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STUDENTS

Short-Term Certificates Boom, but Study Finds They Don't Help Students Get Jobs

By Katherine Mangan | NOVEMBER 06, 2014

Short-term community-college certificates, which have been growing rapidly in popularity as a way to get students quickly and cheaply into jobs, do not, in fact, help most recipients land employment or earn more money, according to a study being released on Thursday.

The study is based on data from Washington state, but it reflects similar findings in three other states, according to researchers at the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College and the Career Ladders Project, an initiative of the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges.

Some community-college leaders who reviewed a report on the study are challenging its conclusions. They insist that short-term certificates help students who can't afford to pursue a college degree get back into the work force, and that even if the payoff isn't immediately obvious, students benefit in the long run.

Proliferation of Programs

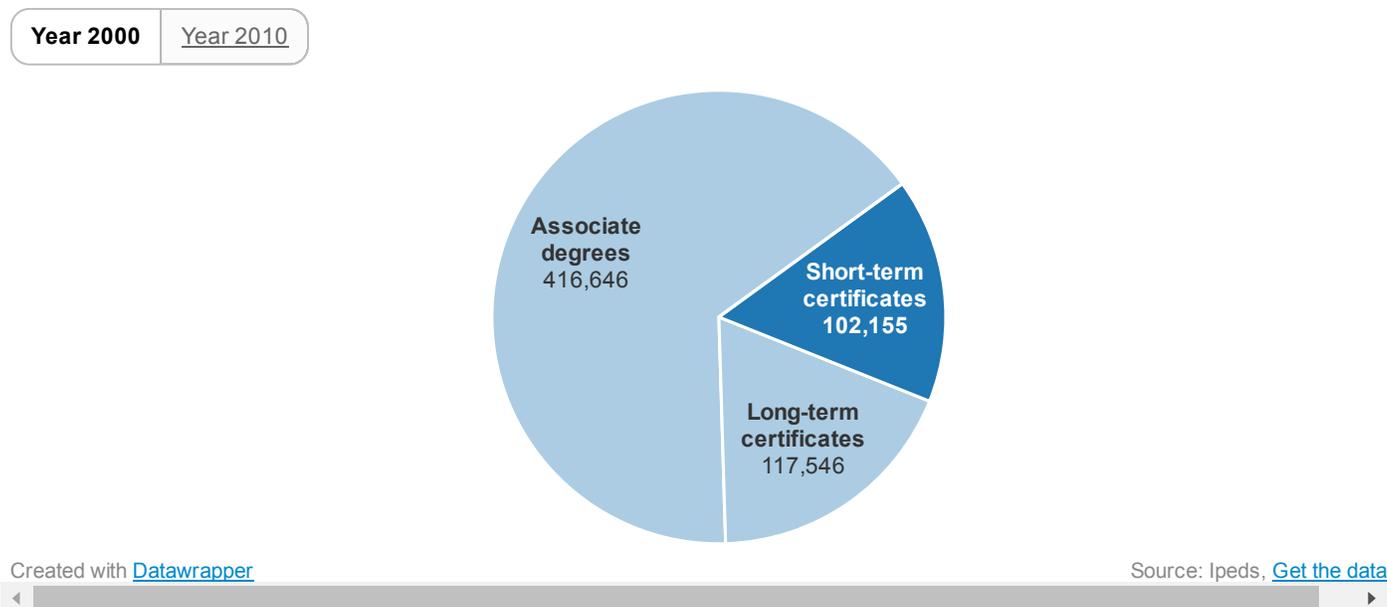
The responses to the data reflect differing views about the purpose of short-term certificates, which can be completed in less than a year, and their place on the higher-education ladder. What isn't in dispute is their widespread popularity.

The number of short-term certificates awarded nationally grew by 151 percent from 2000 to 2010, jumping from 16 percent of the sub-baccalaureate credentials awarded by two-year colleges to 25 percent, the report's authors found.

Short-Term Certificates: On the Rise at 2-Year Colleges

The certificates, which take less than a year to complete, make up a growing proportion of community-colleges' sub-baccalaureate credentials.

Madeline Joy Trimble, of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, and Mina Dadgar, of the Career Ladders Project, analyzed data from the Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or Iped. The figures below are based on public, degree-offering, primarily postsecondary, Title IV-eligible institutions, where at least 90 percent of credentials awarded were awarded at the sub-baccalaureate level.



The push for credentials has been fueled by a college-completion campaign supported by President Obama, major foundations, and state lawmakers who are increasingly tying college appropriations to degrees and credentials earned. It also responds to demands from employers for workers with job-specific skills geared toward their industries.

But according to the report's authors, the benefits to students are unclear.

"We believe that this dramatic national increase in the number of short-term certificates in the last decade may not have produced a commensurate increase in wages for those earning them," the authors say in the report, published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, the peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

"State policy makers may want to place greater value in investing in associate degrees and long-term certificates in high-return fields of study that are known to have positive impacts for students," they write.

The authors—Madeline Joy Trimble, a data analyst with the Community College

Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, and Mina Dadgar, director of research for the Career Ladders Project—analyzed data from the Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or Iped.

They zeroed in on first-time college students enrolled in any of the 34 community and technical colleges in Washington state during the 2001-2 academic year and followed them for seven years. They compared credential-earning students with those who earned some community-college credits but left without obtaining a credential.

Not surprisingly, they found that students with associate degrees and certificates that take longer than a year to complete have substantial wage gains and better luck landing jobs. That wasn't necessarily the case, though, for the fast-track credentials. Similar findings have been reported in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia, the authors say.

"Although we would not go as far as to say that short-term certificates never have any value, the evidence is suggestive that they tend to have minimal value over and above attending college and earning some credits," the report concludes.

That assertion doesn't make sense to leaders of community colleges that are constantly rolling out new short-term certificates specifically designed to meet local employers' needs.

"Their conclusion that there's little labor-market value to these certificates is contradictory to everything we know," Gena Glickman, president of Manchester Community College, in Connecticut, said in an interview. Manchester offers dozens of such programs for those hoping to become paralegals, certified nursing assistants, machinists, and web technicians, among other occupations. Most of the programs have high placement rates, Ms. Glickman said.

'Building Blocks'

The fact that short-term certificates have ballooned in the last decade isn't necessarily a problem, Ms. Dadgar said in an interview, if they are a steppingstone for students with full-time jobs to earn credentials or work toward an associate degree.

If, however, a student expresses interest in health and is steered toward a short-term certificate in an allied health field, the adviser would be doing that student a disservice if

she suggested the student stop there, Ms. Dadgar said.

Advisers for Washington's two-year colleges agree, according to Jan Yoshiwara, deputy executive director of education at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

"Some people don't have a lot of time to spend in college. They have to get out and get a job and begin supporting their families, and these certificates respond to that," she said in an interview on Wednesday. "But this study reinforces concerns we already had that short-term certificates alone are not enough. We're trying to figure out how to use them as building blocks toward associate and bachelor's degrees so that students can stack their credentials in a way that leads to longer-term career mobility and wage gains."

For example, Everett Community College offers "stackable" credentials in precision machining, welding, and other specialties for students interested in breaking into high-demand jobs in manufacturing and aerospace. More than 90 percent of those earning short-term certificates in precision machining have jobs within 30 days, college officials said.

Stella Perez, a spokeswoman for the American Association of Community Colleges, pointed out that the report's wage data show a sharp drop before most students enter short-term certificate programs, which suggests that many do so after losing a job.

"It's not like someone's humming along on a career path, looking for a way to move up," she said. "Something has happened" that made such a person want to retool for a new career. Lower wages as they break in are to be expected, she said.

The study is also limited to students who are attending college for the first time, which doesn't count many of the people who earn short-term certificates. Those credentials are in fact worthwhile, said Ms. Perez.

"I'm a firm believer that completing something and walking away with a certificate is far better," she said, "than leaving with 50 hours of loose credit that you have to make sense of to an employer."

STC as an employer.

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