

## Policy Brief

January 2013

### Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials: Tailored Programs Boost Student Outcomes

Sub-baccalaureate credentials provide a strong economic impact for students, employers and their communities. Because of credential programs' unique place in the realm of education and workforce development, their impact can be strengthened by tailoring program delivery to meet student needs. This brief discusses the impact of credential programs and how to make them more effective for students and employers.

#### ***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.

#### ***Two Threats to Credential Completion: Excessive Time and Credits***

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 "one-year" credential 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.

***Recommendation: improve credential delivery by tailoring programs to meet student needs***

In order to overcome the challenges that prevent students from efficiently completing credential programs, colleges must tailor programs to meet the unique circumstances of credential students. The following is a series of best practices that have been effective in other states:

- Implement streamlined scheduling for program coursework. Providing a regularized sequence of courses (for example, always on Wednesday evenings or Saturday mornings) for the duration of the credential program will help students plan work and family responsibilities. A pre-determined schedule that takes into account potential general education or remedial coursework will reduce excessive credits.
- Promote cohorts of students within credential programs. Cohorts will assist the start-to-finish sequence of programs and reinforce peer support and networking.
- Support adult students by increasing the availability of tailored services. Offer remedial courses alongside program-specific courses so students make immediate progress towards the goals in their field. Provide flexible, compressed formats geared towards adult students who have clear career goals.
- Provide start-to-finish student support that resembles traditional student advising in degree programs. Offer up-front information about program requirements, costs, schedule sequences, and cohorts. Utilize cohort progress reports to inform advising and student services throughout the program. Emphasize cohorts and streamlined schedules in marketing campaigns to increase awareness and identity of programs.

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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