

Policy Brief

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Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials: Solutions for Adult Student Success

Sub-baccalaureate credentials provide a strong economic impact for students, employers and their communities. Credentials can be especially powerful for adult students, and can provide career-boosting benefits in a relatively compact program. However, the special circumstances and challenges that adults face means that institutions must tailor credential programs so adult students face the best chances for success.

What are Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials?

While various terms are used to describe sub-baccalaureate credentials, they are best understood by the benefits they bring to students, employers and the state. The terms themselves can be slippery: what is known as a ‘one-year certificate’ in one state may be called a ‘diploma’ in another state. Therefore, we use the umbrella term *credential* to encompass sub-categories such as certificates, certifications, apprenticeships and licenses. We use the term ‘sub-baccalaureate’ to indicate that the credential is earned below the four-year degree level.

Beyond the terminology, what is most important about credentials are their economic characteristics, such as:

- the jobs they lead to;
- the wages that can be earned in those jobs;
- whether they are ‘stackable’ to higher postsecondary degree attainment, and;
- whether they are ‘portable’ within a career and lead to industry-recognized exams or state licensures.

The Economic Impact of Credentials

Credentials bring economic benefits to the students who earn them, to employers who increasingly demand them, and to the communities and states. High school graduates who earn credentials can earn an average of 20 percent more than those who do not, nearly \$240,000 over a lifetime. If only half of workers with only a high school diploma were to earn a credential, the state would stand to gain over \$316 million in sales and income tax revenue each year. By 2018, there will be 400,000 job openings in Indiana that will require more than just a high school diploma.

The Bad News: Extra Time & Credits Hurt Adult Students

While adult students face specific challenges to completing any education program, Excessive time and credits negatively impact Indiana’s certificate completion rate. In 2007-08, credential-seeking Hoosier students in a program requiring just 30 credits took 79 credits if full time and 68 credits if part time. Credential completion is not impacted just by excessive credits, but also by excessive time.

In Indiana, a credential designed for “one year” takes an average of 3.4 years for full-time students and 4.7 years for part-time students. However, adult students have better completion rates, suggesting that tailored programs can have a successful impact for this population of learners.

The Good News: Opportunities to Help Adult Students Succeed

While adult students face real challenges to the successful completion of credential programs, they have several advantages that provide significant opportunities. Adult students who return to post-secondary education are more likely to be motivated and career-driven in their efforts, and less subject to the aimless sampling in programs and courses that younger students face. Because many adult students must actively juggle work and family responsibilities to seek additional educational opportunities, they are likely to be drawn to programs with clear economic and career benefits that provide clear enrollment and student services. The result is that adult students currently have a slightly better credential completion rate, suggesting that tailored programs could have a strong positive impact.

Recommendation: Tailor Credential Programs to Meet the Unique Needs of Adult Students

Indiana can help unlock the economic potential that credentials can bring to adult students by promoting policies that assist enrollment, services and completion. Make it easier for older adult learners to enroll, earn credit for previous learning and complete certificate programs that can lead to higher education completion goals. Strategies include “awarding credit for prior learning and improving the delivery of remedial/developmental education. Some of the more successful efforts to improve the delivery of remedial education to adults include the provision of remedial and college level work simultaneously so adults experience immediate progress toward a credential” 6

Read the Institute’s full report *Credentials of Opportunity: Better Jobs, Better Employment & Better Outcomes for Indiana* at <http://www.incap.org/credentialreport.html>

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Indiana Institute for Working Families
1845 W. 18th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
Phone: 317-638-4232
Web Site: <http://www.incap.org/iwf.html>