



Expanding the Opportunity Scholarship to Strengthen New Mexico's Workforce Education

Monique Anair, Santa Fe Community College

In the United States, educational milestones, such as high school and college graduation, are benchmarks of success and social advancement. For many students postsecondary education holds their imagination for a better future.

However not all students have equal access to the opportunities that traditional postsecondary pathways provide. The New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee (NMLFC) in their 2024 report *Postsecondary Certificates* highlighted three critical challenges to advancing equitable access to education and workforce opportunities in New Mexico:

1. Low-skilled workers are disenfranchised and marginalized in the state
2. Employers and workers are disconnected because education systems are misaligned
3. Youth living in areas of concentrated poverty have been unjustly impacted by the pandemic, allowing them to fall behind their peers.

Expanding Access and Addressing Workforce Needs with Non-Credit Programs

In response to these challenges, the New Mexico legislature has encouraged New Mexico's Higher Education Institutions (NM HEIs) to increase alternative non-credit postsecondary workforce training to job pathways over the next three years. Alternative non-credit postsecondary workforce training programs include non-traditional higher education credentials like nanodegrees, microcredentials, and industry-recognized certifications, that fall outside traditional college markers of attainment like a bachelor's degree.

Since 2020, NM HEIs have seen an increase in non-credit enrollments. Non-credit postsecondary workforce training programs are designed to be flexible with easy accessibility, low-cost entry points, variable calendars, accelerated learning opportunities, and courses aligned with industry pre-apprenticeships or on-the-job training. These types of programs are more accessible to New Mexicans who navigate multiple personal and professional responsibilities that prevent them from committing to a traditional for-credit college degree program.

Over 80% of New Mexicans who engage in non-credit workforce courses have completed some college classes, but never earned a degree. When we use terms like unaccredited, short-term, non-traditional, non-credit, non-degree, and workforce training we are often **masking the identity of students who identify as Black, Hispanic, and Native American**. Because we consistently separate college degrees and industry-recognized credentials within our postsecondary institutions we often fail to recognize their interconnectedness. This devalues non-credit postsecondary education within the higher education landscape meaning funding like

New Mexico's Opportunity Scholarship are not available to students who might benefit the most.

In 2024, the New Mexico legislature invested \$60 million in non-credit postsecondary workforce education and \$152 million in for-credit postsecondary education. Though these two legislative fiscal investments may seem unrelated, they are uniquely connected through our students' choices of postsecondary education at New Mexico's colleges and universities.

Research conducted at Santa Fe Community College (SFCC) found students were combining non-credit and for-credit college courses to increase their wage earning power while they continued to pursue their bachelor's degree. The NMLFC reported that NM HEIs must do better at aligning non-credit and for-credit postsecondary programs. For example, credentials like OSHA-30 are required by some job sites. Alone, OSHA-30 does not increase your wage earning power, however when packaged with a series of intentionally curated courses industry certifications can lead to apprenticeships and employment, and provide credit-earned towards a bachelor's degree pathway. At SFCC we have found students are taking the lead and aligning non-credit and for-credit postsecondary experiences to get the jobs and careers they want.

Separate Systems of Postsecondary Education Complicates Data Collection

Students view their experiences in non-credit and for-credit programs as connected, however this is not reflected in the data because non-credit data is inconsistently collected. Currently the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) does not consistently track non-credit student data. The lack of data about non-credit postsecondary education provides a challenge when we are tasked with meeting future higher education objectives that include non-credit postsecondary pathways.

Nationally, there are an estimated **five to eight million postsecondary students currently engaged in non-credit postsecondary programs**. The New Mexico Independent Community Colleges (NMICC) has documented 15,000 students enrolled in non-credit alternative workforce education programs at New Mexico's community colleges. Alternative credentials by their very name suggests they are outside the norm. Therefore, it is important that New Mexico continue supporting non-credit postsecondary program data collection. If we value the outcomes provided by high-quality, industry-recognized, non-credit postsecondary credentialing then investing directly in the students who choose this postsecondary pathway sets the best example for our HEIs to adopt systems that will gather data about non-credit students and their non-credit postsecondary experiences.

Using the Opportunity Scholarship to Support Non-Credit Workforce Training

The Opportunity Scholarship currently supports for-credit students enrolled in college degree programs. Expanding the Opportunity Scholarship to support students in both non-traditional and traditional postsecondary pathways at New Mexico's HEIs would preserve both the value of formal higher education degree pathways and legitimize non-credit workforce training credentialing programs. Currently, the Opportunity Scholarship only benefits New Mexico high school graduates **who have the ability to commit to pursuing a traditional for-credit college degree**.

By expanding the Opportunity Scholarship to include non-credit postsecondary workforce credentialing New Mexico ensures the development of high-quality industry-recognized postsecondary workforce credentialing

programs by creating a financial framework to integrate non-credit and for-credit programs at NM HEIs.

The Opportunity Scholarship and its current success is helping NM HEIs reimagine higher education systems to meet the workforce challenges we face as a state, and as a nation. By investing in students who choose to combine for-credit and non-credit pathways at New Mexico's colleges and universities we will create long-lasting socioeconomic benefits for New Mexican students and their families.

To hear first-hand accounts of Santa Fe Community College students using non-credit and for-credit postsecondary education in Northern New Mexico, see [Dr. Anair's documentary](#).