Offering and Completing College Nondegree Programs: Trends in Public Data

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Nondegree programs continue to be an expanding field of interest and enrollment in the U.S. higher education landscape. Frequently developed in response to labor market needs, they offer alternative, flexible pathways to credentials that can be completed more quickly than traditional degrees. Nondegree programs typically refer to postsecondary education programs that yield nondegree credentials, which may include certificates, industry certifications, occupational licenses, apprenticeship certificates, badges, and other forms of microcredentials. These programs can be either credit-bearing or noncredit-bearing, and depending on institutional design, they may also be stackable with other degree or nondegree programs.

Despite their growing prominence, nondegree programs vary widely in definition, structure, purpose, and outcomes. This variability creates challenges for stakeholders—such as learners, institutions, employers, funders, researchers, and policymakers—who need to understand how these programs operate and how their value can be measured. Greater clarity can strengthen access to quality credentials and inform policies and incentives.

To build this understanding, the American Council on Education (ACE)—with support from Lumina Foundation—conducted a multi-part study of the ecosystem of nondegree programs. The study focuses on offerings within postsecondary institutions, examining their structures; the roles of colleges and external partners; the influence of policy environments; and the ways outcomes are defined and assessed. This work also informs ACE's ongoing effort to update the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, with the goal of advancing a more inclusive framework that reflects the diverse educational portfolios of institutions, including nondegree education. Together, this work contributes to a fuller and more accurate picture of postsecondary education and its impact.

The project was conducted by Ji Hye "Jane" Kim, Austin Freeman, and Erica Swirsky at ACE—in collaboration with Alisa F. Cunningham, John Archacki, and Elexus Robinson at Higher Ed Insight—under the direction of Hironao Okahana at ACE.

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INTRODUCTION

This second brief—part of the four-part Lumina Foundation–funded series on the ecosystem of college nondegree programs—analyzes publicly available data on nondegree programs at U.S. colleges and universities. Given the challenges in locating a comprehensive source that consistently details various nondegree programs and credentials, our analysis primarily utilized data from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). However, it is essential to recognize that IPEDS only provides information on certificate completions that were offered at IPEDS-participating institutions. This limits our understanding of the full spectrum of nondegree credentials that are available from U.S. colleges and universities, given that many nondegree educational and training programs are provided by for-profit private institutions that are not required to report their program data to IPEDS (Brown and Kurzweil 2017). To address this limitation, this brief includes additional analyses that complement our findings from the IPEDS certificate completion data. While it remains challenging to fully capture the diverse array of nondegree credentials, these supplementary analyses enable us to observe trends related to nondegree programs from various perspectives. Additional data sources analyzed in this brief include two series: the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center's Undergraduate Degree Earners and Credential Engine's Counting U.S. Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials.

CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS IN IPEDS

IPEDS—the primary data source for this brief—collects information on postsecondary degree and certificate completions across 12 categories. This chapter specifically focuses on certificate data, including subbaccalaureate, postbaccalaureate, and post-master's certificates. Postbaccalaureate and post-master's certificates are offered for those who have already earned a bachelor's or master's degree, respectively. Subbaccalaureate certificates—for those without an undergraduate degree—require fewer than four academic years of study, with various time frames that range from fewer than 12 weeks of study to at least two but fewer than four years. While the emphasis is on certificate data, this brief also presents information on degree completions as context for comparing with certificate completions. The completion data are analyzed further by certificate type, institutional sector, Carnegie Classification, and field of study.

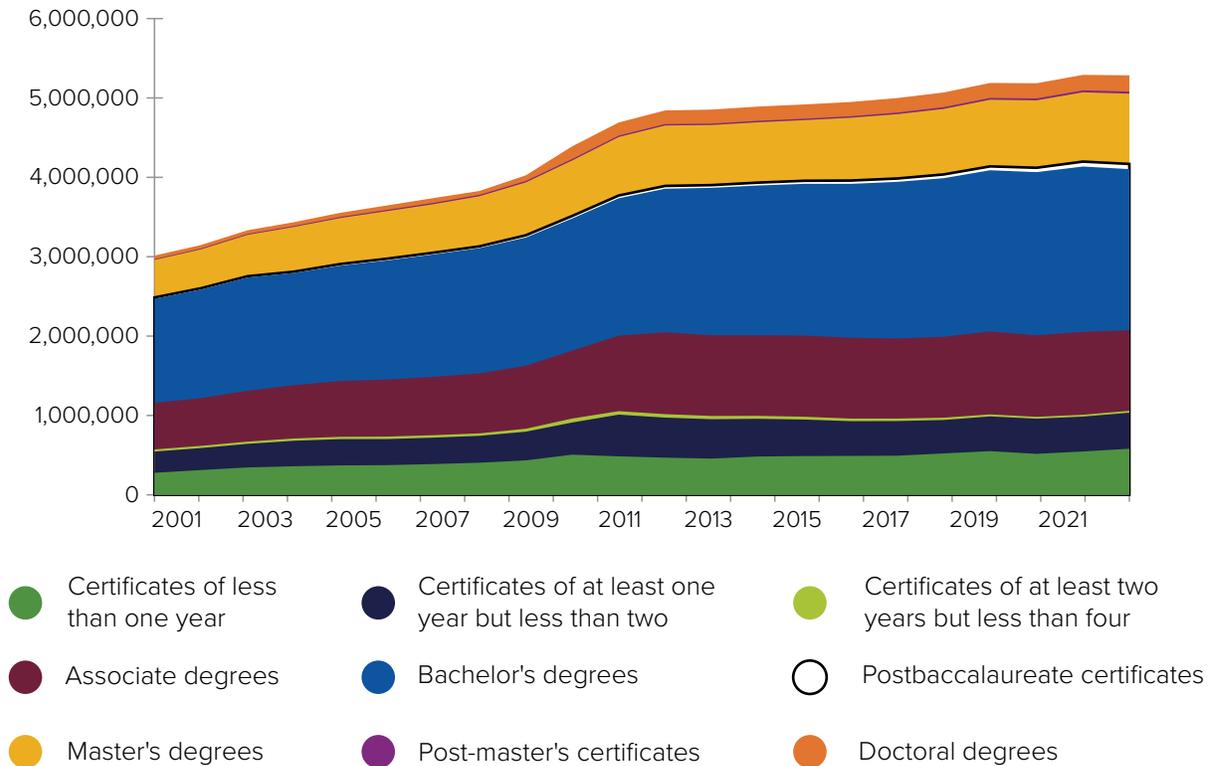The 12 categories of postsecondary degree and certificate completions are:

1. Certificates of fewer than 12 weeks
2. Certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year
3. Certificates of at least one but fewer than two years
4. Certificates of at least two but fewer than four years
5. Associate degrees
6. Bachelor's degrees
7. Postbaccalaureate certificates
8. Master's degrees
9. Post-master's certificates
10. Doctoral degrees—research/scholarship
11. Doctoral degrees—professional practice
12. Doctoral degrees—other

In 2022, IPEDS reported 5.3 million postsecondary degree and certificate completions from 6,003 Title IV institutions, which included 4,071 degree-granting institutions and 1,932 non–degree-granting institutions. Of these, about 1.15 million represented certificate completions (21.7 percent). Of all degrees and certificates awarded in 2022,

subbaccalaureate certificates represented about 20.0 percent and were the majority of certificates awarded in that year. In contrast, postbaccalaureate certificates accounted for 1.2 percent, and post-master's certificates accounted for 0.5 percent (see figure 1).

The total number of certificates awarded by U.S. postsecondary education institutions nearly doubled in the past two decades, from 596,834 in 2001 to 1,149,441 in 2022. During this period, the number of awarded subbaccalaureate certificates increased from 571,738 to 1,058,357; postbaccalaureate certificates climbed from 15,583 to 64,968—the most significant growth; and post-master's certificates rose from 9,513 in 2001 to 26,116 (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Total Degree and Certificate Completions (2001–22)

Source: Data from U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2001–22.

Notes: Data reflect degrees and certificates earned at Title IV institutions. | As of 2020, the category of certificates of less than one year was restructured into two distinct categories: 1) certificates of fewer than 12 weeks and 2) certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year. In this figure, the two categories are combined for better visual clarity. | As of 2008, the category of doctoral degrees was restructured into three distinct categories: 1) doctoral degrees—research/scholarship, 2) doctoral degrees—professional practice, and 3) doctoral degrees—other. The use of the new categories was optional for the first two years (2008–09 data collection, which reported on awards granted between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008, and 2009–10 data collection year, which reported on awards granted between July 1, 2008 and June 30, 2009), but it was mandatory the following year. In this figure, the three categories are combined for better visual clarity.

CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS ACROSS CERTIFICATE TYPES

In 2022, certificates accounted for approximately 21.7 percent of all degrees and certificates awarded, while degrees accounted for approximately 78.3 percent. The vast majority of the certificates awarded were subbaccalaureate certificates that required fewer than two academic years of study. Of the total of 1,149,441 certificates awarded in 2022, 484,095 (about 42.1 percent) were certificates that took at least 12 weeks but less than one year, while 454,191 (about 39.5 percent) were certificates of at least one year but fewer than two years. Each of these two most popular categories of certificates represented about 9 percent of all degrees and certificates awarded in 2022. Notably, a slightly higher number of certificates that required fewer than two years were conferred than that of associate degrees (1.03 million compared to 1.01 million) (see table 1).

Table 1. Degree and Certificate Completions Across Credential Types (2020–22)

	2019–20		2020–21		2021–22	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Certificates Total	**1,061,902**	**20.5%**	**1,095,587**	**20.7%**	**1,149,441**	**21.7%**
Certificates of fewer than 12 weeks	85,808	1.7%	85,722	1.6%	96,709	1.8%
Certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year	430,310	8.3%	460,379	8.7%	484,095	9.2%
Certificates of at least one year but less than two	443,064	8.5%	439,543	8.3%	454,191	8.6%
Certificates of at least two years but less than four	23,386	0.5%	23,175	0.4%	23,362	0.4%
Postbaccalaureate certificates	55,104	1.1%	62,257	1.2%	64,968	1.2%
Post-master's certificates	24,230	0.5%	24,511	0.5%	26,116	0.5%
Degrees Total	**4,123,297**	**79.5%**	**4,195,250**	**79.3%**	**4,135,972**	**78.3%**
Associate degrees	1,026,846	19.8%	1,043,904	19.7%	1,014,655	19.2%
Bachelor's degrees	2,055,942	39.7%	2,083,325	39.4%	2,030,448	38.4%
Master's degrees	849,015	16.4%	872,711	16.5%	885,540	16.8%
Doctoral degrees—research/scholarship	73,770	1.4%	72,769	1.4%	79,751	1.5%
Doctoral degrees—professional practice	115,380	2.2%	120,102	2.3%	123,117	2.3%
Doctoral degrees—other	2,344	0.05%	2,439	0.05%	2,461	0.05%
All Degrees and Certificates Total	**5,185,199**	**100.0%**	**5,290,837**	**100.0%**	**5,285,413**	**100.0%**

Source: Data from U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Note: Data reflect degrees and certificates earned at Title IV institutions.

CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL SECTORS

IPEDS data show that public two-year institutions were the leading providers of certificates, and they issued 44.2 percent of all certificates awarded in 2022. Public four-year institutions followed as the second largest providers, which accounted for about 20.4 percent of total certificate completions in the same year. The third largest provider was fewer-than-two–year for-profit institutions, which issued about 14.5 percent of all certificates awarded in 2022 (see table 2).

For-profit institutions represented a much larger share of certificate completions than degree completions. In 2022, for-profit institutions awarded over a quarter (26.8 percent) of all certificates but only 6.0 percent of all degrees. Additionally, fewer-than-two–year institutions, which primarily do not grant degrees, played a significant role in certificate completion across sectors and issued 18.1 percent of all certificates completed in 2022 (see table 2).

Table 2. Degree and Certificate Completions Across Institutional Sectors, by Credential Type (2022)

		Four-Year or Above			Two-Year			Less Than Two-Year			Total
		Public	Private Nonprofit	For-profit	Public	Private Nonprofit	For-profit	Public	Private Nonprofit	For-profit	
Certificates Total	%	20.4%	4.3%	3.7%	44.2%	0.8%	8.6%	3.1%	0.5%	14.5%	100.0%
	Freq.	233,921	48,953	42,484	508,432	8,959	98,354	35,755	5,695	166,888	1,149,441
Certificates of fewer than 12 weeks	%	19.0%	0.4%	0.9%	54.2%	0.4%	5.8%	8.7%	0.3%	10.3%	100.0%
	Freq.	18,365	373	896	52,433	375	5,567	8,446	251	10,003	96,709
Certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year	%	23.5%	1.6%	3.0%	50.4%	0.4%	4.9%	2.0%	0.4%	14.0%	100.0%
	Freq.	113,682	7,595	14,480	243,855	1,724	23,681	9,451	2,094	67,533	484,095
Certificates of at least one year but less than two	%	10.4%	1.4%	4.8%	45.4%	1.0%	12.6%	3.9%	0.7%	19.7%	100.0%
	Freq.	47,190	6,551	21,962	206,272	4,676	57,001	17,850	3,350	89,339	454,191
Certificates of at least two years but less than four	%	7.9%	3.7%	2.0%	25.1%	9.3%	51.8%	0.03%	-	0.1%	100.0%
	Freq.	1,845	863	472	5,872	2,184	12,105	8	-	13	23,362
Postbaccalaureate certificates	%	62.2%	31.8%	6.0%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	40,418	20,659	3,891	-	-	-	-	-	-	64,968
Post-master's certificates	%	47.6%	49.4%	3.0%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	12,421	12,912	783	-	-	-	-	-	-	26,116
Degrees Total	%	51.7%	26.9%	5.4%	15.2%	0.3%	0.6%	-	0.0%	-	100.0%
	Freq.	2,137,494	1,110,712	222,267	629,513	10,793	25,173	-	20	-	4,135,972
Associate degrees	%	26.1%	4.1%	4.2%	62.0%	1.1%	2.5%	-	0.002%	-	100.0%
	Freq.	264,804	41,410	42,950	629,513	10,793	25,165	-	20	-	1,014,655
Bachelor's degrees	%	66.5%	28.5%	5.1%	-	-	0.000%	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	1,349,567	578,330	102,543	-	-	8	-	-	-	2,030,448
Master's degrees	%	47.6%	44.7%	7.7%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	421,803	395,991	67,746	-	-	-	-	-	-	885,540
Doctoral degrees—research/scholarship	%	58.7%	35.7%	5.6%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	46,813	28,452	4,486	-	-	-	-	-	-	79,751
Doctoral degrees—professional practice	%	43.9%	52.6%	3.4%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	54,074	64,796	4,247	-	-	-	-	-	-	123,117
Doctoral degrees—other	%	17.6%	70.4%	12.0%	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	433	1,733	295	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,461
All Degrees and Certificates Total	%	44.9%	21.9%	5.0%	21.5%	0.4%	2.3%	0.7%	0.1%	3.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	2,371,415	1,159,665	264,751	1,137,945	19,752	123,527	35,755	5,715	166,888	5,285,413

Source: Data from U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2022.

Note: Data reflect degrees and certificates earned at Title IV institutions.

CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS ACROSS CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATIONS

Institutions categorized as associate colleges by the 2021 Carnegie Classifications awarded 46.2 percent of all certificates that were completed in 2022, making them the primary provider of those credentials. In contrast, these institutions represented only 16.6 percent of all degrees awarded in 2022. Institutions not classified by the Carnegie Classification system awarded 23.9 percent of the certificates completed that year, but they accounted for just 0.4 percent of all degrees awarded in 2022.

Considering certificates by institution types, the leaders were not surprising—in 2022, associate colleges awarded the majority of the subbaccalaureate certificates that required fewer than two academic years of study. Doctoral universities awarded the majority of postbaccalaureate and post-master's certificates. These institutions awarded just 9.4 percent of all certificates in 2022, but they awarded 49.1 percent of all degrees during the same year (see table 3).

Table 3. Degree and Certificate Completions Across Carnegie Classifications, by Credential Type (2022)

		Doctoral Universities	Master's Colleges and Universities	Baccalaureate Colleges	Associate Colleges	Special Focus Institutions	Tribal Colleges and Universities	N/A or Unknown	Total
Certificates Total	%	9.4%	4.7%	9.1%	46.2%	6.8%	0.05%	23.9%	100.0%
	Freq.	107,634	53,460	104,027	531,395	77,713	532	274,680	1,149,441
Certificates of fewer than 12 weeks	%	0.8%	0.5%	8.8%	62.7%	2.9%	0.03%	24.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	795	517	8,514	60,669	2,805	26	23,383	96,709
Certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year	%	7.6%	3.1%	12.5%	52.7%	3.9%	0.04%	20.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	36,841	14,789	60,577	254,967	19,056	208	97,657	484,095
Certificates of at least one year but less than two	%	1.1%	3.7%	7.4%	46.6%	10.5%	0.1%	30.7%	100.0%
	Freq.	4,909	16,940	33,746	211,557	47,486	294	139,259	454,191
Certificates of at least two years but less than four	%	3.7%	3.2%	1.8%	17.9%	16.7%	0.02%	56.6%	100.0%
	Freq.	858	758	423	4,184	3,912	4	13,223	23,362
Postbaccalaureate certificates	%	73.1%	20.3%	1.0%	0.03%	3.8%	-	1.7%	100.0%
	Freq.	47,473	13,212	642	18	2,487	-	1,136	64,968
Post-master's certificates	%	64.2%	27.7%	0.5%	-	7.5%	-	0.1%	100.0%
	Freq.	16,758	7,244	125	-	1,967	-	22	26,116
Degrees Total	%	49.1%	20.7%	8.8%	16.6%	4.4%	0.05%	0.4%	100.0%
	Freq.	2,030,886	854,854	364,749	688,167	180,310	1,906	15,100	4,135,972
Associate degrees	%	2.8%	5.4%	19.1%	67.8%	4.6%	0.1%	0.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	28,094	55,266	193,312	687,677	46,362	1,427	2,517	1,014,655
Bachelor's degrees	%	61.4%	27.7%	7.9%	0.02%	2.6%	0.02%	0.4%	100.0%
	Freq.	1,245,713	561,644	159,749	488	53,652	435	8,767	2,030,448
Master's degrees	%	67.6%	25.7%	1.2%	0.000%	5.2%	0.005%	0.4%	100.0%
	Freq.	598,742	227,283	10,219	2	45,789	44	3,461	885,540
Doctoral degrees—research/scholarship	%	92.1%	3.5%	0.2%	-	4.1%	-	0.1%	100.0%
	Freq.	73,429	2,798	164	-	3,288	-	72	79,751
Doctoral degrees—professional practice	%	68.2%	6.2%	0.8%	-	24.6%	-	0.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	83,961	7,636	1,002	-	30,235	-	283	123,117
Doctoral degrees—other	%	38.5%	9.2%	12.3%	-	40.0%	-	-	100.0%
	Freq.	947	227	303	-	984	-	-	2,461
All Degrees and Certificates Total	%	34.4%	14.8%	9.0%	27.6%	5.2%	0.05%	8.9%	100.0%
	Freq.	2,138,520	908,314	468,776	1,219,562	258,023	2,438	289,780	5,285,413

Source: Data from U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2022.

Notes: Data reflect degrees and certificates earned at Title IV institutions. | The analysis utilized the 2021 Basic Classification from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. | Baccalaureate colleges include baccalaureate/associate colleges: mixed baccalaureate/associate in the 2021 Basic Classification. | Associate colleges include baccalaureate/associate colleges: associate dominant in the 2021 Basic Classification.

Photo courtesy of Ivy Tech Community College

CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS ACROSS FIELDS OF STUDY

The Classification of Instructional Programs codes found within the IPEDS completions data were used to group 2022 data based on six fields of study: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields; business, personal, and consumer services; health-care fields; social sciences and humanities; general studies and other fields; and manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields. This allowed researchers to assess award attainment across fields. Among all certificate completions in 2022, almost three-quarters belonged to either health-care fields (25.1 percent); manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields (25.1 percent); or business and personal and consumer services (24.3 percent) (see table 4). Among certificate completions, the following results are also notable regarding fields of study:

- Over half of the certificates of fewer than 12 weeks completed in 2022 were awarded in health-care fields (52.9 percent).

- Almost one-third of the certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year that were completed in 2022 belonged to business and personal and consumer services (31.8 percent). Manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields accounted for 26.9 percent of these certificates awarded in 2022.

- Health care was the most popular field for certificates of at least one but fewer than two years that were completed in 2022 (30.0 percent).

- The majority of the certificates of at least two but fewer than four years that were completed in 2022 were awarded in manufacturing, military, technology, and other applied fields (51.7 percent).

- Manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields (32.3 percent) were the most popular fields for postbaccalaureate certificate completers in 2022, followed by business and personal and consumer services (22.1 percent).

- Over half of post-master's certificates were earned in manufacturing, military technology, and other applied fields (54.1 percent).

Table 4. Degree and Certificate Completions Across Fields of Study, by Credential Type (2022)

		STEM Fields	Business and Personal and Consumer Services	Health-Care Fields	Social Sciences and Humanities	General Studies and Other Fields	Manufacturing, Military Technology, and Other Applied Fields	Total
Certificates Total	%	**10.2%**	**24.3%**	**25.1%**	**13.7%**	**1.6%**	**25.1%**	**100.0%**
	Freq.	**117,201**	**278,762**	**288,805**	**157,639**	**18,530**	**288,504**	**1,149,441**
Certificates of fewer than 12 weeks	%	6.8%	15.7%	52.9%	1.0%	0.4%	23.3%	100.0%
	Freq.	6,588	15,151	51,111	929	380	22,550	96,709
Certificates of at least 12 weeks but less than one year	%	14.7%	31.8%	16.8%	7.6%	2.2%	26.9%	100.0%
	Freq.	71,336	154,122	81,116	36,874	10,531	130,116	484,095
Certificates of at least one year but less than two	%	6.4%	19.8%	30.0%	23.7%	0.6%	19.5%	100.0%
	Freq.	29,088	90,067	136,148	107,670	2,583	88,635	454,191
Certificates of at least two years but less than four	%	6.3%	15.1%	20.3%	6.3%	0.3%	51.7%	100.0%
	Freq.	1,462	3,532	4,740	1,478	64	12,086	23,362
Postbaccalaureate certificates	%	11.7%	22.1%	14.6%	12.2%	7.1%	32.3%	100.0%
	Freq.	7,602	14,356	9,469	7,939	4,605	20,997	64,968
Post-master's certificates	%	4.3%	5.9%	23.8%	10.5%	1.4%	54.1%	100.0%
	Freq.	1,125	1,534	6,221	2,749	367	14,120	26,116
Degrees Total	%	**17.8%**	**17.8%**	**16.6%**	**27.1%**	**5.9%**	**14.8%**	**100.0%**
	Freq.	**735,342**	**737,654**	**685,660**	**1,120,745**	**245,533**	**611,038**	**4,135,972**
Associate degrees	%	9.5%	12.2%	17.8%	45.7%	4.4%	10.5%	100.0%
	Freq.	95,971	123,561	181,009	463,538	44,341	106,235	1,014,655
Bachelor's degrees	%	22.6%	19.7%	13.2%	26.4%	7.9%	10.3%	100.0%
	Freq.	459,136	399,234	267,756	535,101	159,455	209,766	2,030,448
Master's degrees	%	16.2%	23.7%	16.8%	11.7%	4.3%	27.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	143,522	210,073	148,615	103,830	38,404	241,096	885,540
Doctoral degrees—research/scholarship	%	41.6%	5.4%	9.6%	19.1%	4.1%	20.3%	100.0%
	Freq.	33,187	4,271	7,619	15,255	3,230	16,189	79,751
Doctoral degrees—professional practice	%	2.9%	0.2%	64.6%	2.1%	0.03%	30.2%	100.0%
	Freq.	3,525	229	79,564	2,560	43	37,196	123,117
Doctoral degrees—other	%	0.04%	11.6%	44.6%	18.7%	2.4%	22.6%	100.0%
	Freq.	1	286	1,097	461	60	556	2,461
All Degrees and Certificates Total	%	**16.1%**	**19.2%**	**18.4%**	**24.2%**	**5.0%**	**17.0%**	**100.0%**
	Freq.	**852,543**	**1,016,416**	**974,465**	**1,278,384**	**264,063**	**899,542**	**5,285,413**

Notes: Data reflect degrees and certificates earned at Title IV institutions. | STEM fields include computer and information sciences, engineering and engineering technology, biological and physical sciences, science technology, math, and agriculture. | General studies and other fields include fields such as liberal arts and sciences, interpersonal and social skills, personal awareness and self-improvement, and multi- or interdisciplinary studies, among others. | Other applied fields for certificates and associate degrees include manufacturing, construction, repair and transportation; military technology and protective services; education; architecture; communications; public administration and human services; design and applied arts; law and legal studies; library sciences; and theology and religious vocations. | Other applied fields for bachelor's degrees include personal and consumer services; manufacturing, construction, repair, and transportation; military technology and protective services; architecture; communications; public administration and human services; design and applied arts; law and legal studies; library sciences; and theology and religious vocations.

ADDITIONAL DATA SOURCES

This brief includes additional analyses that complement our findings from the IPEDS certificate completion data. While it remains challenging to fully capture the diverse array of nondegree credentials, these supplementary analyses enable us to observe trends related to nondegree programs from various perspectives. Additional data sources analyzed in this brief include two series: the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center's Undergraduate Degree Earners and Credential Engine's Counting U.S. Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials.

UNDERGRADUATE CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS, BY EARNER TYPE, IN NSC's REPORT

Undergraduate Degree Earners: Academic Year 2023–24 profiles students who earned undergraduate credentials from 2014–15 to 2023–24. This report includes data files that detail undergraduate credential completions, and it distinguishes between first-time completers and those who had earned prior awards. The report also categorizes these completions by award level, which includes bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificates (Randolph et al. 2025). The NSC data specifically illustrates undergraduate-level certificate completions at Title IV degree-granting institutions only, while IPEDS addresses certificate completions at undergraduate and graduate levels across all Title IV institutions, including both degree-granting and non–degree-granting institutions. However, the NSC data on undergraduate certificate completions provides additional insights by including the prior awards earned by certificate completers.

The number of undergraduate-level certificate completers increased from 390,049 in the 2014–15 academic year to 525,215 in the 2023–24 academic year. The share of certificate completers among all undergraduate degree and certificate completers also increased from 12.4 percent to 16.1 percent during the same period. In contrast, the share of associate degree completers among all undergraduate completers decreased from 28.1 percent to 25.1 percent. Bachelor's degrees were still the most popular credential type for undergraduate earners, but the share of bachelor's degree completers also slightly decreased from 59.5 percent in the 2014–15 academic year to 58.8 percent in the 2023–24 academic year (see table 5).

Considering the earner type, about 70.5 percent (370,308) of all certificate completers in the 2023–24 academic year were first-time completers, while 29.5 percent (154,907) were completers with a prior award. In contrast, about 77.7 percent (638,109) of all associate degree completers were first-time completers, and 22.3 percent (183,336) were completers with a prior award (see table 5).

When it comes to the prior award type of certificate completers, approximately 10.7 percent (56,383) of the individuals who completed certificate programs during the 2023–24 academic year already held a bachelor's or master's degree. Another 10 percent (54,542) of certificate completers had previously earned another certificate before they obtained their most recent certificate during the 2023–24 academic year. About 8.4 percent (43,982) of these completers held an associate degree. This indicates that a substantial number of individuals with undergraduate degrees are choosing to further their education by completing a certificate program at the undergraduate level (Randolph et al. 2025) (see table 5).

Table 5. Undergraduate Degree and Certificate Completions, by Credential and Earner Type (2015–24)

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Certificates Total	**390,049**	**404,901**	**405,911**	**429,891**	**437,459**	**437,472**	**426,490**	**447,579**	**472,254**	**525,215**
Certificate (First-Time Completers)	273,626	281,687	280,344	295,941	301,349	299,574	289,504	305,703	328,820	370,308
Certificate (Completers with a Prior Award)	116,424	123,214	125,567	133,950	136,110	137,898	136,986	141,876	143,434	154,907
Prior Award: Certificate	37,944	39,674	42,865	44,701	44,529	47,566	45,430	45,802	47,704	54,542
Prior Award: Associate	31,862	35,426	36,021	39,161	38,115	38,091	37,474	39,893	40,741	43,982
Prior Award: Bachelor's/ Master's	46,618	48,114	46,681	50,087	53,466	52,241	54,082	56,181	54,989	56,383
Associate Degrees Total	**883,650**	**895,942**	**891,629**	**891,779**	**902,635**	**887,077**	**899,012**	**873,660**	**829,307**	**821,445**
Associate (First-Time Completers)	725,623	729,826	719,707	715,441	724,666	706,734	711,922	686,468	646,316	638,109
Associate (Completers with a Prior Award)	158,027	166,116	171,922	176,338	177,968	180,343	187,090	187,192	182,991	183,336
Prior Award: Certificate	61,479	62,218	63,856	66,065	70,310	72,830	75,042	76,803	76,386	79,522
Prior Award: Associate	62,209	70,633	74,039	75,782	72,990	72,996	75,454	74,572	71,543	70,530
Prior Award: Bachelor's/ Master's	34,338	33,266	34,027	34,491	34,668	34,517	36,594	35,817	35,063	33,284
Bachelor's Degrees Total	**1,872,132**	**1,909,862**	**1,943,625**	**1,963,561**	**1,997,904**	**2,007,312**	**2,050,718**	**1,981,738**	**1,944,762**	**1,920,131**
Bachelor's (First-Time Completers)	1,421,980	1,441,263	1,455,427	1,464,682	1,482,955	1,481,624	1,498,648	1,448,637	1,420,572	1,399,720
Bachelor's (Completers with a Prior Award)	450,152	468,599	488,199	498,879	514,949	525,688	552,069	533,101	524,190	520,411
Prior Award: Certificate	22,404	22,337	23,127	23,686	24,147	25,286	27,367	28,150	29,625	31,479
Prior Award: Associate	365,036	370,000	385,846	396,660	411,042	420,060	440,306	423,299	414,895	412,475
Prior Award: Bachelor's/ Master's	62,712	76,263	79,225	78,533	79,760	80,342	84,396	81,652	79,670	76,458
All Undergraduate Degrees and Certificates Total	**3,145,832**	**3,210,706**	**3,241,165**	**3,285,231**	**3,337,997**	**3,331,861**	**3,376,220**	**3,302,977**	**3,246,323**	**3,266,791**
All First-Time Completers	2,421,229	2,452,776	2,455,477	2,476,064	2,508,970	2,487,932	2,500,074	2,440,808	2,395,708	2,408,137
All Completers with a Prior Award	724,603	757,930	785,688	809,167	829,027	843,928	876,145	862,169	850,615	858,654
Prior Award: Certificate	121,828	124,228	129,848	134,452	138,987	145,681	147,840	150,755	153,714	165,543
Prior Award: Associate	459,107	476,058	495,906	511,603	522,147	531,147	553,234	537,765	527,179	526,987
Prior Award: Bachelor's/ Master's	143,668	157,643	159,933	163,112	167,894	167,100	175,072	173,650	169,722	166,125

Source: Data from Randolph et al. 2025.

Notes: Data reflect undergraduate degrees and certificates earned at Title IV, degree-granting institutions that participated in NSC data collections. | Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Photo courtesy of Des Moines Area Community College

NUMBER OF POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIALS IN THE CREDENTIAL ENGINE REPORTS

Credential Engine has published several reports in its Counting U.S. Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials series. To strengthen data reporting and transparency related to credentials and their value to students, workers, employers, educators, and policymakers, these reports count or estimate the number of secondary and postsecondary credentials that are offered by various entities (Credential Engine 2022). For each type of credential, the report provides their counts or estimates of unique credentials available in the data collection year. The first report was released in 2018 and subsequent publications followed in 2019, 2021, and 2022.

Credential Engine provides data on the number of nondegree credentials that are offered by not only Title IV and non-Title IV institutions but also by online alternative education providers and nonacademic organizations. Credential Engine's inclusion of data from the broader postsecondary ecosystem provides a more comprehensive understanding of the landscape of nondegree programs.

According to Credential Engine's 2022 report, there were 350,412 unique degrees and certificates offered by postsecondary educational institutions. This included 53,853 certificates from Title IV institutions and 58,342 from non-Title IV institutions. These figures are estimates derived from data sources such as IPEDS, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL), and sample data from various state ETPLs (see table 6).

Additionally, the 2022 report identified 13,014 unique nondegree credentials offered by massive open online course (MOOC) providers. This encompassed 1,604 microcredentials, 54 degrees available in the U.S. from foreign universities, and 11,357 course completion certificates (see table 6).

Nonacademic organizations play a significant role in the realm of nondegree credentialing. Credential Engine estimated that these organizations provided a total of 656,753 nondegree credentials in 2022, which far exceeds the number of credentials that were offered by postsecondary institutions and MOOC providers. Digital badges represented the largest category and totaled 430,227, followed by online course completion certificates (177,292), registered apprenticeships (27,385), occupational licenses (12,152), occupational certifications (7,051), coding bootcamp course completion certificates (2,153), and unregistered apprenticeships (448) (see table 6).

Table 6. Counts and Estimates of Credentials Available, by Provider and Credential Type (2018–22)

	2018		2019		2021		2022	
Postsecondary Educational Institutions	-		370,020		359,713		350,412	
Title IV Degrees	213,913	a)	212,802	a)	196,139	c)	233,676	c)
Non-Title IV Degrees	(Excluded)		3,188	d)	1,350	c)	4,541	b)
Title IV Certificates	66,997	a)	111,941	c)	122,048	c)	53,853	c)
Non-Title IV Certificates	(Excluded)		42,089	d)	40,176	c)	58,342	c)
MOOC Providers	-		7,132		9,390		13,014	
Microcredentials	47		629	a)	820	a)	1,603	a)
Degrees from Foreign Universities	-		28	a)	50	a)	54	a)
Course Completion Certificates	-		6,475	a)	8,520	a)	11,357	a)
Nonacademic Organizations	-		315,067		549,712		656,753	
Occupational Licenses	8,864	b)	11,837	c)	11,938	c)	12,152	c)
Occupational Certifications	5,465	b)	6,724	c)	8,165	a)	7,051	a)
Registered Apprenticeships	13,656	a)	22,488	a)	23,400	a)	27,385	a)
Unregistered Apprenticeships	(Excluded)		50	b)	50	b)	448	c)
Coding Bootcamp Course Completion Certificates	1,718	b)	1,014	c)	1,560	c)	2,153	b)
Online Course Completion Certificates	-		80,117	c)	123,038	a)	177,292	c)
Digital Badges	(Excluded)		191,459	a)	381,561	a)	430,272	a)
Military Certifications	-		1,378	b)	-		-	

Sources: Data from Credential Engine 2018; Credential Engine 2019; Credential Engine 2021; and Credential Engine 2022.

Notes: The method of estimation or enumeration is categorized as follows: a) enumeration, b) partial enumeration, c) estimate, and d) rough estimate. | Military certificates were included as a separate category in the 2019 report only. | Data may vary significantly across iterations due to updated methodologies and expanded sources.

CONCLUSION

This brief provides an overview and analysis of publicly available data on nondegree programs at U.S. colleges and universities. Key findings from the three data sources utilized in this study are summarized in table 7. Additionally, table 7 presents important comparison points across these three data sources, including available data, nondegree credentials, providers, and their data sources.

The three data sources provide insights into different aspects of nondegree programs in U.S. postsecondary education. IPEDS collects and publishes information on the number of certificates awarded, categorized by various institutional characteristics. Additionally, IPEDS presents certificate completion data by student characteristics—including gender, race and ethnicity, and age—as Title IV institutions are required to report the number of students who earn these awards. NSC also gathers data on certificate completions at the undergraduate level and disaggregates it by various student and institutional characteristics. NSC provides information on the types of prior awards obtained, as they primarily focus on profiling undergraduate credential earners. This enables researchers to examine the educational pathways of certificate completers. While both IPEDS and NSC data emphasize the number of completers, Credential Engine counts and estimates the number of credentials available.

When discussing public data on nondegree programs at U.S. colleges and universities, IPEDS is recognized as the most comprehensive data source. However, it has several limitations that hinder our understanding of the diverse range of nondegree programs within the U.S. postsecondary education system. First, IPEDS only provides data on certificate completions, which represents just one type of nondegree credential at this level. Additionally, IPEDS is not an ideal source for information about nondegree programs that are offered by non-Title IV institutions, as these institutions

are not required to report their program data to IPEDS. This is significant because certificates offered by non-Title IV institutions could comprise as much as half of all certifications available in postsecondary education, according to Credential Engine's 2022 report (Credential Engine 2022).

Further, Credential Engine serves as a unique data source that encompasses a much broader range of nondegree credentials available in the United States. While both IPEDS and NSC focus primarily on certificates within the spectrum of nondegree credentials, Credential Engine includes a wider variety, such as occupational licenses and certifications, apprenticeships, course completion certificates, digital badges, and other microcredentials. However, Credential Engine does not provide information on individuals who have completed those credentials.

Table 7. Publicly Available Data on Nondegree Credentials and Providers, by Data Source

	IPEDS	NSC	Credential Engine
Available Data	Certificate completions in the data collection year at both undergraduate and graduate level, by certificate type, institutional sector, Carnegie Classification, and field of study, as well as by other various student and institution characteristics	Undergraduate-level certificate completions in the data collection year, by earner type (first-time completers versus completers with prior award), as well as other various student and institution characteristics	Number of nondegree credentials available in the data collection year
Credentials Included	Certificates offered at Title IV institutions	Undergraduate certificates offered at Title IV degree-granting institutions	Postsecondary Education Institutions • Title IV certificates • Non-Title IV certificates Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) • Microcredentials • Degrees from foreign universities • Course completion certificates Nonacademic Organizations • Occupational licenses • Occupational certifications • Registered apprenticeships • Unregistered apprenticeships • Coding bootcamp course completion certificates • Online course completion certificates • Digital badges
Providers Included	Postsecondary education institutions (Title IV degree-granting and non–degree-granting institutions)	Postsecondary education institutions (Title IV degree-granting institutions only)	• Postsecondary education institutions (both Title IV and non-Title IV institutions) • MOOCs • Nonacademic organizations
Data Source	Institutional reports	Institutional reports	• Postsecondary education institutions: IPEDS, WIOA ETPL, state ETPLs • MOOCs: edX, Coursera, FutureLearn, Kadenze, Swayam, Udacity, Class Central, etc. • Nonacademic Organizations: Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, ApprenticeshipUSA, etc.

As nondegree programs continue to evolve, it is imperative to confront the question posited by Christopher M. Mullin (2024): "How can we revise current data collection practice to align existing and emergent credentials with degrees?" This inquiry is closely linked to the ACE's recent efforts to ensure that the Carnegie Classification system accurately reflects the contemporary postsecondary education landscape and acknowledges the important role of nondegree programs. Currently, IPEDS allows for the utilization of certification completion data as a basis for universal institutional classification to recognize institutions that provide certificate education. Certificate education may play a significant role for some institutions, while for others it may be a marginal aspect of their offerings. However, since it only focuses on one type of nondegree credential—certificates—it will be crucial to expand the data collection scope ultimately to better capture a wider variety of emerging credentials. Additionally, the establishment of a public data reporting system is crucial for enabling institutions and learners to access post-completion outcomes, since improving students' outcomes in the labor market is a primary goal of these programs.[1] The growing concerns surrounding the quality of nondegree programs further emphasize the urgent need for a reliable data system that is capable of effectively evaluating program outcomes (Albert and Weko 2025).

Fortunately, we are expecting more data sources regarding nondegree credentials to become publicly available. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau conducted the National Training, Education, and Workforce Survey (NTEWS) Pilot in 2022 and released experimental statistical products in January 2025 (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). This federal survey is sponsored by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) within the National Science Foundation as well as the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. Started in 2022, the survey will track a random sample of adults over eight years to provide information on the number and characteristics of individuals who have various education and work credentials, such as high school diplomas, college degrees, industry-recognized certifications, and state licenses. Additionally, the survey will monitor individuals' paths both into and out of the workforce. Although the data from the pilot survey cannot be used to draw official conclusions or make inferences because it does not meet the quality standards set by the NCSES, it is promising that this new survey will contribute to the federal pursuit of information on work-related credentials, including a variety of nondegree qualifications (NCSES 2025).

State-level initiatives are also making significant strides toward improving the infrastructure for nondegree data. A key example is the State Noncredit Data Project from Rutgers University's Education and Employment Research Center (EERC). In this project, the EERC collaborates with state leaders across the country to create a comprehensive inventory and establish consistent operational definitions for noncredit data elements at the state level. The primary aim is to deepen the understanding of the noncredit data infrastructure while collecting and analyzing data related to noncredit courses and programs. This initiative will help efforts to examine the connections between noncredit offerings, enrollment rates, outcomes, instructional characteristics, and financial arrangements (Van Noy et al. 2024).

Nongovernmental initiatives also show considerable promise in developing a robust data infrastructure for nondegree programs. A notable example is CredLens, a nonprofit national data trust dedicated to nondegree credentials, with a special focus on outcomes data (CredLens 2024). Although this data is not publicly accessible at the moment, we anticipate that such efforts will enhance the data landscape through collaborations with educational institutions and state policy agencies.

With increased access to reliable data from the initiatives mentioned above, we expect that future research will provide better insights into the characteristics and trends of nondegree programs within the U.S. postsecondary education ecosystem.

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1   See Austin Freeman, Ji Hye "Jane" Kim, Alisa F. Cunningham, Elexus Robinson, and John Archacki, *How Colleges and Universities Are Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating Nondegree Programs: Lessons Learned from Five Institutions* (American Council on Education, 2025).

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