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State Noncredit Data Project: Promising Practices from Louisiana

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Introduction

State higher education policymakers and system heads have grown increasingly supportive of noncredit postsecondary education. A 50-state survey by HCM Strategists identified 59 state-led initiatives across 28 states, investing at least $3.8 billion in short-term credentials, most noncredit in nature.[1] Noncredit and nondegree offices serve more than four million students annually at community colleges alone,[2] work closely with important regional employers,[3] and offer promising opportunities to advance the missions of their institutions.

What these state leaders have found, however, is a profound shortage of actionable data with which to shape change.[4] Federal funding never flowed in any significant way to noncredit and continuing education offices, and so they developed as fee-based entities with modest data systems disconnected from the rest of their institutions. A 2015 survey of respondents at state and system entities found that only four out of 47 collected data on noncredit-to-credit transitions, five on wages after completion, seven on the credential received by students, and 15 on student demographics.[5]

[1] Murphy, M.M. (2023). A typology and policy landscape analysis of state investments in short-term credential pathways. HCM Strategists.
[2] American Association of Community Colleges. (2024). Fast Facts 2024.
[3] Leigh, E., Jankowski, N. and Leavitt, M. (2024). Trends in employer partnerships with community colleges: Insights from Strada's national grant challenge. Strada Education Foundation. https://stradaeducation.org/report/trends-in-employer-partnerships-with-community-colleges/
4 Voorhees, R. A., & Milam, J. H. (2005). The hidden college: Noncredit education in the United States.
[5] D'Amico, M. M., Morgan, G. B., Katsinas, S. G., Adair, J. L., & Miller, M. T. (2017). A national analysis of noncredit community college education: Enrollment, funding, accountability, and contextual issues. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 41*(4-5), 288-302. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1251349

In Louisiana, leads of the state community college association had grown frustrated with their own fragmented data systems. So they decided to do something about it. Between 2020 and 2022, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) undertook a multi-department, multi-college initiative to integrate their member colleges' data systems for noncredit and for-credit education into one system centralized across schools. Their successful navigation of the challenges inherent in such an ambitious initiative marks LCTCS as an exemplar in a vital area of interest for other colleges, systems, and state higher education offices.

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

Methodology

Information for this brief originates from several sources. As a research partner in EERC's State Noncredit Data Project, LCTCS's Executive Director for Process Improvement worked with a project team liaison to investigate and document their state noncredit data infrastructure, resulting in a coauthored state data snapshot.[6] Project conversations, a presentation, and an interview are sources for some of the content for this brief. Additionally, LCTCS shared background material and written resources that were part of their data processes and reviewed a draft of this brief, although EERC is solely responsible for its content.

Benefits in Integrating Noncredit and Credit Data Systems

Colleges typically maintain data on credit and noncredit programs quite differently. On the credit side of the house, institutional research offices collect detailed datasets on students, finances, and course progression with data definitions that are consistent across institutions and states. The federal government requires this as a condition of receiving aid under the Higher Education Act. No comparable Federal requirements apply to noncredit data. As a result, the offices responsible for noncredit or continuing education focus on collecting the data needed to operate their programs, often with little consistency across institutions or integration with credit-side data systems.[7]

The status quo of separate and decentralized noncredit data systems makes improving noncredit outcomes challenging. First, state and institutional leadership cannot track the movement of students between noncredit and credit education, obstructing their ability to facilitate articulation between the two. Second, decentralized and siloed noncredit data systems lead to inconsistencies across institutions in data collection and storage as well as reporting limitations. Third, the vastly more extensive reporting structure for credit-side programs reinforces a policy bias toward credit-bearing programs, since noncredit programs cannot demonstrate outcomes such as employment, wages, and completion of credentials. Shifting to integrated

[6] Website for State Noncredit Data Project, accessed October 8, 2024. Louisiana noncredit data snapshot

[7] Voorhees & Milam op cit.

systems would enable administrators and policymakers to understand and report about noncredit education for accountability, funding, and planning.

The Louisiana Community and Technical College System: Centrally governed with local autonomy

The Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) is a statewide system of twelve independently accredited two-year institutions. In 2023-24, LCTCS had credit enrollment of almost 80,000 students, 22,000 workforce-related students, and 30,000 students in Work Ready U, which offers a variety of pre-college services.[8] LCTCS and its member colleges are governed by a 12-member Board of Supervisors, which in turn reports to the state Board of Regents.[9] The system office provides leadership, governance, and support to member colleges, but each institution retains local autonomy to manage administrative functions while meeting external requirements, with varying capacities and areas of focus. Among eight member colleges for which data are available, there were 396 noncredit offerings for the 2020-21 academic year. Four-fifths (316) of those offerings were for occupational training while 14 were for personal interest and 66 for other purposes.[10]

In 2012, these colleges moved to a centralized system called Banner for information about credit education. In 2015, the colleges began utilizing Xenegrade software for noncredit data at individual colleges to track registration, payment, and related credentials. In contrast to the centralized Banner system for credit programs, which LCTCS managed as a unified platform for all member institutions with centralized IT support and streamlined data processes, each college independently operated its own Xenegrade platform for non-credit programs. Information reaching the LCTCS system staff was sparse and often unreliable. System leaders knew little beyond the overall level of noncredit enrollment at each institution.

Louisiana tackles data integration

Starting in 2020, LCTCS began an initiative to increase reporting capacity and standardization across the colleges' data systems. Drivers for integrating noncredit and for-credit educational data flowed from important state policy innovations. LCTCS leaders cited three primary reasons for embarking on a challenging pathway of database integration: documenting the state's progress toward its educational attainment goal, qualifying noncredit courses for state funding and improving operational effectiveness.

Measuring Postsecondary Attachment

Louisiana is among 40 states that have set a postsecondary attainment goal to reach on or by 2030.[11] Louisiana's Board of Regents adopted an attainment goal in 2019 for 60% of the state's working-age adults

[8] Internal data reported by LCTCS.

[9] Websites of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, Board of Supervisors; and the Louisiana Board of Regents. Accessed October 8, 2024.

[10] Bahr, P. et al. (2023, March). Louisiana noncredit data snapshot. Education and Employment Research Center Issue Brief.

[11] Lumina Foundation (January 2024). States with higher education attainment goals. Author.

to have a post-secondary credential meeting its criteria, by 2030.[12] State actors realized that to be able to reach the goal, they would need to count all credentials, not just degrees. The state master plan for educational attainment allows noncredit education for industry-based certifications to be counted towards the state's educational attainment goal if they meet specific definitions of leading to a credential of value, associated with earnings gains or employment opportunities, or an on-ramp credential, defined as an intermediate credential on the way to a credential of value.[13] The LCTCS leadership sought to include the noncredit data elements required to show progress in meeting the state's educational attainment goal in the state's data collection.

Qualifying for the M.J. Foster Promise Program

Enacted in 2021, The M.J. Foster Promise Program provides financial aid to students ages 21 and over who are pursuing an associate degree or a shorter-term postsecondary education credential required for high-demand, high-wage occupations aligned with state workforce priorities.[14] In order for noncredit programs leading to a credential to be deemed eligible for the Foster Promise Program, they must be entered into the state Curriculum Inventory.[15] In addition, the programs must be reviewed for alignment with the Foster Promise Program's eligibility standards. This provided a strong incentive to collect noncredit data for governing bodies' review, including individual identifiers, enrollment, completion time, subject area, and demographic information.[16] Having developed the capacity to report integrated data for the M.J. Foster program, LCTCS will also be capable of reporting data for other funding streams.

Improving operational effectiveness

The decentralized and siloed nature of the LCTCS noncredit data systems took a daily toll on the effectiveness of their departments, particularly in relation to handoffs with other departments. At a workshop of institution-level users, participants highlighted several structural problems, including excessive manual data entry, particularly with student transfers, which undermined student recruiting; the cascading effect of siloed technologies contributing to siloed departments, which created inconsistent processes and unfamiliarity with processes in other departments, which led to poor customer service and visible disorganization; and increased difficulty in integrating third-party products into work flow. System-level staff expressed concern about inability to create meaningful and timely reports for member colleges to inform their decision making, as well as an inability to report to policymakers on their colleges' contributions to regional economic development.

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[12] Louisiana Board of Regents (September 20, 2023). "Gaining meauxmentum: Regents announces 49.5% educational attainment rate, releases master plan year four update". Press Release.

[13] https://www.laregents.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/PRP-VII.E.2-Quality-Postsecondary-Credentials-of-Value-Exec-Summary-Removed.pdf

[14] Website of Louisiana's MJ Foster Promise Program, accessed October 2024.

[15] William Tulak, Memorandum to Louisiana Community & Technical College System Board of Supervisors, August 16, 2021.

[16] https://mylosfa.la.gov/students-parents/scholarships-grants/mjfoster/

Louisiana's Data Integration Process

Over a two-year period, LCTCS moved noncredit workforce training and adult basic education data from decentralized institution-level systems into a centralized system which already housed data for credit education. In taking these steps, LCTCS leaders adapted their noncredit data collection, storage, and reporting processes to provide information comparable to data already available for credit programs of study.

LCTCS pursued a seven-step process in its data integration initiative.[17]

Step 1: Convene a Data Integration Team

LCTCS convened a leadership team to research and recommend how the system could best maintain and utilize noncredit data and information on curricular offerings. This team included representatives from each member college, as well as advisors from the system office led by the Executive Director for Process Improvement.

Step 2: Research other states' funding mechanisms and associated data systems

The leadership team researched other states' noncredit funding systems and the data platforms used to validate their noncredit offerings. However, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis prompted the team to back away from consideration of other platforms. Instead, they chose to expand LCTCS's own data system for credit offerings to cover noncredit offerings as well.

Step 3: Retain consultant for third-party review

LCTCS contracted with DXC Technology to conduct a third-party review of their data systems. As part of its review, DXC Technology convened a two-day workshop with institutional data system users to identify issues and possible solutions. Participants in the workshop highlighted a number of issues caused by lack of data integration, discussed above.

Step 4: Conduct outreach with institutions

The data integration team reached out to member institutions and held information fairs to explain their goals in implementing an integrated data system. LCTCS solicited feedback from colleges, asking the colleges to identify parts of the platforms and systems that were working well for them and parts that they were grappling with, as well as what challenges an integrated system could help them meet.

[17] LCTCS Data Integration Project. Report of Data Integration Project Executive Summary, submitted to Monty Sullivan, Louisiana Community and Technical College System; Interview with Amy Cable, Executive Director for Process Improvement, LCTCS on February 8, 2024.

Some issues could be traced to the noncredit database, Xenegrade, which was designed with a different focus compared to credit enrollment systems. Xenegrade operated more like an e-commerce platform, where certain personal data fields such as social security numbers and birthdates were not required for course enrollment. This design choice, while simplifying the registration process, created challenges when attempting to integrate or compare data with credit program systems that routinely collected such information. The workforce departments at each college also lacked system-level guidance on types of data to be entered in Xenegrade.

Step 5: Submit recommendations to Board of Supervisors for approval

The data integration team submitted its final proposal to the Board of Supervisors for approval to proceed with implementation. The proposal recommended "an integrated system for credit, non-credit, workforce and adult basic education services, which may include a dynamic interface with or be incorporated into, the current administrative system (Banner) to provide a single data collection and retrieval point." Other recommendations covered training and creating a centralized data repository.

Step 6: Plan and implement integration of noncredit data

After approval by the Board of Supervisors, the data integration team created a group to plan and implement integration of noncredit data into the Banner system. The group consisted of a project lead and institutional representatives of workforce, institutional research, student admissions, enrollment, and registrar offices, as well as other offices as needed.

The group developed action plans based upon recommendations from their third-party consultant and promising practices from LCTCS member institutions. LCTCS leadership then asked college chancellors to approve the plan for implementation at their schools.

Step 7: Merge noncredit and credit data into one system

The data integration team developed a procedure to migrate Xenegrade data into the Banner system. As colleges encountered issues, the team responded in coordination with the LCTCS system's IT department They also established a noncredit curriculum inventory with information comparable to that reported for credit-bearing education. The Non-Curriculum of Inventory (NCRIN) reports programs that colleges have submitted to their Board of Supervisors and received approval, and which have been reported to the state Board of Regents. Programs appearing on the NCRIN have undergone approval processes appropriate for any associated credentials[18] and the NCRIN serves to verify programs for state and federal funding.[19]

[18] Curriculum Development Process and Requests, Policy # 1.024,Louisiana Community and Technical College System, revised October 20, 2021.

[19] William Tulak, Memorandum to Louisiana Community & Technical College System Board of Supervisors, August 16, 2021.

The LCTCS IT department provided essential support during the data integration process. For example, the IT department created a batch process to enable colleges to upload data from employer partners who had funded their employees to obtain customized training without having to ask the employees directly for the information.

Challenges in Integrating Noncredit with Credit Data Systems

The leadership team faced serious challenges during the design and implementation of this initiative. An early plan to shift to a new system-wide noncredit data system proved impractical when the COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions that threatened to increase cost and slow the transition to unacceptable levels. LCTCS opted instead to expand its credit system, Banner, into an integrated system encompassing noncredit data as well.

Implementation at each college required coordination between a number of departments, most importantly the office administering workforce-oriented noncredit offerings, the academic affairs office administering for-credit programs, and the financial aid office. The data integration team found that siloed administration of the noncredit office sometimes made coordination more difficult. However, the process itself improved communication, and at some colleges led administrators to begin taking steps to prioritize coordination of noncredit with other services.

Louisiana's New Integrated Data System

Banner is now LCTCS's system of record for both noncredit and credit education data. For the first time, systems-level staff can draw meaningful and actionable data on noncredit students and programs at LCTCS's 12 colleges. Institutional users access the system through separate webpages for noncredit and credit student admissions applications. The Banner admissions application page for noncredit education looks similar to the Banner admissions applications page for credit but asks for less information. The subcommittee created registration rules, a workbook and a frequently asked questions document. The system office stores a master list of approved programs and credentials and sends data about approved programs and credentials to the Board of Regents to be certified for Foster Promise Program eligibility and counted toward the state postsecondary attainment goal.

Lessons Learned

The urgency of integrating noncredit education into the broader postsecondary landscape is widely felt among policymakers and practitioners. While each state and higher education system has its own configuration of financing, policy and program goals, and institutional composition, Louisiana's successful data integration project nonetheless offers instructive lessons.

Data integration is achievable on a budget. The LCTCS initiative coincided with a difficult financial period in Louisiana, as COVID-19 disrupted schooling, imposed unexpected expenses, and drove down community college enrollment. Yet the LCTCS leadership persisted, adjusted their plan for resource constraints, and brought it to a successful conclusion.

Data integration is achievable on a realistic timeframe. LCTCS began scoping options in January 2020. Two years later, they completed project implementation. Of course, projects like this never fully end, since many aspects need to be refined or offer opportunities to expand. Other states considering data integration have software and process options to consider when choosing what will work best in their state.

Data integration is valuable for multiple purposes. LCTCS has found its integrated system useful for reporting on member colleges' educational offerings, enabling them to qualify for public funding, and documenting contributions to progress toward the state's educational attainment goal. Since the plan was largely designed by institutional staff, it also meets many of their needs for automating data reporting, extending their analytical capacity, and building internal lines of communication.

Future Directions in Louisiana

The leadership of LCTCS undertook efforts to integrate the system's noncredit and credit education data and achieved their primary goals, in a timely fashion. In the process, they learned more about their data and how they might improve its value. LCTCS is now seeking to achieve even more. The system and institutional leaders are building systems to collect data from employer-led trainings when employers are reluctant to provide demographic information and social security numbers. More detailed information on course offerings improves development of credit for prior learning processes.[20] Looking ahead, some LCTCS colleges are developing lists of noncredit courses for student recruitment and also identifying noncredit classes that could be converted to credit-bearing classes.

At the system level, LCTCS also sees ongoing opportunities to use the data they can report from their integrated system. They can now provide information to policymakers on the types of credentials earned by students, and they would like to provide more granular information on the wages earned by completers. Additionally, they can offer valuable input to policymakers on emerging high-demand sectors for economic development and workforce planning. As an early adopter of cutting-edge integrated data systems, LCTCS will continue to provide valuable lessons for other state policymakers and institutional practitioners.

[20] Credit for Prior Learning, Policy 1.023, Louisiana Community and Technical College System. Revised December 9, 2020.

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