Work-Based Learning Toolkit were supported by Future Ready Iowa, the Iowa Hospital Association, and the Iowa Health Care Association, as well as a block grant from the Centers for Disease Control.

Iowa's Strategies for Developing Noncredit Data Partnerships

Noncredit data are particularly difficult for institutions and states to capture because they often rely on information from third-party providers. These data are accessed through the formation of data sharing relationships. IDOE utilized several effective strategies to organize productive data partnerships.

1. Show other stakeholder groups the value that the data partnerships can provide for their own priorities.

Building data partnerships requires showing other stakeholders the value they will receive for their own priorities. By showing other agencies and groups the benefits of IDOE's data collection and analysis, IDOE persuaded them to share their data (and sometimes resources) with them by building trust and confidence. State agencies are often justifiably cautious in sharing their data. IDOE staffers strengthened relationships with other agencies by providing workforce and educational expertise and showing the value of noncredit data analysis. IDOE staffers shared their specialized knowledge and experience with other agencies tasked with workforce development activities. They also helped other agencies by drawing from their experience in using data to inform educational program design. These collaborative relationships helped IDOE shape their propositions to other agencies and groups. IDOE also researched the mission, purpose, and value statements of other entities. By identifying common-ground focus areas or goals, IDOE was able to connect with other organizations and forge key data partnerships.

2. Connect with other state agencies about their workforce, education, and training initiatives.

Oversight of workforce, education, and training providers is typically managed by multiple agencies or offices in state government. IDOE reached out to the relevant agencies to see what sort of federal, state, or regional initiatives they were involved in and used that information to forge partnerships. This process often involved connecting with the workforce, education, or training teams at different agencies. IDOE data leaders would use the strategy of presenting at cross-agency meetings (webinars and face-to-face) to highlight ways in which these data can benefit different stakeholders.

3. Suggest new initiatives, grants, funding approaches, or projects that would be beneficial to both agencies.

IDOE leadership strengthened their relationships with other agencies through the development of new collaborative efforts. These efforts included initiatives, grants, projects, and funding mechanisms. When agencies work together, they can leverage their shared staff knowledge and expertise to create more compelling proposals. Specifically, IDOE looked for ways to braid or blend resources between agencies in order to pursue mutual goals and track common metrics. Because so many state agencies rely on grant

funding that mandates strict performance metrics, data experts like those at IDOE can help other agencies in collecting and presenting their results. IDOE also looked for ways to share funding and staff across agencies, thus strengthening relationships with those agencies.

4. Partner with credential providers to capture a more robust dataset.

When IDOE wanted to collect more data about credential completers in the field of IT, IDOE data specialists connected with CompTIA to broker a data sharing agreement that would provide both parties with desired data about the employment outcomes of certification earners. Initially, the data provided by CompTIA only allowed for a "fuzzy" match, but IDOE data experts worked with their partner and were able to secure the addition of the elements necessary for a more robust match. CompTIA continues to regularly send student-level data to IDOE, which data specialists match with other datasets to track trends and workforce outcomes among certification seekers and earners. This relationship is mutually beneficial because both CompTIA and IDOE are interested in being able to communicate the value of these IT certifications—and, in the case of the IDOE, the noncredit programs they are associated with—as indicated by positive workforce outcomes.

Lessons Learned and Takeaways

IDOE developed and implemented strategies for collaborating with other state agencies and credential providers in order to further expand on available noncredit data outcomes. Capturing these data inform institutional decisions around noncredit program selection and design and will help potential students or trainees identify potential educational and career paths. Showing the labor market value of noncredit offerings may also inform state funding priorities[6].

Looking to the future, IDOE will continue to strengthen their preexisting data partnerships and expand their efforts to different sectors. For example, they might pursue certifications/licenses by industry, perhaps starting in the trades due to the high concentration of license and certifications in that particular area. They may also work on capturing data on industry-recognized certifications, some of which may be prized by employers. In the light of its successful partnership with CompTIA, IDOE may seek to partner with additional trade organizations that provide credentials to capture more data, as private entities may have less red tape around data sharing when compared to the byzantine bureaucracy of many state agencies.

IDOE found that the key challenge in developing data sharing relationships was showing other groups the value of such partnerships. According to IDOE data specialists, it was important to pay attention to the question of "What's in it for me?" as they recruited other agencies and groups into data sharing partnerships. Noncredit leaders at IDOE also faced some technical challenges, like the lack of connective data (e.g., name, birthday, social security number), but these obstacles were not prohibitive to the mission of capturing and presenting noncredit data.

[6] Iowa Department of Education. (2023). Noncredit program outcomes. Iowa Student Outcomes. https://www.iowastudentoutcomes.com/noncredit_program_outcomes

Noncredit experts at IDOE facilitated this collaboration in many ways, notably by demonstrating the value of these data and analyses for their partners' priorities, as well as by sharing resources and developing unique funding strategies for cross-agency projects.

About the Authors

Eliza Peterson is a researcher at the Education and Employment Research Center at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations

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