



# Non-Credit to Credit Pathways to Higher Education

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## Non-Credit to Credit Pathways

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## Overview

### What are Non-Credit to Credit Pathways?

Non-credit to credit pathways are prescribed avenues that translate non-credit achievements into credit toward a degree. “Credit for prior learning is college credit awarded for validated college-level skills and knowledge gained outside of a college classroom.”<sup>1</sup> Non-credit achievements include professional certifications or licenses, prior learning assessments that award credit for prior learning, micro-credentials/badging, faculty reviews, military experience, non-credit conferences, online courses with valid assessments, continuing education units, and more. These pathways ensure that each learning experience can be a step toward something more widely recognized. Non-credit to credit pathways exist to provide a “default on-ramp to a degree program” and incorporate non-traditional learning experiences into the traditional for-credit degree program.<sup>2</sup>

Non-credit achievements, like certifications and badges, are widespread in higher education, but non-credit to credit pathways are a new phenomenon, launched by just a handful of pioneers. These include many two-year community colleges along with a few four-year universities like Purdue, Northeastern, and Rutgers, among others.

### Why Do Non-Credit to Credit Pathways Matter?

Non-credit to credit pathways should be a part of the strategic vision of the future of higher education. College enrollments are dropping and it is not just due to the heightened uncertainty caused by COVID-19. The September 2020 report from Strada Education Network found that “the majority (59 percent) of aspiring adult learners believe additional education will be worth the cost and 64 percent believe it will get them a good job, but that’s down substantially from 77 percent and 89 percent, respectively, in 2019.”<sup>3</sup> Students’ trust in the value of the college degree is waning and higher education institutions must evolve in order to survive.

Instead of signing up for a two- or four-year degree program, students are increasingly interested in opportunities that keep their educational options open and don’t break the bank. With the assurance that these experiences can count toward a more recognized credential, students can confidently engage in non-credit learning experiences that are shorter, less expensive, and more flexible than a degree. Then, they can put their learning experiences toward a degree if and when desired.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.palomar.edu/pages/cpl/files/2020/08/CPL-Toolkit.pdf>

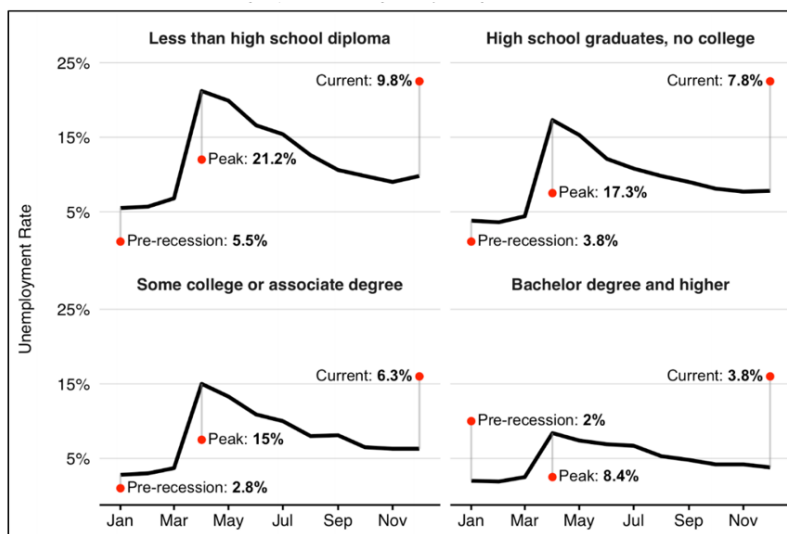
<sup>2</sup> [https://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-New-Framework-for-Alignment\\_FINAL.pdf](https://edstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-New-Framework-for-Alignment_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://stradaeducation.org/press-release/confidence-in-the-value-of-education-has-fallen-among-adults-without-degrees-seriously-considering-additional-education/>

## Non-Credit to Credit Pathways During COVID-19 and Beyond

The United States saw unprecedented unemployment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, but unemployment did not strike the U.S. population evenly.<sup>4</sup> With recent 2021 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Congressional Research Service published a report detailing unemployment trends throughout the pandemic. The report shows that, in general, individuals with less education face unemployment at higher rates, a phenomenon amplified by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 highlights unemployment rates by education.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: Unemployment Rates in the U.S. by Education, Congressional Research Service, 2021**



Widespread non-credit to credit pathways would open up ample opportunities to both the “high school graduates, no college” and “some college or associate degree” groups. Instead of pursuing a new degree, individuals interested in upskilling can use their certifications, badges, and other experiences to get a jump start on a degree, making a degree more affordable by decreasing the number of required credit courses and more flexible while still allowing students to gain new skills and enter new job markets. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2020) stated that being awarded credit for prior learning resulted in a time savings of seven to 14 months for degree earners with 12 or more PLA credits, saving students anywhere from \$1,500 to \$10,200 and helping to close the equity gap.<sup>7</sup> Research also indicated that credit for prior learning can improve motivation.

Rising unemployment rates and general job insecurity have encouraged people to actively search for ways to reskill and upskill, opening doors to new jobs and careers. Annie Phillips, the associate director for the Education Strategy Group, states that the need for “clear pathways to opportunity is particularly urgent as millions of workers displaced by the pandemic seek

<sup>4</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R46554.pdf>

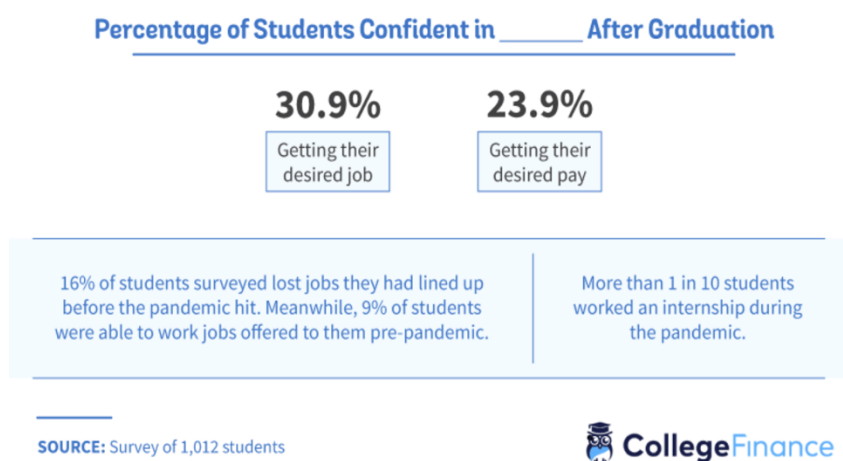
<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cael.org/news-and-resources/new-research-from-cael-and-wiche-on-prior-learning-assessment-and-adult-student-outcomes>

additional training, skills, and credentials to help them get back to work quickly.”<sup>8</sup> People searching for these opportunities are not just adult learners interested in a career change, but also traditional-aged college students who are facing a future of great uncertainty.

College Finance surveyed 1,012 U.S. college students in early 2021.<sup>9</sup> Uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and financial pressure abound in today’s college students who feel less confident in the result of their college education and are more anxious than ever about its cost. Figure 2 illustrates their low-level confidence in getting a job after graduation.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Student Confident, College Finance**



Individuals of all ages are uncertain about the future and facing unemployment at unprecedented rates. People are not looking for expensive educational investments, but quick, intensive, inexpensive, and practical upskilling opportunities. Mark C. Perna of Forbes states that “the rising cost of a college education has caused many students to weigh its potential benefits against its very real price tag. As the pandemic drags on, students are expressing increasing caution about taking on educational debt, with only a quarter of students believing college loans are still a good idea right now.”<sup>10</sup> Allowing individuals to flexibly engage in higher education is the only way that the college degree will remain relevant. Establishing non-credit to credit pathways is a savvy way to both provide students with flexible educational opportunities and ensure that institutions remain actionable.

<sup>8</sup> <https://edstrategy.org/building-pathways-between-non-credit-and-credit-programs-where-to-begin/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://collegefinance.com/uncategorized/the-value-of-college-after-covid-19/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markperna/2021/02/09/an-uncertain-future-ahead-for-college-students-and-they-know-it/?sh=5eba52451580>

## Catalyst for the Research

The original idea for this research project emerged in the UPCEA Vice-Chairs of Non-Credit Committee in 2018 after it identified non-credit to credit pathways as an emerging field in higher education, along with government holding colleges and universities accountable for student time to degree and subsequent job placement.<sup>11</sup>

To understand what other UPCEA members were doing at their institutions in the non-credit to credit space, a working group consisting of Gail Ruhland, Julie Uranis (UPCEA), Lynda Wilson, and Sandra von Doetinchem developed an initial qualitative survey instrument. The questionnaire was distributed to UPCEA members via UPCEA's CORE discussion forum in Summer 2018. In total, 23 UPCEA member institutions responded to the questionnaire. The qualitative results were coded for themes and the results were presented at the UPCEA 2019 Annual Conference.

While the initial survey provided additional context, it raised more questions than it answered. The initial research included multiple shortcomings related to a small sample size and limited institutional representation. Furthermore, survey data revealed the need for additional, refined survey questions and a quantitative approach.

In 2019, the survey developers produced a more refined survey instrument with larger institutional representation. Jim Fong and Bruce Etter supported the idea and joined the team.

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<sup>11</sup><https://www2.palomar.edu/pages/cpl/files/2020/08/CPL-Toolkit.pdf>

## UPCEA Non-Credit to Credit Pathways Study, 2020

### Study Purpose

UPCEA conducted research to understand the emerging field of non-credit education. A voluntary survey was sent to UPCEA member institutions, asking questions about their non-credit education and non-credit to credit pathways.

### Survey Methodology

In total, 374 member institutions received an email invitation to participate in the non-credit to credit pathways study. The survey was also distributed through UPCEA's CORE Network. Representatives from 122 institutions responded to the survey from August 4<sup>th</sup> through September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The margin of error is  $\pm 8\%$  at the 95% confidence level. The survey was designed by Gail Ruhland, Lynda Wilson, and Sandra von Doetinchem with guidance from UPCEA's Center for Research and Strategy. UPCEA also launched an additional snap poll in March of 2021. Methodology for that survey can be seen later in the report. The research was underwritten by MindEdge, a global education and training content provider.

### Demographics

Figure 3 illustrates the types of institutions represented in the survey. Of the 122 responding institutions, 70% are 4-year public institutions, 24% 4-year private institutions, 3% are community colleges, and 4% other.

Figure 3: Which of the following best describes your institution? (n=113)

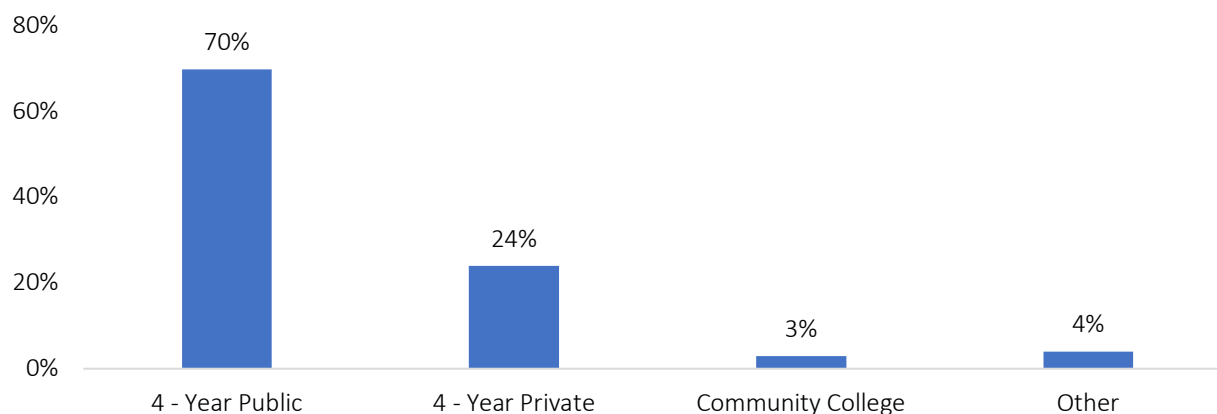


Figure 4 depicts the size of the institutions represented in the survey. Approximately one third (32%) had 30,000 or more for-credit students during the 2018-2019 academic year.

**Figure 4: Overall, how many for-credit students did your entire institution have during the 2018-2019 academic year? (n=113)**

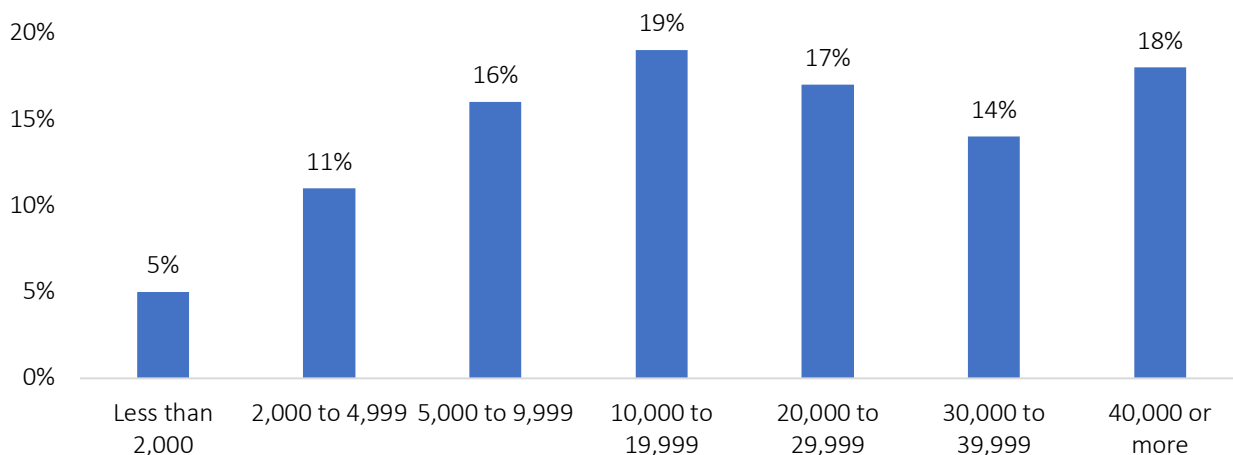
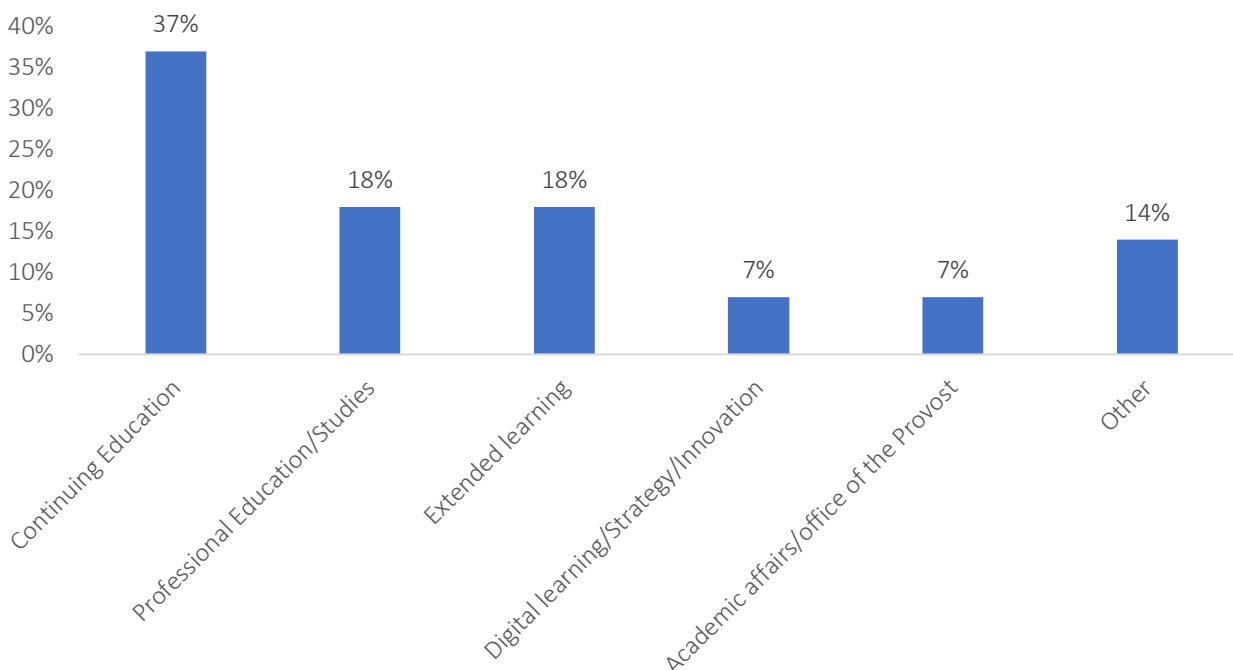


Figure 5 highlights each respondent's department. Over a third (37%) are from their institution's continuing education department.

**Figure 5: Respondents' Academic Unit (n=57)**





## Survey Results

Figure 6 illustrates the survey's initial question: Is your institution currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities? Sixty-six reported that their institution was not currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities (54%), 52 said their institution was currently engaged (43%), and 4 were not sure (3%).

**Figure 6: Is your institution currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities? (n=122)**

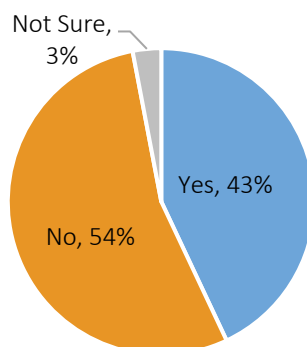
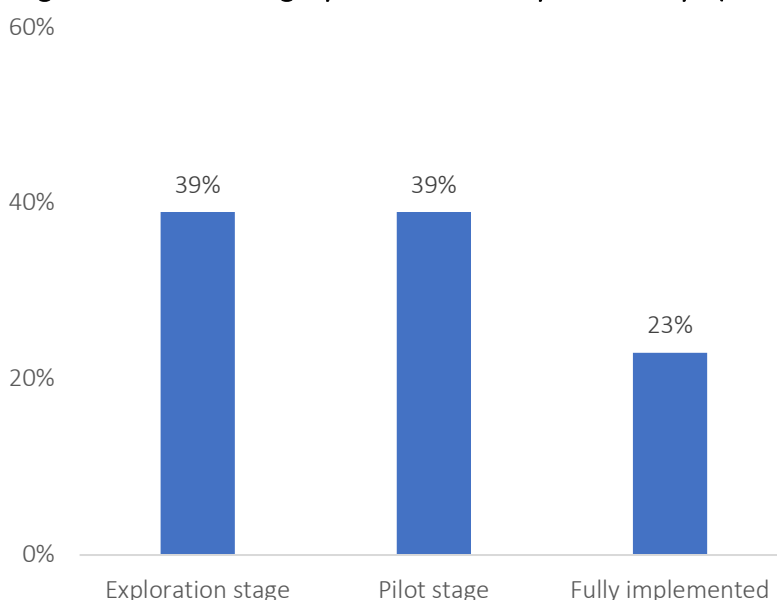


Figure 7 shows the involvement stages of each institution that reported that their institution was currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities. Of the 52 respondents, 20 reported being in the exploration stage (39%), 20 being in the pilot stage (39%), and 12 having non-credit to credit pathways that were fully implemented (23%).

**Figure 7: Which category best describes your activity? (n=52)**



## Institutions in the Exploratory or Pilot Stage

Figure 8 highlights when each institution began exploring non-credit to credit pathways. Forty reported that they were currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathways, of which 15% started exploring pathways prior to 2014. Starting in 2017, an increasing number began exploring pathways, and in 2019, 38% did so. Five percent of respondents were not sure.

**Figure 8: When did you institution first start exploring non-credit to credit pathways? (n=40)**

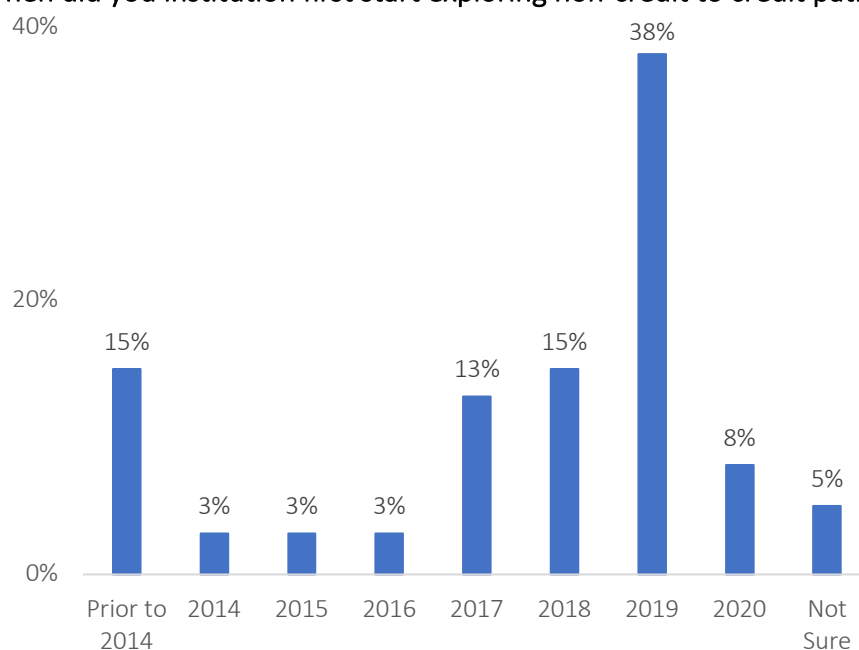


Figure 9 on the following page highlights the reason why each institution began exploring non-credit to credit pathways. The most frequent answer was to accommodate non-traditional, adult learners (93%). Other reasons were to provide greater access to higher education and to provide interest in seeking a degree. Only 10% of respondents indicated that they explored these pathways in order to improve retention and graduation rates.

**Figure 9: Why did you start exploring non-credit to credit pathways at your institution? (n=40)**

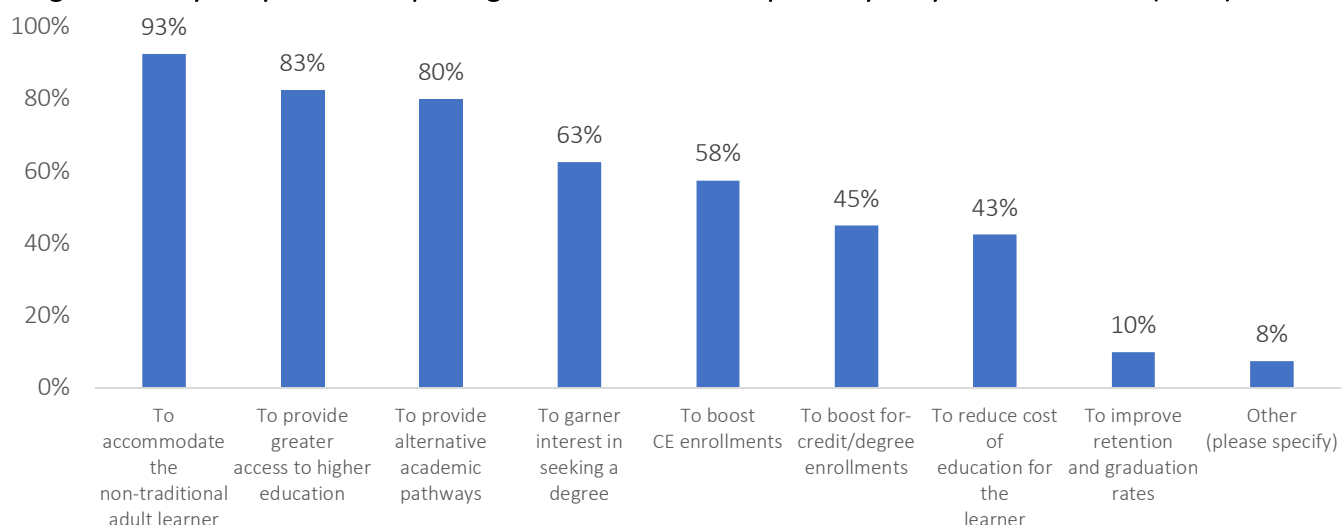


Figure 10 illustrates respondents' belief in the necessity of offering non-credit to credit pathways. The majority (85%) strongly agree or agree that offering non-credit to credit pathways will be a necessity for their institution while 16% disagree or strongly disagree.

**Figure 10: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Offering non-credit to credit pathways will be a necessity for my institution." (n=40)**

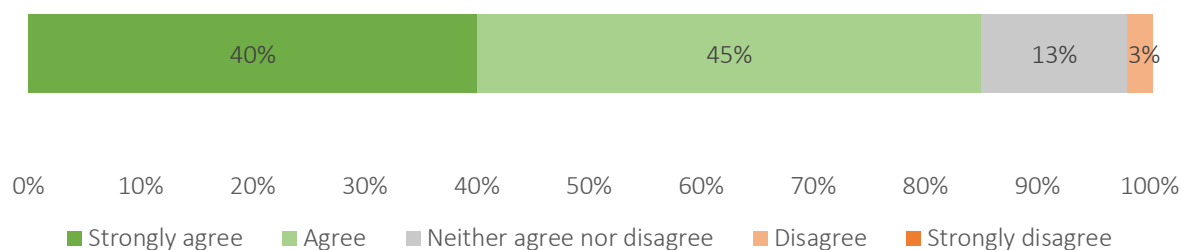


Figure 11 shows the preparedness of institutions in offering non-credit to credit pathways. Only 13% of respondents said their institution is extremely or very prepared. The majority (65%) indicated that they are somewhat prepared. Fewer than a quarter (23%) indicated that their institution was not very prepared or not at all prepared.

**Figure 11: How prepared is your institution to offer non-credit to credit pathways? (n=40)**

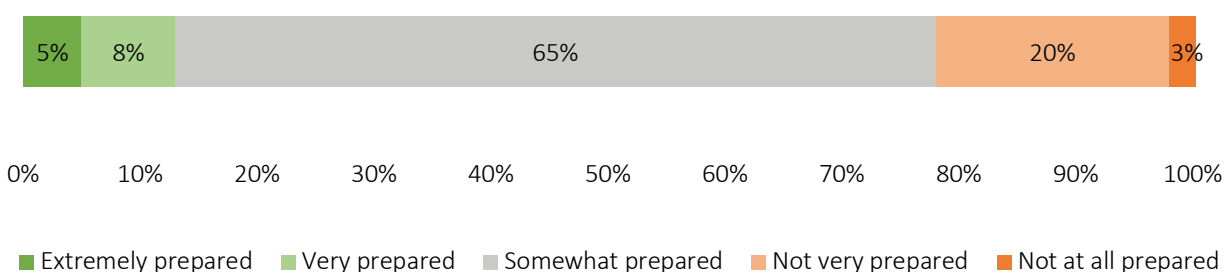


Figure 12 highlights the learning activities accepted as non-credit to credit pathways at each institution. The top three non-credit activities institutions will accept are professional licensing/certification (60%), prior learning assessment (58%), and micro-credentials/badging (58%).

**Figure 12: What non-credit course learning activities will your institution accept as pathways from non-credit into credit? Please check all that apply. (n=40)**

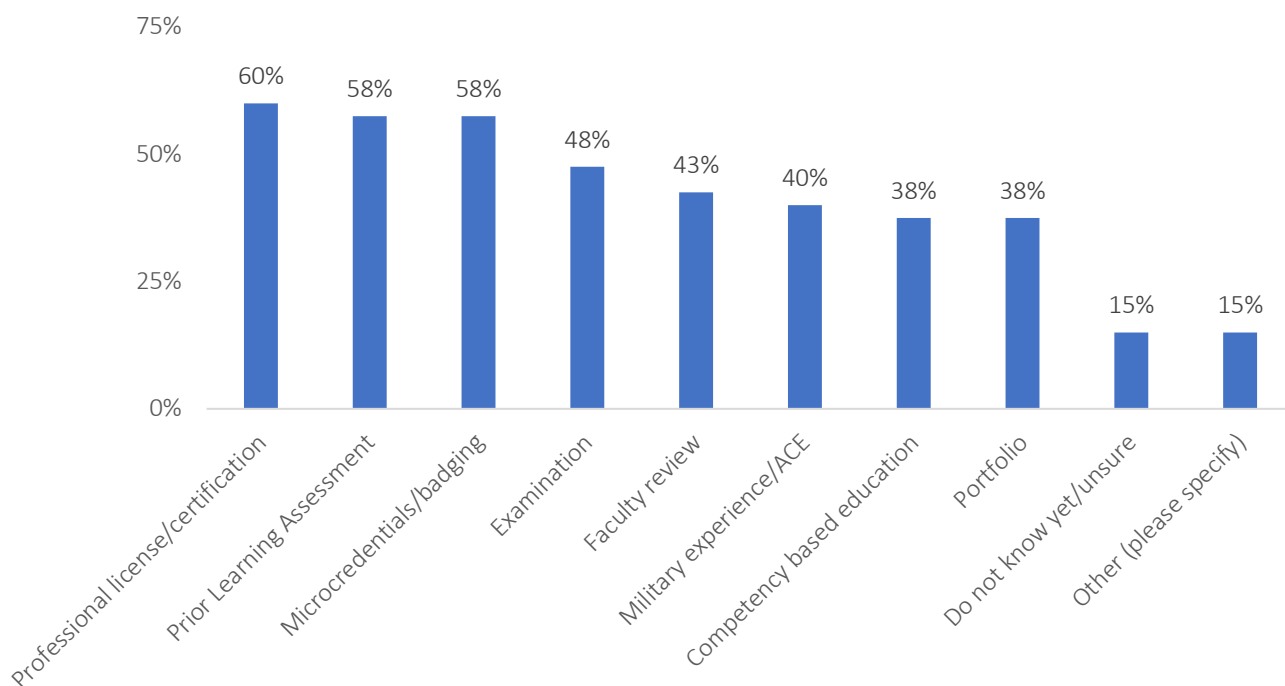


Figure 13 charts whether an institution has a maximum number of credits that can be converted from non-credit learning activities. Half have a maximum number of units/credits that can be converted.

**Figure 13: Will you have a maximum number of units/credits that can be converted from non-credit learning activities? (n=40)**

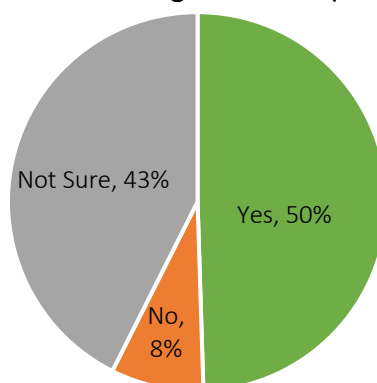


Figure 14 shows whether institutions experienced resistance in the process of implementing non-credit to credit pathways. The majority (62%) experienced some degree of resistance.

**Figure 14: Do you see any resistance towards non-credit to credit pathway activities at your institution? (n=39)**

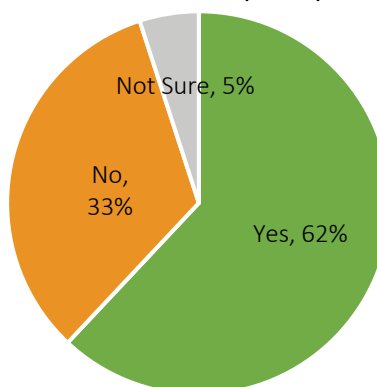


Figure 15 highlights the origin of resistance to the process of implementing non-credit to credit pathways. At the 24 institutions that experienced resistance, all experienced resistance from faculty and 46% from administration.

**Figure 15: Which of the following have you seen resistance from? Please check all that apply. (n=24)**

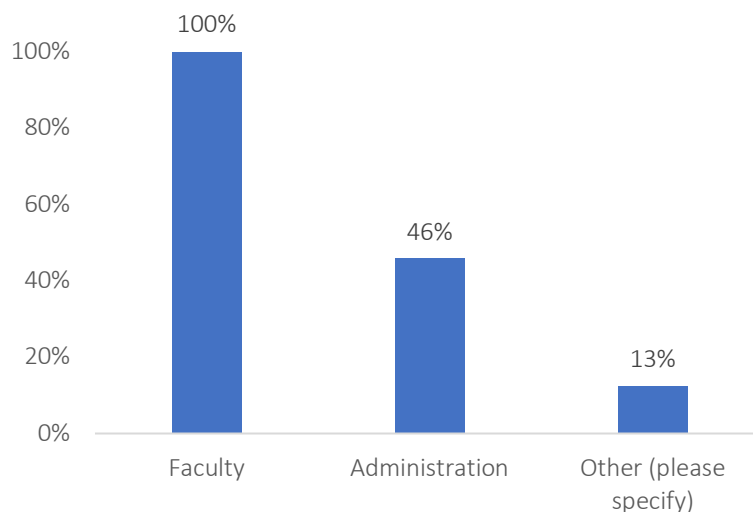
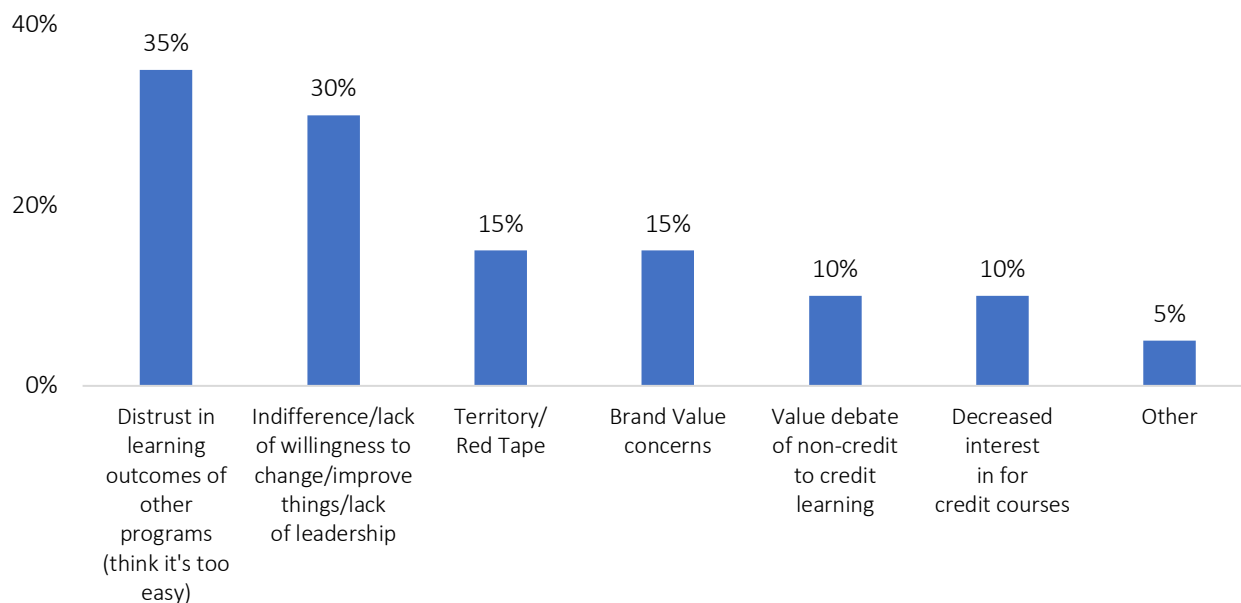


Figure 16 shows that the primary types of resistance experienced at the institutions were distrust in learning outcomes of other programs (35%) and the lack of willingness to change/improve things (30%).

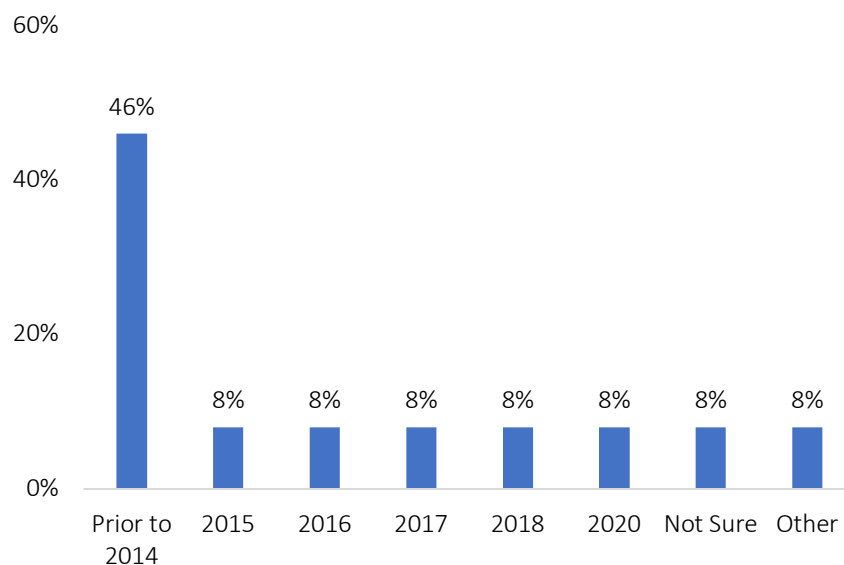
**Figure 16: Types of Resistance Experienced at Institutions (n=20)**



## Institutions with Fully Implemented Pathways

Thirteen of the 122 respondents indicated that their institution had fully implemented non-credit to credit pathways and Figure 17 shows when this occurred. Six of the institutions had fully implemented pathways prior to 2014.

**Figure 17: When did your institution fully implement non-credit to credit pathways? (n=13)**



There is a wide variety of non-credit activities accepted as pathways to credit, including five of 10 institutions accepting prior learning assessments, micro-credentials/badging, professional license/certification, faculty reviews, military experience/American Council on Education (ACE) and more. Included in the “other” category were non-credit conference/experience/certificate completion with a credit option and online learning providers with valid assessments, such as edX and Coursera.

Figure 18 on the following page highlights the learning activities accepted as non-credit to credit pathways at each institution. The most common types accepted include prior learning assessment (50%), microcredentials/badges (40%), professional license/certification (40%), faculty review (40%), military experience/ACE (40%), and competency-based education (30%).

**Figure 18: What non-credit course learning activities does your institution accept as pathways from non-credit to credit? Please check all that apply. (n=10)**

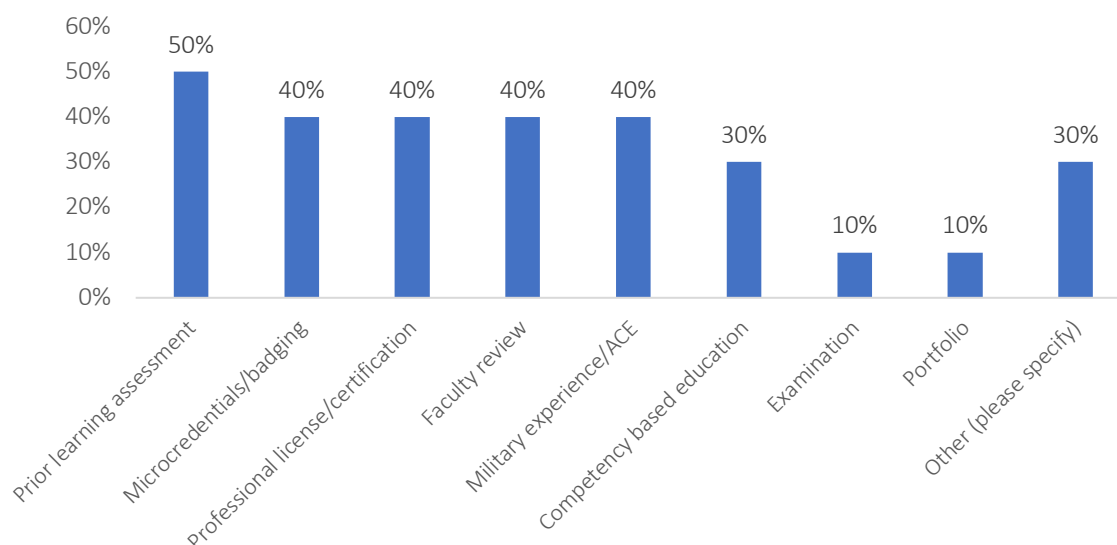
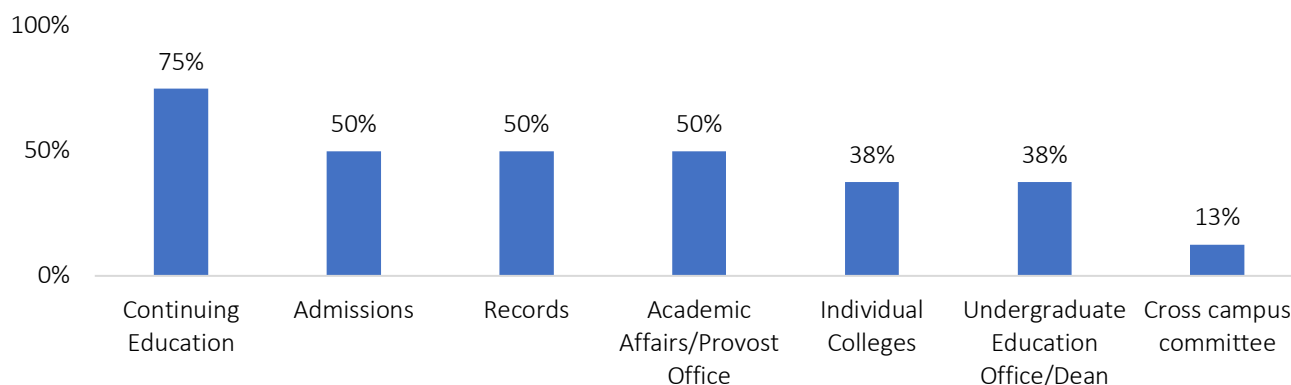


Figure 19 shows the departments tasked with the implementation of non-credit to credit pathway activities. At more than three quarters (82%) of institutions, this was the continuing education department. Half also relied on admissions, records, and academic affairs/provost office. Only 13% indicated having a cross-campus committee in charge of implementation.

**Figure 19: Which departments or units are tasked at your institution during the implementation of non-credit to credit pathway activities? Please check all that apply. (n=8)**

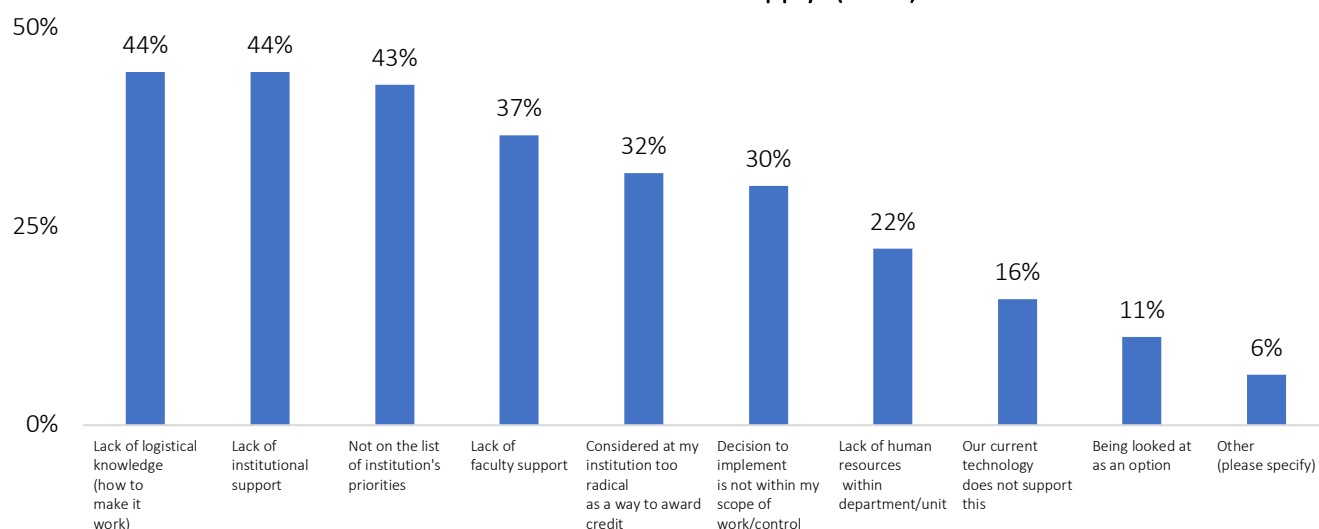




## Institutions Not Currently Engaged in Pathway Activities

Fifty-seven of the responding institutions indicated that they were not currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities. Figure 20 shows the reasons why they are not involved. The most common reasons were a lack of logistical knowledge (44%) and a lack of institutional support (44%). Other common reasons were that pathways were not on the list of institutional priorities (43%), there is a lack of faculty support (37%), and pathways are considered to be too radical (32%).

**Figure 20: Why is your institution not currently engaged in non-credit to credit pathway activities? Please check all that apply. (n=57)**



## Challenges and Hurdles Faced by Institutions in Implementing Non-Credit to Credit Pathways

In March 2021, 112 individuals participated in a brief survey on non-credit to credit pathways. Invitations were sent out via UPCEA's Membership Matters newsletter; by UPCEA's platinum partner, MindEdge Learning; and a link was posted on the UPCEA CORE discussion site. The survey was also distributed through UPCEA's CORE Network.

Slightly less than a third of respondents (30%) said that their institution offers non-credit to credit pathways.

**Figure 21: Does Your Institution Offer Non-Credit to Credit Pathways? (n=112)**

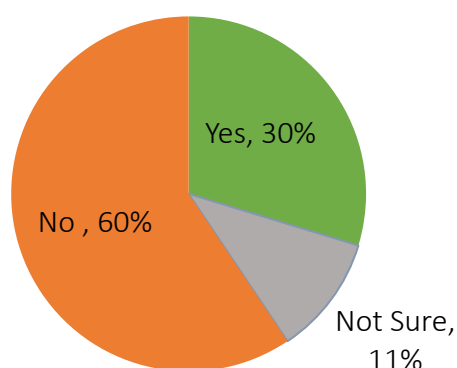
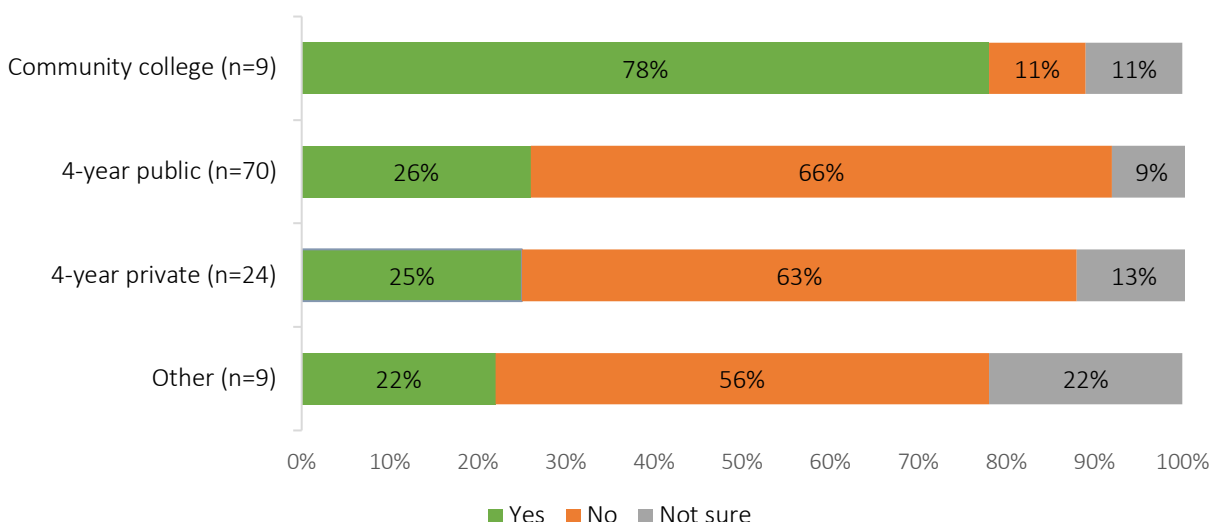


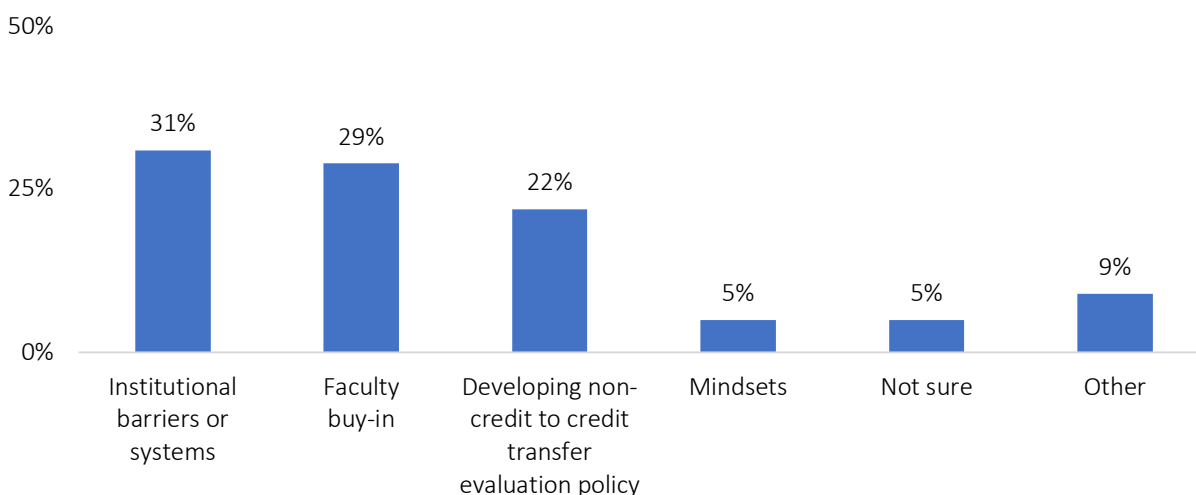
Figure 22 displays the prevalence of non-credit to credit pathways by institution type. Community colleges (78%) were overwhelmingly the most likely to offer non-credit to credit pathways, though their sample size was considerably smaller than 4-year public and 4-year private institutions.

**Figure 21: Non-Credit to Credit Pathways Offered by Institution Type**



Among institutions not currently offering non-credit to credit pathways, the greatest challenges include institutional barriers or systems (31%), faculty buy-in (29%), and developing non-credit to credit transfer evaluation policy (22%).

**Figure 23: What is the Greatest Challenge Your Institution Faces in Implementing Non-Credit to Credit Pathways? (n=59)**



Among institutions that currently offer non-credit to credit pathways, the greatest reported challenges include developing a non-credit to credit transfer policy (48%), faculty buy-in (22%), and institutional barriers or systems (13%).

**Figure 24: What is the Greatest Challenge Your Institution Faced Implementing Non-Credit to Credit Pathways? (n=23)**

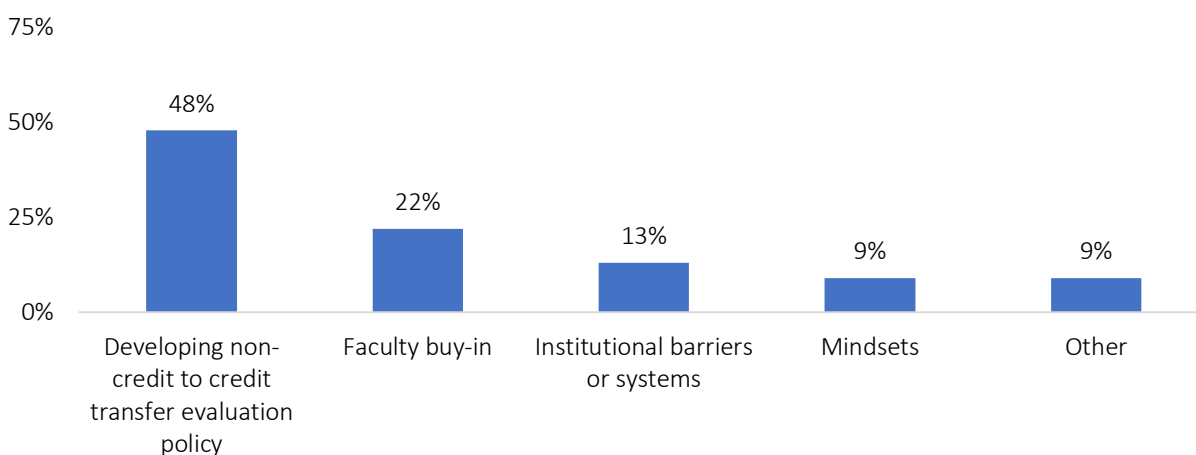


Figure 25 illustrates how these institutions overcame the challenges faced during the implementation of non-credit to credit pathways. Approximately a quarter of respondents (26%) said that they reviewed their courses and conducted research to aid implementation, while another 26% emphasized communication with faculty. It is worth noting that 22% stated that they are still trying to overcome challenges.

**Figure 25: How Did You Overcome those Challenges? (n=23)**

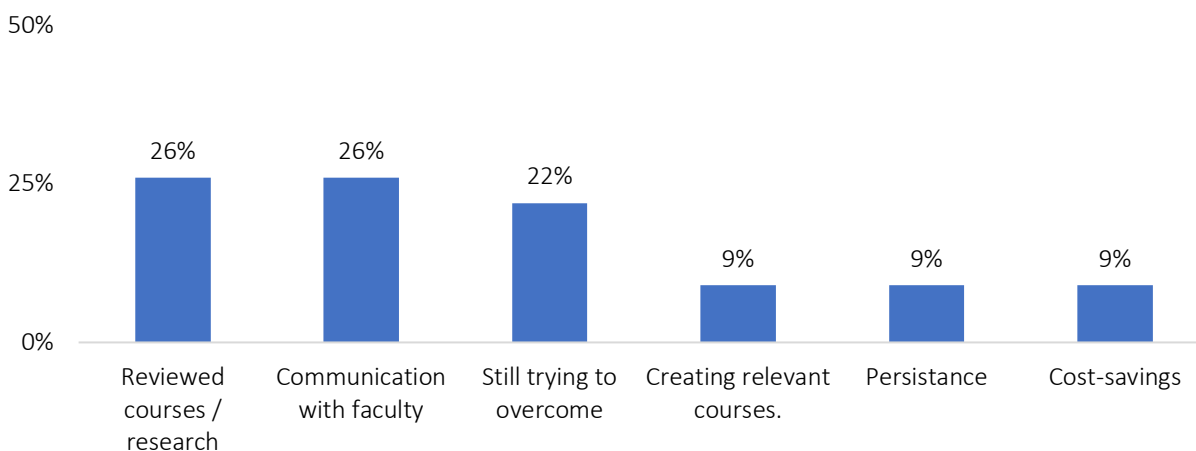
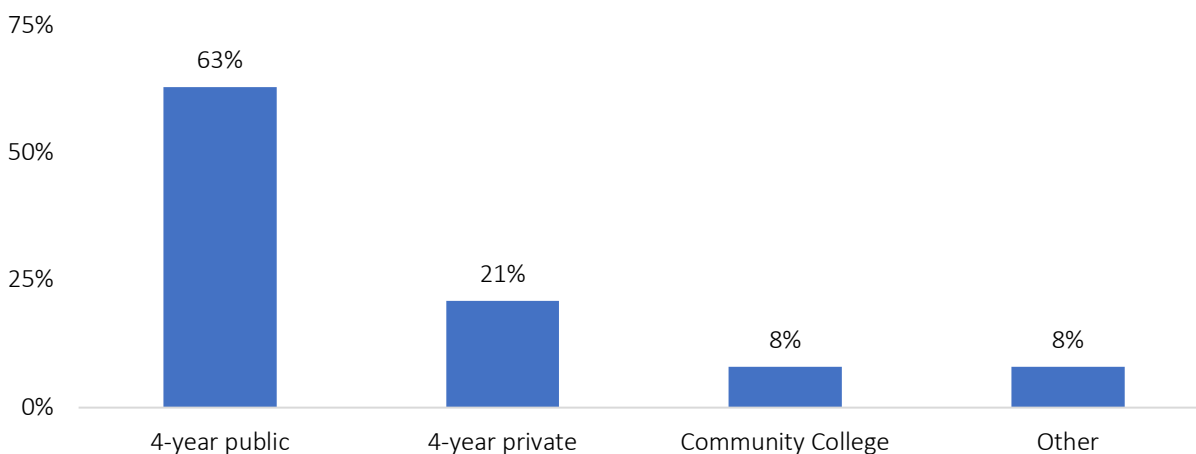


Figure 26 highlights the demographics of the participating institutions. The majority are public institutions (63%).

**Figure 26: Institution Type (n=112)**



## Case Studies and Best Practices

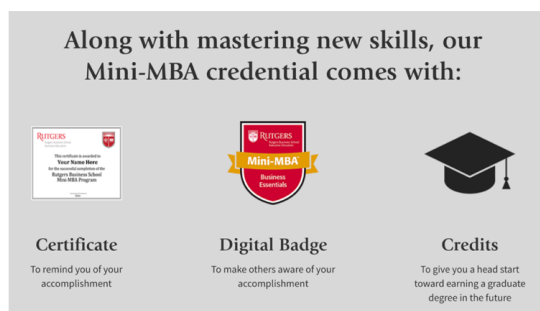
Colleges and universities have shown there are numerous ways to effectively implement non-credit to credit pathways. UPCEA has found that best practices for institutions offering these options include extremely clear verbiage to explain the process, straightforward procedures, and easy-to-find information on the program's website. The examples included in this document exhibit best practices.

Rutgers University offers a non-credit Mini Master of Business Administration (MBA) program that allows its graduates to waive credits if they enroll in their full MBA program. Northeastern University has a robust badge system, including stackable badges that can translate into academic credits. Purdue University's Graduate Council put forward a formal procedure highlighting all the possible avenues to earn credit for non-credit learning experiences. Many non-credit courses can be stacked together and count toward a degree at Keystone College. Some of the non-credit certificate programs at Keystone even qualify for state underwriting for re-training in Pennsylvania. Louisiana State University (LSU) Online instituted a new microcredentials badging program, MicroCreds, in 2019 that allows individuals to translate non-credit badges into credit toward an LSU degree. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has five non-credit, credential programs that allow students to take a series of courses in a discipline and then apply it toward a master's degree at one of many universities.

### Rutgers University

Rutgers University<sup>12</sup> has a non-credit to credit pathways between the non-credit Mini-MBA and the Master of Business Administration program; a 3-credit elective course requirement is waived for Mini-MBA graduates enrolled in an MBA program which can be seen in Figure 27. These Mini-MBAs are progressive programs for business professionals interested in refreshing and enhancing their business savvy through flexible and condensed courses. They are offered in numerous concentrations: business essentials, artificial intelligence, digital marketing, healthcare management, etc., as well as for specific target audiences: Engineers and Technology Managers, Military and Veterans, etc. Although the content of these programs differs based on the concentration, all of the programs result in a formal certificate and a digital badge.

**Figure 27: Rutgers University Mini-MBA Outcomes**

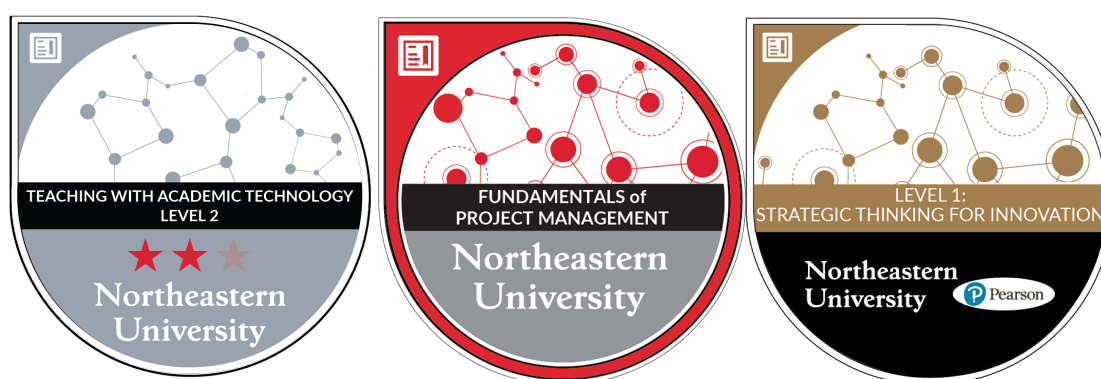


<sup>12</sup> <https://www.business.rutgers.edu/executive-education/classes/1566>

## Northeastern University

Northeastern University offers non-credit to credit pathways in the form of badges. These badges, which can be seen in Figure 28, are a type of micro-credential that represents both credit and non-credit learning experiences. Non-credit badges are not a form of academic credit on their own but can be stacked in order to award a student with prior learning credit for a particular skill or experience.<sup>13</sup> Northeastern has a team of individuals dedicated to determining if there is “sufficient equivalency” between a particular stack of badges and the requirements of a specific course or courses.<sup>14</sup> Partnering with Credly, Northeastern acknowledges learning experiences by awarding individuals with digital badges.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 28: Northeastern University Non-Credit Badges**



## Purdue University

Purdue University has detailed guidelines for their non-credit to credit pathways.<sup>16</sup> According to these guidelines, there are four ways to receive credit through a non-credit pathway: credit by exam, departmental credit, achievement credit, or credit based on advanced standing. While the policies are university-wide, each department has full discretion concerning the acceptance and use of non-credit to credit pathways for their degrees. Final grades from non-credit courses will not be transferred to a student’s transcript even if the courses are counted toward degree completion. Students are limited to 12 awarded credits for non-credit accomplishments. Figure 29 illustrates the approved non-credit to credit procedure.

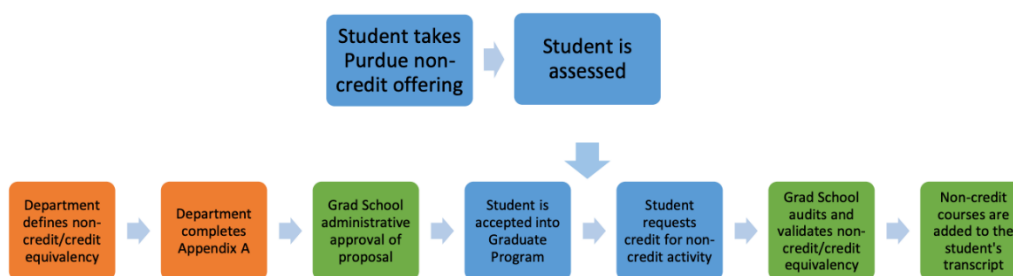
<sup>13</sup> <http://www.northeastern.edu/nuolirc/digital-badges/badges/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.purdue.edu/gradschool/documents/admissions/GC\\_Report\\_18-40a\\_Non-credit-to-credit-pathway,final.pdf](https://www.purdue.edu/gradschool/documents/admissions/GC_Report_18-40a_Non-credit-to-credit-pathway,final.pdf)

Figure 29: Purdue University Non-Credit to Credit Pathway Approved Procedure



## Keystone College

In an effort to promote lifelong learning and career advancement, Keystone College provides non-credit certificate programs that can transfer to academic degrees.<sup>17</sup> Certificate programs are offered in the following subjects: customer service, business management, health and human services, information technology for business, medical billing and coding, paralegal studies, and professional communications. Some of Keystone's certificate programs are approved by the Commonwealth Workforce Development System in Pennsylvania, meaning displaced workers may qualify for state underwriting for re-training through the certificate program.<sup>18</sup> Figure 30 highlights the medical billing and coding certificate program.

Figure 30: Keystone College PA Commonwealth Workforce Development System Approved Medical Billing and Coding Certificate Program<sup>19</sup>



The screenshot shows the Keystone College website. The header includes the college logo and a navigation menu with links: About Keystone, Admissions, Academics, Continuing Education, Campus Life, Alumni, Giving, and Athletics. The main heading is "Medical Billing and Coding Certificate Program". Below this is a section titled "About the Program" with the text "15 credits". The text describes the program as preparing participants for employment in the medical community, involving medical billing, coding, and claims processing. It mentions that medical billing and coding specialists are responsible for translating and sequencing medical documentation into formal, standardized, numerical codes for diagnoses and procedures. The program also supports the billing process by coding and processing claims. Various organizations in the community offer opportunities for employment, including medical practices, hospitals, nursing and rehabilitation facilities, coding and billing services, insurance companies, government agencies, and consulting firms. Upon successful completion of 15 credits online and passing the exam, participants receive a certificate in Medical Billing and Coding. To the right of the text is a contact form with fields for Name (First and Last), Email, and Phone, and a button that says "If you are interested in learning more about this certificate program, please contact us."

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.keystone.edu/continuing-education/certificate-programs-workforce/>

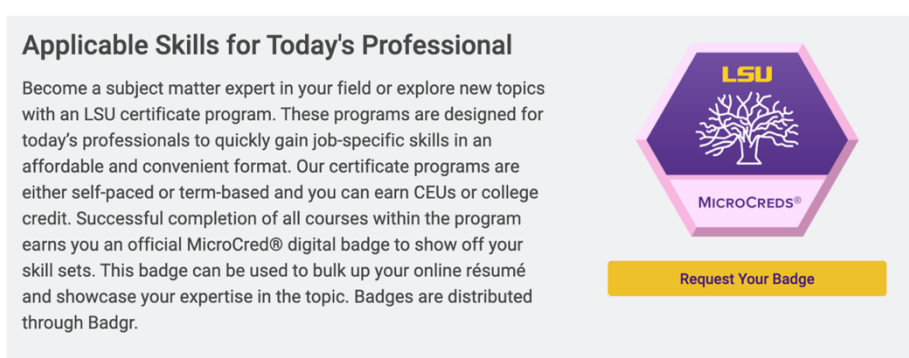
<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.keystone.edu/project/medical-billing-and-coding-certificate-program/>

## Louisiana State University

In late 2019, LSU Online launched a series of microcredentials called MicroCreds.<sup>20</sup> MicroCreds are short, online courses designed to train individuals in specific skill sets in a short period of time. Each MicroCred is part of a series of microcredentials, two to five related courses on a specific topic.<sup>21</sup> Once a series of MicroCreds is successfully completed, students are awarded with a digital badge, seen in Figure 31, that can be shared on online profiles and résumés. Like many other similar programs, LSU distributed these microcredentials through Credly. LSU's MicroCreds cover topics like business, education, human services and social work, liberal arts and humanities, engineering, technology and data analytics.<sup>22</sup> These credentials can be bundled and applied toward a for-credit degree.

**Figure 31: Louisiana State University Online MicroCreds<sup>23</sup>**



## Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) offers five non-credit, graduate-level certificate programs called MITx MicroMasters Programs.<sup>24</sup> The five different credential programs are Supply Chain Management, Data, Economics and Development Policy, Principles of Manufacturing, Statistics and Data Science, and Finance.<sup>25</sup> The openly enrolled programs are offered by MITx and edX and consist of a series of courses and a final comprehensive exam. The MicroMasters credential is a pathway to a master's degree at MIT or a host of other universities that recognize the verified credential.<sup>26</sup> Universities like Arizona State, Bethel, Purdue, Rochester Institute of Technology, and many more each have a predetermined path for MITx MicroMasters graduates, including granting credit toward a master's degree in the same discipline. Successful completion of the MITx MicroMasters does not guarantee admittance to any program with established pathways. Figure 32 displays an example of a verified edX credential.

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.lsu.edu/mediacenter/news/2019/10/17online\\_microcreds.php](https://www.lsu.edu/mediacenter/news/2019/10/17online_microcreds.php)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> <https://online.lsu.edu/continuing-education/certificates/>

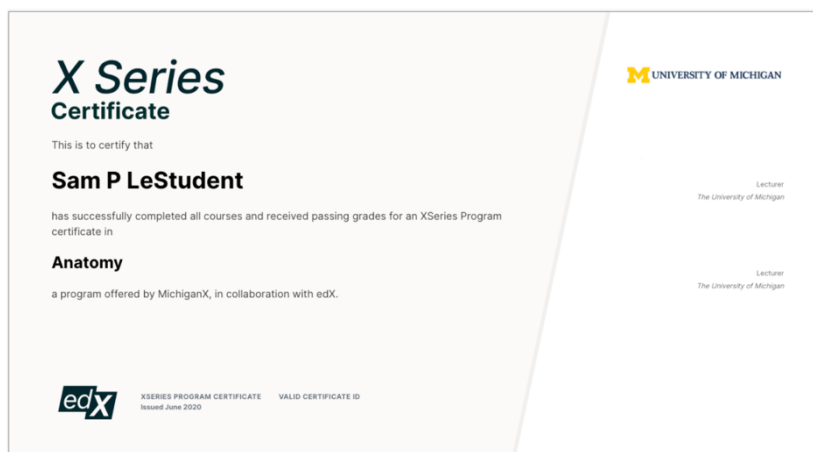
<sup>24</sup> <https://micromasters.mit.edu/>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> <https://micromasters.mit.edu/scm/>



Figure 32: Example of a Verified edX Credential<sup>27</sup>



<sup>27</sup> <https://support.edx.org/hc/en-us/articles/229740967-What-will-the-MicroMasters-credential-look-like>

## Impact on Higher Education

Non-credit to credit pathways are not going away any time soon and will most likely play a greater role in an institution's mission and credential diversification strategy. Institutions of higher education have been optimistic about how they see themselves coming out of the pandemic. However, the demographics were not favorable for traditional education before the COVID-19 pandemic and, despite record applications, application rates do not equal enrollments. Many colleges and universities will soon find themselves in difficult financial situations and will look to diversify their revenues. This may increase the pace for non-credit to credit pathways. Prior learning assessment tools continue to grow, so more institutions will start discovering the "currency of learning." This, too, will accelerate efforts to implement new non-credit to credit pathways.

As more colleges and universities launch non-credit-to credit pathways and build their stackable portfolios, many other institutions will soon follow. Non-credit to credit pathways, as a result, will create competitive advantages for early adopters. Similar to institutions entering the online degree race over the last decade, employers and prospective students view institutions that sit on the sidelines as obsolete or out-of-touch.

Generation Z, born 1996 to 2012, makes up the majority of traditional-age college students. These emerging adults are more concerned about saving money than their predecessors, Millennials.<sup>28</sup> As consumers, Gen Z is far more interested in standing out – buying into unique and valuable products – rather than fitting in.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, Gen Z is predicted to be the most well-educated generation so far.<sup>30</sup> Non-credit to credit pathways and other alternative credential options are the perfect fit for this incoming generation: flexible, unique, cost-effective, and individualized all while being highly educational and professionally beneficial.

The higher education market is likely to fuel non-credit to credit pathways, as early adopters will tout increased enrollments. Individuals who benefit from early-adopting programs or processes for non-credit to credit pathways will share their experiences and their cost savings via social media; other institutions will then demand it. Prospective students, especially Generation Z, will see the cost savings and benefits from non-credit to credit pathways. Institutions that offer them may also see greater retention rates and a conversion into increased enrollments in for-credit programs.

Non-credit to credit pathways may serve as a way to keep employees engaged in learning. Employers will see the benefit: increased education and training means increased employee retention. Employer satisfaction will then increase demand for additional pathways for new employee recruits, perpetuating the entire cycle of non-credit to credit pathways.

<sup>28</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/08/28/is-gen-z-more-frugal-than-older-generations/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-young-and-the-restless-generation-z-in-america>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>

The new economy is moving at a pace where the new degree approval process is too slow. New credentials and pathways to new economy jobs will be the lifelines for many businesses in transformation. Progressive, early adopter institutions will leverage these relationships by overcoming internal obstacles in the non-credit to credit pathway process. UPCEA research shows that institutions are their worst enemy and struggle with how to measure learning, as well as breaking away from the traditional “currency” of learning ... the academic credit. Institutions that have created non-credit to credit pathways have done so through internal course and program reviews and tying those to learning outcomes on the credit side. More importantly, the institutional willingness to overcoming internal politics and anchors to credit by creating non-credit conversions and cost-savings is critical to gaining new students.

## **Role that Organizations like MindEdge Can Play**

One of the great challenges with non-credit to credit pathways is the uncertainty surrounding them. For many institutions, these are uncharted waters. Frequently, individuals at these institutions can feel helpless as they face challenges related to institutional barriers or systems, resistance from faculty, and lack a solidified non-credit to credit transfer evaluation policy. These hurdles often generate a distrust of learning outcomes and a feeling that non-credit learning is not worthy of obtaining the seal of credit approval.

Organizations like MindEdge can provide courses and valid assessments that can mitigate some of these issues, provide third party validity, and generate more internal support for non-credit to credit pathways. As the higher education marketplace becomes increasingly competitive, institutions will need to identify additional pipelines that can attract students. With the current scarcity of training dollars, and the rise of private provider education through companies like LinkedIn, Coursera, and others, developing non-credit to credit pathways will likely become a critical portion of the enrollment funnel for many institutions. Organizations like MindEdge can aid the development of this essential pipeline by reaching new markets and helping to mitigate risk through higher education and corporate partnerships.