# Who Are College Learners with Non-Degree Credentials?

## Executive Summary

workcred
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## Overview

As learners and employers seek flexible pathways to education and career advancement, non-degree credentials such as certifications, certificates, and licenses have gained growing prominence across postsecondary education and the workforce. Yet, relatively little is known about the learners who hold these credentials while enrolled at a postsecondary institution. Using nationally representative data from 53,926 college learners who participated in the Strada Education Foundation 2025 State Opportunity Index survey on learners currently enrolled in postsecondary institutions,[1] the Workcred Division of the American National Standards Institute examined similarities and differences between college learners with and without non-degree credentials at two- and four-year institutions.

Guided by the 4Ps Enrollment Management Framework, which organizes learner experiences into profile, process, progress, and promise,[2] the report provides a descriptive analysis of who holds non-degree credentials, how they experience college, how they perceive their educational progress, and how they view their future opportunities. Together, these dimensions provide insight into characteristics, educational experiences, and future outlooks of college learners with non-degree credentials.

**Figure 1: 4P's Enrollment Management Framework**




## Findings

### Profile: Who Holds Non-Degree Credentials?

Non-degree credential holders represented a relatively small but notable segment of learners in the survey, accounting for approximately 13 percent at two-year institutions and 11 percent at four-year institutions. At two-year institutions, learners with non-degree credentials reported a higher percentage as being older, parents, Pell Grant recipients, and part-time. Learners at four-year institutions, with and without non-degree credentials, appeared similar across many demographic characteristics, though those

1 Strada Education Foundation, State Opportunity Index: Connecting Education with Opportunity (Strada Education Foundation, 2025), https://www.strada.org/state-opportunity-index.

2 D. H. Kalsbeek, "Framing Retention for Institutional Improvement: A 4 Ps Framework," New Directions for Higher Education, no. 161 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20041.

with non-degree credentials were slightly more often older and parents. Overall, college learners with non-degree credentials may not be fundamentally different than college learners without non-degree credentials, though there were key differences that emerged.

### Progress and Process: How Do They View Their Educational Journey?

College learners with non-degree credentials across institution types expressed high confidence in their educational experiences, that their education would help them achieve their career goals, and that it would prepare them for future success. At two-year institutions, learners with non-degree credentials reported participating in work-based learning and experiential opportunities slightly more often than learners without non-degree credentials and engaged more often in personalized coaching with employers and co-workers. Based on these findings, college learners with non-degree credentials may be slightly more involved in interactions that could drive quicker job market entry and success.

### Promise: What Do They Expect for the Future?

College learners at both institution typeswith non-degree credentials also reported strong post-college expectations. They expressed confidence in their ability to find a job aligned with their interests and aspirations, and more often indicated they had already accepted employment before graduation, though the quality of these jobs was unclear. These findings highlight the potentially important role of non-degree credentials in educational pathways towards supporting learners' career readiness and confidence in the labor market.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

The study uncovered the need for institutions, policymakers, and workforce stakeholders to better understand and support learners who hold or pursue non-degree credentials while enrolled at two-year and four-year institutions. To strengthen learning and employment pathways that include non-degree credentials, institutions should consider:

- Improving systems for identifying non-degree credentials and tracking learner outcomes
- Strengthening personalized coaching tailored to non-degree credential attainment and career pathways
- Expanding opportunities for non-degree credential integration and credential stacking
- Enhancing transfer and credit-for-prior-learning opportunities to better recognize and support learners with non-degree credentials

### Developing clearer definitions and classifications for non-degree credentials

As employers, policymakers, and educational institutions place increasing emphasis on skills, competencies, and workforce readiness, understanding the experiences of learners who combine non-degree credentials with degree attainment is increasingly important. Further exploration of college learners with non-degree credentials can help institutions create more seamless programs and pathways that connect education to workforce success while supporting learners' long-term educational and career goals.