

Community College Pathways

The National Academies Symposium on the Supply Chain for Middle-Skills Jobs

Melinda Mechur Karp, Ph.D.
Community College Research Center
Teachers College, Columbia University
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Statement of the Problem

There are many avenues to producing skilled technical workers in the United States, but there is no clear system for doing so.



Community colleges could serve as a centralized training hub.

- Traditional providers of sub-baccalaureate credentials
- Award over 500,000 occupational credentials annually
- Accessible in terms of location and cost

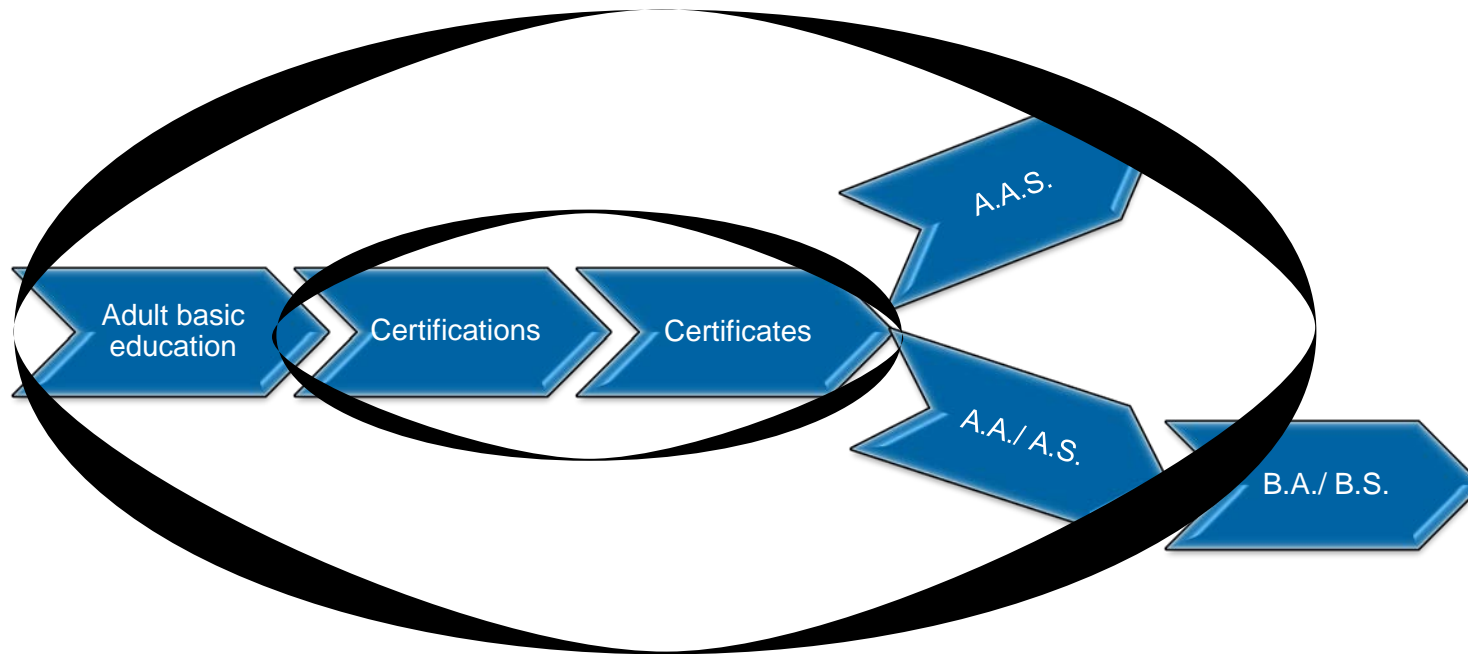
- And yet, community colleges are **complex**.

To what extent are community colleges' offerings systematically leveraged in order to coherently build pathways into middle skills jobs?

Intermediate credentials

Why look beyond the Associate Degree?

Sub-baccalaureate credentials





Intermediate credentials are important stepping stones.

- We **know less** about intermediate credentials than we do about associate degrees.
- **Completion strategies** focus on intermediate credentials.
 - Stackable credentials
 - Embedded intermediate credentials
- Intermediate credentials can serve as “**on and off ramps**” in a postsecondary education credentialing system.

BUT...

1. Are these credentials are **valued** in the labor market?
2. To what extent are intermediate credentials are **connected** to further education and training?



Findings

What do we know about intermediate credentials?

Certificates

- In general, there is a **positive return** to certificates, as compared to earning only a high school diploma or completing some college without earning a credential.
- Outcomes are profoundly **heterogeneous**.
 - Short-term certificates do not generally lead to higher wages.
 - Most research finds that long-term certificates have an overall positive return.
 - Outcomes vary by field, but industry groupings are broad.
 - Regional variation in outcomes.
 - Returns vary by gender and race/ethnicity.



Certificates and the credentialing system

- Some evidence that **employers value** stackable credentials.
- **Unclear** the extent to which certificate holders **pursue further credentials**.
 - Previous research finds that certificate holders have a lower propensity to transfer than associate degree recipients.
 - New research finds that one in four certificate completers earn a bachelor's degree within six years.



Certifications

- Highly **varied**:
 - In content
 - How they are provided
- No **comprehensive** listing or accountability system
- **Few studies** of impact or outcomes

Reflections on the evidence

Community college pathways *could* be leveraged to create a coherent advanced technical education system.

Community colleges *could* serve as a middle-skills training hub.

- Intermediate credentials that are **tightly-coupled** with labor market needs have value.
 - Health care credentials have consistently high returns.
 - Greater return to credentials that are directly related to industry needs.
 - ATE evaluations provide qualitative evidence of the benefit of tight coupling.
- Technician certification programs and policies must take **local contexts** into account.
 - Different studies find positive returns to different occupations.
 - Benefits to certificates are greater if credential-holders are employed in the field in which they hold their credential.

There are substantial challenges to creating such a system.

- **Inconsistent** definitions: Stakeholders do not understand what credentials mean or signify.
- Implementation **variation**: Confusion over access and value
- Potential **unintended consequences**: New barriers and false expectations

Implications and recommendations

