



Jobs for  
the Future

# Microcredentials for Humanities Students

## AT A GLANCE

With the right supports, community college humanities/liberal arts students whose majors don't obviously equip them for a good job can be well prepared for one.

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## About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

# Executive summary

The Humanities to Career initiative is grounded in the belief that the study of the humanities/liberal arts (HLA) can be an asset in preparation for technical and professional careers. Lorain County Community College, in Elyria, Ohio; Bunker Hill Community College, in Boston; and Northern Virginia Community College, located outside of Washington, DC, are beginning their third year of work on implementing the initiative. The [grants awarded](#) to the three community colleges by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation were the culmination of an 18-month research and planning process in partnership with Jobs for the Future (JFF).

In a 2023 survey of college students conducted by the [Center for Community College Student Engagement](#) (CCCSE), 42% of students said that their schools had taught them little or nothing about in-demand jobs in their local areas. Although we don't have this data broken out by major, it is likely that HLA majors are heavily represented among those who did not learn what they needed to know to succeed in finding a job and building a career.

The first brief about the project focused on the challenges colleges were facing in identifying professional or durable skills and teaching them.<sup>1</sup> This second brief represents a report from the field about how each college is progressing with integrating professional skills into students' coursework largely through the development of microcredentials—short-term professional or durable skills content that is embedded in humanities programs.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Students studying the humanities—the college programs that have historically been the least likely to incorporate career preparation—are hungry for such learning and appreciate the new emphasis.
- When provided with the right supports, humanities faculty members are eager to learn about the labor market, embed career-connected learning in their courses, and support students on their pathways to good jobs.
- When faculty members engage with students and employers in developing and using professional skills badges, together they create a language that all three groups can understand.

# Introduction

Two-year degree seekers in the humanities/liberal arts enroll in community colleges to prepare for a career, just as STEM and automotive majors do, and their colleges want them to succeed. But students' success in the labor market is heavily dependent on their college providing them with explicit career preparation, including knowledge about the labor market, professional skills development, and internship opportunities, not just advice on choosing a major.

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*Forty-two percent of students reported that their colleges taught them ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’ about in-demand jobs in their regions. ”*

**Inside Higher Ed, April 24, 2024**



In a 2023 survey administered by the [CCCSE](#), “Forty-two percent of students reported that their colleges taught them ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’ about in-demand jobs in their regions. . . . Plus, 46 percent of students reported that college informed them ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’ about the average earnings of their chosen careers.”<sup>2</sup> And a recent [JFF/Gallup/Walton Foundation survey of members of Generation Z](#) (people born between 1997 and 2012) confirmed what we already knew: With very high student-to-counselor ratios, school counselors’ attention is focused on students applying to traditional bachelor’s degree programs, not on those who might want to pursue other options, such as those offered by community colleges and shorter-term, workforce-focused programs.<sup>3</sup> The survey also found that “42% of students have received ‘some’ information about non-college pathways from school sources while 43% have received ‘a little’ information or ‘no information at all.’”



The knowledge gap is pervasive. If you teach 19th-century literature or art history, you're unlikely to know how to infuse career preparation into your classes; HLA faculty members are not expected to be up to date about the labor market. As for students, they tend to know mostly the “starter,” low-wage jobs that compelled them to enroll in community college in the first place. They have big aspirations but inadequate critical information.<sup>4</sup> And while everyone has social connections, many students with low-income backgrounds do not have access to the networks that can lead to quality employment opportunities—though how to network is a professional skill one can be taught. As for employers, many argue that young job applicants lack professional skills, sometimes called “durable,” or soft skills, and assume that HLA graduates lack the technical expertise many positions require.<sup>5</sup> One might conclude that employers undervalue and are impatient with young job applicants.

Given the opportunity costs as well as the financial burden of higher education, students and their families expect colleges to address such realities. For community colleges, which are often poorly funded and open to serving anyone who applies, capacity-building is needed in order to carry out the career preparation retooling required to meet increased demands. Today, institutions are beginning to move from simple advising about course requirements and majors to career navigation, the newer term for enhanced career preparation. Career navigation, defined by JFF as a “nonlinear, lifelong process balancing immediate priorities, current circumstances, and long-term aspirations,” involves a reorientation of institutional culture.<sup>6</sup> In the best circumstances, community colleges are taking a “career everywhere” approach, meaning that everyone—not just those involved in career services or teaching in workforce-identified areas—must play a role.<sup>7</sup>



# Humanities to Career Today

## A report from the field

Two years ago, the [Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation](#), a champion of liberal arts education, funded three community colleges with reputations for innovation to address perhaps the most intractable career preparation challenge head-on: how to prepare humanities/liberal arts students whose college majors don't obviously equip them for a good job. Thus, the bold Humanities to Career pilot project was born.

In the [first brief](#) about the project, we focused on the challenges colleges were facing in identifying professional or durable skills and teaching them.<sup>8</sup> This second brief is a report from the field about how each college is progressing with integrating professional skills into students' coursework. It also briefly touches on how the pilot sites are doing in

developing internships, the most effective way for students to test learning in real time and gain the experience so vital to success in the labor market. At each pilot community college, HLA students are in their first paid internships.<sup>9</sup> An in-depth look at internships will be the topic of a third brief.

## Setting up for success

In the 2020-21 school year, roughly 400,500 students graduated from a community college with a degree in liberal arts and sciences, general studies, or humanities (around one-third of the total number of community college graduates).<sup>10</sup> Yet, in 2015, of all community college graduates (not just HLA students), only 33% transferred to a bachelor's degree program, and just 16% actually completed a bachelor's degree program.<sup>11</sup> This data indicates that while

a system without dead ends is what's needed, community college represents the end of many students' formal education.<sup>12</sup> Without a college's explicit investment in setting HLA students on quality career pathways, those students are likely to enter a job market unfriendly to those with two-year liberal arts degrees. Employers generally don't understand or value the skills students learn as HLA majors, and, in many cases, the student jobseeker is unable to translate what they've learned to the required skills listed in job descriptions—which makes getting a job tough.

According to a 2018 report, a two-year associate's degree offers little additional labor-market value when compared with a high school diploma or some college coursework, leaving associate's degree holders with few options for obtaining an entry-level job that pays a middle-class wage.<sup>13</sup> In the ensuing years, the HLA return on investment has not changed, but an intriguing theme is emerging in the media—that with artificial intelligence likely to replace many entry-level positions, the *human* skills developed in a liberal arts education may make majoring in such subjects a good bet.

Below are vignettes of each college's work overall, followed by a deeper look at how each is developing and implementing programs to help students learn and practice durable skills through the creation of microcredentials and badges. These new short-term credentials are truly experimental. The pilot sites are betting that microcredentials and badges will serve as signals to both students and employers

that community college graduates' education credentials demonstrate their mastery of the competencies most important for success in the workplace.<sup>14</sup>

The faculty development goal for the three pilot sites is the same: to provide faculty members with the basic knowledge and tools needed to understand the world of work, integrate that knowledge into their course offerings, and make that knowledge accessible and practical for students. Changes are already apparent at all three colleges; students now have access to durable or professional skills training that did not exist before the Humanities to Career initiative began. Curricular innovation is evident in the development of microcredentials and badges for durable skills that faculty members either created themselves or are accessing through external providers.<sup>15</sup>

Each college began by exploring the many preexisting lists of, and frameworks for, developing durable or professional skills. They also reached out to other institutions experimenting with or implementing specific micro-credential systems. Each pilot initiative has used the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\) Career Preparation Competencies](#) in some way. As the vignettes demonstrate, however, each college has shaped its micro-credential initiative differently, based on factors such as faculty culture, the regional labor market, prior work on teaching professional skills, and how the NACE competencies could be adapted to the college's intended learning outcomes.

# College Vignettes

## Bunker Hill Community College

Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) had a head start on infusing career knowledge into its curricula for all students. For the past six years, a humanist and two social scientists have led workshops for their BHCC peers on integrating and embedding career-connected learning into their courses. Their approach, called [Ethnographies of Work](#) (EoW), was adapted from a course developed and pioneered at the City University of New York's Guttman Community College. EoW teaches basic ethnographic methods for observing people in their workplaces and provides academic content, including challenging theoretical and philosophical material about work, workplaces, and the skills required for career success. The goal is for students to deepen their knowledge of work and workplaces in an array of courses throughout their student journeys, starting in their first year of college. A faculty community of practice meets monthly to collaborate and share ideas.

At this writing, 52 HLA students are taking advantage of BHCC's Learn and Earn opportunity and already participating in paid internships. Following the interests of its humanist president, the college has long had internships available in Boston's museums and art galleries; several students, for example, are currently working at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Several others are applying

their skills in communications and visual design at two major Boston hospitals. The Mandel-funded Humanities to Career program has its own internship coordinator who not only deepens the pool of internships available to HLA students through employer outreach but also helps them prepare for those opportunities, including helping them write their resumes and practice their interview skills during classroom visits and in one-on-one meetings. A March 2025 special breakfast for employers interested in sponsoring internships for HLA students attracted 20 employer representatives from 10 local companies and was attended by eight HLA faculty and staff members. And the following month, the college held the Humanities Internships Poster Symposium, where participants shared with other students the impact that their internships had had on their career plans. Furthermore, nearly all of BHCC's HLA degree programs have been updated to include an internship course that offers credits that count toward students' associate's degrees.

BHCC is piloting a skills badge program that uses the NACE competencies and BHCC's [Institutional Learning Outcomes](#) as their framework. The project leaders collaborate with faculty and staff members to embed skills from the framework into a sequence of courses that connect to an industry-recognized skill. The college uses the term "badge" to distinguish learning durable skills from microcredentials—industry certifications earned through short-term programs.

# Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce Definitions



## Career & Self Development

Proactively develop oneself and one's career through continual personal and professional learning, awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, navigation of career opportunities, and networking to build relationships within and without one's organization.



## Communication

Clearly and effectively exchange information, ideas, facts and perspectives with persons inside and outside of an organization.



## Critical Thinking

Identify and respond to needs based upon an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information.



## Equity & Inclusion

Demonstrate the awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills required to equitably engage and include people from different cultures and backgrounds. Engage in anti-oppressive practices that actively challenge the systems, structures, and policies of racism and inequity.



## Leadership

Recognize and capitalize on personal and team strengths to achieve organizational goals.



## Professionalism

Knowing work environments differ greatly, understand and demonstrate effective work habits, and act in the interest of the larger community and workplace.



## Teamwork

Build and maintain collaborative relationships to work effectively toward common goals, while appreciating diverse viewpoints and shared responsibilities.



## Technology

Understand and leverage technologies ethically to enhance efficiencies, complete tasks, and accomplish goals.

Visualization by JFF, based on data from: National Association of Colleges and Employers

Once a skills badge has been created, it is validated by an employer partner, who weighs in on how the skill is relevant for a specific career path; these valuable insights are shared with both faculty members and students. BHCC has also produced a handbook for faculty members that includes a model sequence of three basic communications courses with career-embedded content. It has also created guides and workshops for students on how to use the skills badges to explain career-focused learning achieved in the classroom to employers. The pilot badges were created in a collaboration that included the communications department and the [ACE \(Achievement, Cultural Competency, Engagement\) Mentor Program](#), a paid opportunity for experienced students to assist students in first-year learning communities. Badges are also in development within the English, music, and performing arts departments.

## Lorain Community College

Lorain Community College's Humanities to Career program is building on the college's identity as a working campus. As Donna Hunt, the project lead, explained, the term *working campus* means that "we see that each department budget provides for student workers, not just for needed help but to expand paid work experience and the learning from it." This in-house approach also removes the transportation barriers that many students would otherwise face getting to an internship while managing, school, family, and other work responsibilities.

The Lorain's Career Services website provides an invitation specifically addressing HLA students: "The Mandel Humanities to Career Pilot is a learning community open to students in Art, Communication, and English pathways. The learning community is focused on providing

students in the Humanities with a designated career plan and career preparation activities, including work-based learning and internships with local employers.”

In keeping with Lorain’s student-focused culture, its HLA students participate in an extra-credit intensive career preparation learning community and capstone course—prerequisites for being placed in an internship. The project leaders have found that their students need coaching to better understand why internships are critical in preparing them for jobs; younger students, especially, are delightfully optimistic that “things will work out” even if they lack work-based learning experiences. They don’t quite believe the data that indicates that internships are both more difficult to attain than in the past and that increasing numbers of entry-level positions require several years of experience.

Nevertheless, after students have become engaged in the community of practice and internships, they report that they understand the importance of career preparation and all that goes into getting a job and starting a career.

One particularly interesting development is that humanities and business faculty members are building the [Insurance Fast-Track](#) certificate to meet the needs of Progressive Insurance, a nationwide insurer that’s based in Cleveland. Progressive is eager to have HLA students as interns and future employees. Developed by Lorain’s business department, the certificate program includes courses in insurance and finance, communications, and design thinking. Progressive held a virtual [Career Exploration Workshop](#) in April 2025 just for Lorain HLA students. In addition, a local health care practice is exploring creating internships in graphic design and social media marketing for Lorain HLA students.

Lorain’s direct work with students, including their extra-credit learning community, is grounded in and designed for helping students master the NACE competencies. Rather than developing its own microcredentials, Lorain offers students the opportunity to earn extra credit through Coursera and LinkedIn Learning courses (see “*Sample Certificates*” below).

## Sample Certificates



### Google Project Management Certificate (v1)

Issued by [Coursera](#)

Those who earn the Google Project Management Certificate have completed six courses, developed by Google, that include hands-on, practice-based assessments and are designed to prepare them for introductory-level roles in Project Management. They are competent in initiating, planning and running both traditional and agile projects.

[Learn more](#)

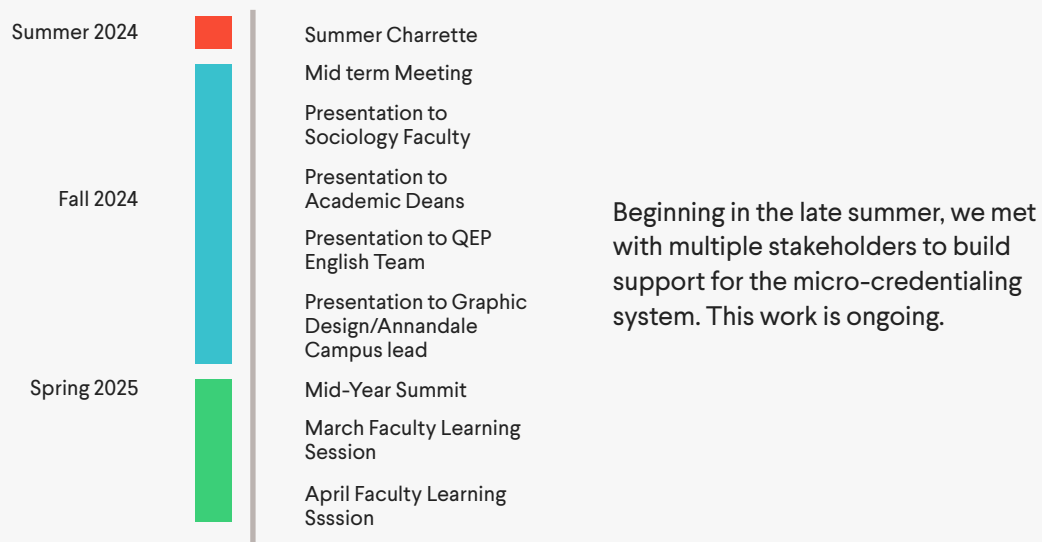
Learning

Faculty members have been introduced to career-connected learning through activities such as attending a pre-semester seminar on labor market information, department chair meetings to gain their support for the project, and a workshop on incorporating work-based learning into transfer pathways. They have also learned the same durable skills and NACE language that their students have. Finally, as Hunt noted, “Lorain’s campus has long provided a wide range of opportunities for students to learn about careers, meet employers, and network, but no one thought to open these to humanities students.”

## Northern Virginia Community College

The top priority for Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is to actively engage faculty members in addressing questions about career opportunities for HLA students. A set of intensive activities they have participated in is outlined in the graphic below.

### Faculty Professional Development



Visualization by JFF, based on data from: NOVA

As Nicole Evans, the project lead, noted, when she introduced the Humanities to Career program at the college, faculty members were “surprised but then excited” that their campus was taking this serious step to enhance the value of humanities degrees and that the humanities were no longer in the shadow of STEM and health care. Identifying and engaging faculty members at six campuses and finding the right students for the project among the 70,000 enrolled made NOVA’s efforts particularly challenging. The other two colleges have one English department each, while NOVA has English programs at its campuses in Alexandria, Annandale, Loudoun, Manassas, and Woodbridge, as well as online. Even with such a far-flung faculty, its commitment has been steady and impressive.



The project started with English 111, building on departmental work to meet the goals of NOVA's [Quality Enhancement Plan](#), which was developed by its regional accrediting organization, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. It is now integrated into multiple disciplines and on the priority lists of NOVA faculty members. One valuable unanticipated consequence of NOVA's Humanities to Career approach is that as faculty members have integrated career applicability into their assignments, they have found that students' engagement, attendance, and grades have improved. Clearly, students appreciate their professors' recognition that they are attending college, at least in part, to start on a career journey. As is the case at BHCC and Lorain, students are already participating in internships, some through NOVA's established [internship placement service](#) and others through the [Parker Dewey](#) micro-internship platform, which links students with virtual short-term projects that employers have posted.

NOVA's strategy is the most complex of the three colleges piloting Humanities to Career. Its initial goal was to create a common language for employability skills. NOVA started with the [U.S. Department of Education's Employability Skills Framework](#) because it appreciated the depth and how well the skills aligned with its HLA coursework. NOVA also appreciated the

skill statements developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). After conducting interviews with employers and having discussions with faculty members, it modified preexisting frameworks to create a final product that is quite original. Engagement has taken an intensive form at NOVA, with faculty members constructing 28 microcredentials based on three AAC&U skills categories: communication, creative thinking, and leadership and teamwork.

Evans said that once faculty members realized that they were already imparting these skills in their students, they were better able to break down those skills into more bite-sized chunks of content, embed them in coursework, and create assessments to verify student competence in areas such as editing, proofreading, negotiation, and role awareness. Faculty members also share their revised assignments in a professional learning community of about 40 members. A particular focus has been to redesign assignments to incorporate a professional writing micro-credential. The graphic below illustrates one of the periodic summits the project leader holds in which faculty members present their revised courses and microcredentials to the peer learning community. These are then posted on a resource page to encourage faculty members to borrow from one another.

## Faculty Highlighted Events

**NOVA** Northern Virginia Community College

Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation

**MICRO-CREDENTIALS: IN PRACTICE**  
ENGLISH, POLITICAL SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY

Friday, March 28  
at 10am

Teaching faculty from all disciplines are invited to learn more about micro-credentialing opportunities for in person and NOL courses.

15

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CONTACT US ▶ Phone Number: 703.3232327 Canvas site: Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Workforce Initiative

The flyer features three circular portraits of faculty members and two QR codes. The background is green with orange and white wavy lines.

“

*The...hardest thing is to see the skills in ourselves. Made me realize what I could do with feedback and help show [I] have marketable skills [I] didn't realize.* ”

**UNNAMED STUDENT, FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW,  
MANDEL HUMANITIES TO CAREER PROGRAM**



# Conclusion

The JFF evaluation team has completed site visits to each of the three campuses. Its findings will allow us to learn more deeply about the success of micro-credentialing and badging. The most straightforward question we hope to answer is whether the durable skills that a student practices, masters, and documents will improve their ability to successfully pitch themselves as prepared for employment. We are testing our hypothesis that the results will be positive. Since the project is still in the early stages, it's too soon to come to any conclusion about whether this is the most important question or even one that data will be able to answer.

It may also turn out that our initial questions missed subtle but important impacts because they presumed cause and effect—"I passed an assessment in creative thinking and teamwork so I can explain to a recruiter why I'm a good fit for a specific job and land an interview." What we do know already is that students in focus groups are reporting a much higher degree of awareness of the multiple aspects of preparing for a career. A JFF evaluator summarized comments of one focus group:

**“Students indicated that their thinking about careers differs a lot from when they started the learning community. They spoke highly and at great length about the supports they received from things so simple as having dedicated time to focus and think through how to get to their desired career. They also noted that they learned practical skills—for example, resume-writing best practices that included adjustments needed so that a technology screener would not throw out their submission. Of note, students shared they understand that learning is a lifelong experience.”**

Regarding career decisions and support, one student said, “The program . . . makes me feel a career is more achievable. Seeing what is available has helped. I can see what I need to do to be ready for an interview online.” Another student confirmed what program planners suspect to be true of many: “The . . . hardest thing is to see the skills in ourselves. Made me realize what I could do with feedback and help show [I] have marketable skills [I] didn't realize. Practice interview was good. Hate talking about self or bragging so the learning experience was good.”

The big takeaway from the Mandel Humanities to Career work so far is encouraging: The group of students who were least likely to see their programs connected to career preparation are hungry for such learning and appreciate this new emphasis. And faculty members, when provided with the right supports, are eager to help students on their way. Based on what we've seen on each campus thus far, we see that faculty and student engagement in developing and using professional skills badges and work-related modularized skills certificates creates a language for them as well as for the workplace—a language that employers can understand as they assess candidate qualifications for internships and permanent employment. That is happening because of the project's deep preparation of faculty members, students, and employers.

The two vital components of HLA programs—teaching durable skills and providing internships—point to how the success of the initiative will be measured: Are employers opening their doors to English, music, theater, and history majors as a result of this initiative? In addition, we hope to learn what kinds of internships and jobs employers are offering HLA students—especially in unexpected sectors of the economy.



# Endnotes

- 1 Nancy Hoffman, *Building New Pathways From Humanities to Careers* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, September 2024), <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Building-New-Pathways-from-the-Humanities-to-Careers.pdf>.
- 2 *How Clear Is Their Path?: Guided Career Pathways and Community College Students* (Austin, Texas: Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2024), <https://www.ccsse.org/guided-career-pathways/Guided-Career-Pathways.pdf>; Sara Weissman, “Survey Finds Community College Students Need Better Career Preparation,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.inside-highered.com/news/institutions/community-colleges/2024/04/24/report-community-college-students-need-more-career>.
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- 5 Many reports conclude that recent graduates lack the requisite skills and experience to meet the requirements of entry-level jobs. See, for example, Ashley P. Finley, *The Career-Ready Graduate: What Employers Say About the Difference College Makes* (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.), <https://dgm81phvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AACU-2023-Employer-Report.pdf>; and Carolyn Crist, “Executives and Workers Alike Say Entry-Level Workers Seem Unprepared,” *HR Drive*, November 14, 2024, <https://www.hrdrive.com/news/executives-workers-say-entry-level-workers-seem-less-prepared/732927/>.
- 6 Unpublished memo, ASA Center for Career Navigation at JFF.
- 7 “Career Everywhere Conference 2025,” uConnect, accessed August 20, 2025, <https://www.gouconnect.com/career-everywhere/events/>.
- 8 Hoffman, *Building New Pathways*, <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Building-New-Pathways-from-the-Humanities-to-Careers.pdf>.

- 9 The promising early news from the pilot sites is that when a community college’s internship coordinator takes the time sit down for an exploratory conversation with an employer, they find that most do appear to be intrigued by internships for humanities students.
- 10 “Number of Community College Graduates in the United States in 2020-21, by Field of Study,” Statista, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/421073/us-community-colleges-distribution-of-graduated-students-by-field-of-study/>.
- 11 “Number of Community College Graduates,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/421073/us-community-colleges-distribution-of-graduated-students-by-field-of-study/>; Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya, Davis Jenkins, et al., *Tracking Transfer: Community College Effectiveness in Broadening Bachelor’s Degree Attainment* (New York: The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center, 2024), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/tracking-transfer-community-college-effectiveness-1.pdf>.
- 12 David Altstadt, David Bradley, Mary Clagett, Erica Cuevas, et al., *No Dead Ends: A Policy Road Map for Ensuring Boundless Opportunities at School, at Work, and in Life* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, June 2024), <https://info.jff.org/hubfs/240701-NoDeadEnds-Report1-JA-FD-V3.pdf>.
- 13 Mark Schneider and Matthew Sigelman, *Saving the Associate of Arts Degree: How an A.A. Degree Can Become a Better Path to Labor Market Success* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, January 2018), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Saving-the-Associate-of-Arts-Degree.pdf>.
- 14 See Greg DeSantis and Meena Naik, “Too Many Credentials, Not Enough Value. Let’s Change That,” Jobs for the Future, June 5, 2025, <https://www.jff.org/too-many-credentials-not-enough-value-lets-change-that/>.
- 15 Although they don’t have clear definitions, “microcredentials” and “badges” are generally terms for short, skills-based certifications of specific competencies.



Building a Future  
That Works  
**For Everyone**