

# THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

## Creating Certificates to Advance the Liberal Arts

Certificates  
Licenses  
Credentials  
Microcredentials  
Nanocredentials  
Digital Badges  
Credit Credentials  
Non-Credit Credentials

“The array of options for postsecondary education and training has exploded over the last several decades, and interest is still growing: According to Strada Public Viewpoint research, 62 percent of Americans would prefer skill training or another nondegree option if they enrolled in a program within the next six months. In the 1950s, five percent of American workers held some type of licensure or certification; today 30 percent do” (July 29, 2021, p. 1).

“In 2019, community colleges granted 852,504 associate degrees and 579,822 certificates” (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021, para. 10). The reason for this significant growth in certificates and credentials rests with their accessibility in providing training for employability.

“In 2019-20, Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio awarded 4,129 short-term certificates, 2,167 degrees, and 845 one-year certificates” (Scott Markland, Personal Communication, 10/05/2021).

A course is still the historical foundation for organizing learning, and diplomas and degrees are still the historical “certifications” for completing courses. Diplomas, degrees, and courses are the pillars that support the traditional framework educators have used for centuries to capture and codify the outcomes of learning. But a new framework of certificates and credentials is emerging that complements the traditional framework that will have a significant impact on students, faculty, educational institutions, and on workforce education at every level.

To understand this new framework, it is important to know the difference between certifications and credentials. A certificate is a focused learning experience on a set of specific skills or knowledge stripped of unnecessary meanderings often allowed in a 16-week

traditional course. A certificate can be earned in a three-hour learning experience, a week-long learning experience, or in a six-month learning experience. Certificates are offered by community colleges, technical institutes, colleges and universities, industries, associations, and special groups organized to provide certificates and credentials. A one-year certificate is the certificate awarded by most community colleges.

A credential is awarded following an advanced level examination which follows rigorous exam development protocols, is psychometrically validated, and is delivered through a third-party testing service. Possessing a credential not only helps one to prove competency and capability in a given field, but also demonstrates to one’s community and employers that the individual is competent, properly trained, and equipped to carry out his or her duties. In other words, a credential is similar to a diploma or to a degree. (National Environmental Health Association, 2021)

The 2021-22 catalog of Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, California features many certificate options for students—often connected to associate degrees. For example, there is an associate degree in Computer Information Systems and a Certificate of Achievement in Computer Information Systems. Requirements for the Certificate include 24 units of courses in various aspects of information technology plus a professional emphasis of a minimum of 12 units from any of the following specializations: Computer Science, Cyber Security, Data Analytics, Game Development, Networking, Programming, Social Media, or Technology and Innovation. Students earn a Certificate of Achievement from Chaffey by successfully completing the prescribed courses. Students may also choose to take exams in some of these areas to earn an industry-approved credential. (pp.184-188) Value of Certificates and Credentials

In a 2020 Strada-Gallup Education Survey of a nationally representative sample of nearly 14,000 adults, researchers summarized the value of credentials.

1. College graduates who combine their degree with a nondegree credential have substantially higher ratings of their education than those without nondegree credentials. Seventy percent of those who had both an associate degree and a nondegree credential said their education made them an attractive job candidate, compared to 43 percent of associate degree holders without a nondegree credential.

2. The outcomes of nondegree credentials earned in isolation are comparable to associate degree programs. Sixty-five percent of those who complete nondegree programs said their education was worth the cost, and 49 percent said it helped them achieve their goals, compared to 59 percent and 43 percent, respectively, of associate degree holders.
3. Longer certificate programs do not necessarily lead to better outcomes than shorter programs. Eighty-five percent of those who completed a certificate program that took between a week and a month to complete said it was worth the cost, compared to 59 percent of those who completed a program that took between six months and a year to complete.
4. Nondegree credentials issued by community colleges received the highest ratings in terms of quality and value. Seventy-eight percent of those with a nondegree credential from a community college said it was worth the cost, compared to 54 percent of those with a nondegree credential from an individual business or company.
5. Black Americans rated the quality and value of non-degree credentials the highest among racial groups, while white Americans rated them the lowest. For example, 71 percent of Black Americans with a non-degree credential said their education helped them achieve their goals, compared to only 46 percent of white Americans. (Hanson 2021)

The value of certificates and credentials can also be calculated in a very practical way. Certificates and credentials:

- Are not bound by time or place.
- Are transparent in what is required for completion.
- Focus on a set of skills or a core of knowledge.
- Prepare students for specific jobs.
- Meet national and international standards.
- Allow students to engage at their own pace.
- Are stackable and portable.
- Can be combined with an associate and bachelor's degrees.
- Provide practice tests.
- Are accessible from many sources.
- Are often more inexpensive than college degrees.
- Are recognized and valued by employers.
- Translate directly into skills and knowledge employers prefer.
- Can be used by students to explore career pathways.
- Can be updated regularly.
- Often must be renewed periodically through continuing education.

#### Using Certificates and Credentials in the Liberal Arts

Certificates and credentials have created an alternative system of capturing and codifying the outcomes of learning that is viewed by some educators as revolutionary. "In the same way that online learning

revolutionized education by making courses accessible from anywhere, the growing market for micro-credentials and alternative education options will transform how we think of learning and how academic programs are structured" (Off Campus, August 4, 2021).

*If certificates and credentials are proving effective and efficient in achieving the goals of career and technical education, might they not be an effective and efficient alternative in achieving the goals of liberal education? Certificates and credentials could be another tool or approach to making liberal education more accessible. Why should advocates of liberal education even consider such a proposition?*

**Reason One:** Liberal education has a very long history and tradition around the world and for centuries dominated higher education as the unassailable preference of educators. In the last fifty years, however, liberal education has been carefully scrutinized by a number of critics.

"Skepticism about the value of a liberal education has grown in part because of the rising cost of college and in part because of the difficulty of measuring the quality of an education" (Perkins, 2019). "We raise this question, recognizing that liberal education and the great tradition of the American liberal arts college have been put on the defensive of late. Small colleges across the nation have to make their case to students, to their parents, and to the public more urgently" (St. John's College, 2014, para. 1).

Victor Ferrall (2015), President Emeritus of Beloit College, noted that liberal education is not only on the defensive, but also on the brink of major decline:

There no longer is reason to believe the decline of liberal arts education will be stayed or reversed. Liberal arts are over the brink. Some liberal arts colleges will fail or be forced to sell out to for-profit institutions; some already have. Many will quietly morph into vocational trainers. A handful of the wealthiest colleges, probably fewer than 50, educating less than one-half of one percent of U.S. college students, may survive. They will, however, no longer play a central role in educating Americans. Rather, they will become elite boutiques, romantic remnants of the past, like British roadsters and vinyl phonograph records (pp. 7-8).

Many initiatives, organizations, documents, and leaders championing liberal education today do so from a defensive position as can be seen from these selected perspectives. The message here is quite clear: liberal education needs to change to keep up with changing times. Adapting liberal education to certificates and credentials might be one way to make liberal education more available and acceptable to students and the general public.

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How are college students exposed to the liberal arts? How are professionals such as physicians, lawyers, and engineers and semi-professional workers exposed to the liberal arts? How are carpenters, nurses, IT specialists, and the police exposed to the liberal arts? How is the general public exposed to the liberal arts? The richness of the liberal arts needs to be made more accessible to all people. The liberal arts need to be brave enough to leave the safety of the Ivory Tower and to engage the people on the streets through certificates and credentials.

This proposal does not mean that the liberal arts should give up the bastions of their most successful programs in small liberal arts colleges or the expansion of liberal arts courses and programs into universities and community colleges. The suggestion here is that to become more accessible to many underserved constituencies the liberal arts should consider the creation of certificates and credentials as an additional strategy to reach these constituencies.

**Reason Two:** The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the primary champion of liberal education in higher education, has conducted seven national focus groups and surveys since 2007 of employer views of liberal education. The 2013 survey by Hart Research Associates included 318 employers whose organizations had at least 25 employees. Respondents included owners, presidents, and vice presidents from the private sector and nonprofit organizations. Nearly all those surveyed (93 percent) agreed that “a candidate’s demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major” (p.1). More than nine in ten of those surveyed said it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity, intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning. More than three in four employers indicated they want colleges to place more emphasis on helping students develop key learning outcomes, including critical thinking, complex problem solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings. These results are a ringing endorsement of the soft skills that are usually visibly included in liberal education programs and increasingly in workforce education programs.

When asked directly about the importance of liberal education in preparing today’s workforce, 94 percent of the employers indicated that such an education was very or fairly important. In response to the question, “If you were advising your child or a young person you know about the type of college education he or she should seek in order to achieve professional and career success in today’s global economy, would you recommend he or she pursue a liberal education?” Eighty-nine percent indicated they would advise students to do

so. It is quite clear that the employers who participated in this survey view liberal education as a key component for a successful career.

All of the AAC&U focus groups and surveys confirm these views by employers that a liberal education is very important to the career success of students. In the seventh report issued in 2021, *How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most*, Lynn Pasqueralla, President of AAC&U said, “In fact, a consistent headline-level finding across all our employer research has been that employers and educators are largely in agreement when it comes to the value of a contemporary liberal education—providing it is described using language that is common and accessible to both stakeholder groups” (p. iii).

Employers are very well aware of the language of certificates and credentials and use these widely in their screening of employees and in their promotion of employees. It might be prudent for leaders of liberal education to learn about certificates and credentials as an additional way to engage learners in liberal education in a more accessible way than traditional courses and programs.

**Reason Three:** One of the values of a liberal education is that it encourages students to challenge conventional wisdom. If we apply that value to the proposition that liberal educators should at least explore the possibility of using certificates and credentials to present the topics of liberal education the needle of change may begin to move. One would expect that liberal educators would be the leaders of innovation, exploring new possibilities, trying new ways, creating new models—indeed, challenging conventional wisdom.

Actually, liberal arts colleges have explored certificates and certifications in the past according to a new book by Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt *The Great Upheaval: Higher Education’s Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*. In their Opinion piece in the *Hechinger Report* on the book the authors pointed out that “Certificates and degrees have existed side by side for more than two hundred years: Yale established the first certificate program for students who took only scientific and English language classes two centuries ago” (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021, para. 7). The authors also noted that “A study conducted more than 40 years ago found that 21 percent of four-year arts and sciences colleges and 28 percent of professional schools awarded certificates” (para. 9).

While it is apparent from these brief references that liberal arts colleges have experimented with certificates, that experimentation did not lead to a series of accessible certificates for students and the general public popular today. The opportunity may be ripe for



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community colleges to launch an effort to explore and create a series of certificates on the liberal arts that are substantive, appealing, and accessible.

**Reason Four:** If it has been done before it can be done again—with more finesse and better technology. And if certificates have found a home in workforce education there is no reason they cannot find a home in liberal education. Imagine a well-supported and designed series of certificates on the Harlem Renaissance similar to the quality of a PBS-sponsored program such as Masterpiece Theatre or Ken Burns' documentary on The Civil War. Imagine a series of certificates on the English Romantic Poets a student could master during the summer break. Imagine a series of certificates on Nihilism in Russian Literature a student could take as an elective. Imagine a series of certificates on how liberal education contributes to employability skills. There is no end to organizing and creating certificates that are more manageable and accessible than sitting in a classroom three days a week for 16 weeks.

Certificates and credentials in liberal education can be easily built on a model that already exists and is widely used by many teachers. Many, if not most, teachers organize their courses around units or modules which easily lend themselves to the organizing principles of certificates.

For example, Sara Butler, a faculty member at College of the Desert in Palm Desert, California, teaches a three-credit course Political Science One: Introduction to Government. She organizes the course into the following units:

- Unit One: Introduction and Key Concept
- Unit Two: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights
- Unit Three: Public Opinion and Voting
- Unit Four: Mediating Institutions
- Unit Five: Formal Federal and State Institutions
- Unit Six: Outputs of Government

The structure of the content easily lends itself as a template for organizing a series of certificates around an Introduction to Government.

Ann Thebaut, a faculty member at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida teaches Philosophy 2635—Biomedical Ethics which includes the following modules that would make good certificates:

- Module One: Biomedical Ethical Principles and Ethical Frameworks
- Module Two: Paternalism and Patient Autonomy/ Truth-Telling and Confidentiality
- Module Three: Informed Consent and Human Research
- Module Four: Abortion/Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide
- Module Five: Reproductive Technology and Genetic Choices
- Module Six: Justice and Health Care

In addition to teaching this course she and her colleagues, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, are creating an Ethics Bowl, a series of Ethics Across the Curriculum workshops, Community Services in Ethics for students, and a Character Education Certificate Program.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the liberal arts were meant only for privileged students, not for working class students. And they were mostly available only to the wealthy who could afford to attend elite liberal arts colleges where the liberal arts prospered. These colleges are still among the most prosperous, prestigious, and respected institutions of higher education in the nation.

The American university incorporates the liberal arts primarily through introductory courses for undergraduates and through a department of Arts and Sciences. Universities have wrestled for decades with what constitutes a liberal education in the required introductory courses. It is in the community college, an institution that enrolls half of the students in American higher education, where the liberal arts have failed to embed their richness and value.

In today's community college the liberal arts are mostly offered through required courses in general education. In 2021, Terry O'Banion and Cindy Miles completed a national study of general education programs in community colleges. (O'Banion and Miles) The study included 30 randomly selected colleges divided by size into large, medium, and small. The study revealed that the average number of courses to meet general education requirements held steady at 12 across all sizes of colleges. The most revealing findings of the study was the number of courses from which students had to select to meet the 12-course requirement. In large colleges students had to choose 12 courses from 181; in medium colleges students had to choose 12 from 203; in small colleges students had to choose from 102.

In the community college engaging with the liberal arts is often a case of students required to choose "sloppy seconds" from a cafeteria of courses prepared by faculty with no training in preparing experiences that nurture the mind and the soul.

One way this situation could change may be through democratizing the delivery of the liberal arts through certificates and credentials. Freed from the Ivory Tower and captivity by general education the great riches embedded in the liberal arts should be freely available to every citizen in the nation. Our society is in greater need now of such a Renaissance more than any time in its history.

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