



Higher Education Certificate Programs

Background

In May 2014, the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee (PRI) voted to examine the effectiveness of workforce development sub-baccalaureate certificate programs to determine if the type of certificate holders Connecticut is producing is aligned with employer demand. The study is to develop a detailed description of certificates awarded by the Board of Regents for Higher Education (BOR), (which for this project is effectively the 12 public community colleges and Charter Oak State College), and 57 private occupational schools, which tend to be for-profit.

A prominent workforce study has indicated that in Connecticut 65 percent of all jobs will require some type of postsecondary education beyond high school by 2018. The most recent figures indicate that Connecticut's postsecondary education attainment level is about 56 percent. This suggests a fairly significant gap.

The data in this report show that private occupational schools offered 308 certificate programs and accounted for about three-quarters (18,668) of the approximately 25,000 certificate program enrollments and 19,000 (13,651) awards in academic year 2013. (The actual totals would be higher because 20 percent of private occupational schools did not report complete data).

Over the same time period, community college *noncredit programs* enrolled 4,240 students (16 percent) and awarded 3,208 certificates (17 percent) from 141 programs, while community college *for-credit programs* had 1,819 enrollments (7 percent) and 2,035 awards (11 percent) granted in 101 programs.

This report contains staff findings and 11 recommendations.

Main Staff Findings

Transparency and accountability needs to be improved for all certificate programs. Potential and current students cannot easily compare certificate program costs and outcomes across schools and colleges.

BOR needs to correct fundamental problems in managing certificate programs. BOR's process for collecting and reporting certain data about for-credit and noncredit certificates is unreliable and not comprehensive. BOR does not have a definition of certificates or a comprehensive, coordinated marketing plan for certificate programs

Similarly named noncredit certificate programs as well as the noncredit program approval processes vary considerably by community college. Differences among similar programs included course hours, tuition costs, and the type of qualifications earned. Not all community colleges use the same criteria for approving new certificates.

OHE needs to improve oversight practices and capabilities. OHE does not audit certain private occupational school student data and relies on unpaid evaluators to review occupational school certificate curriculums.

PRI Staff Recommendations

OHE shall maintain a website that provides for comparative information among certificate programs. Certain certificate program information shall also be available on each school's website. The goal of this recommendation is to allow potential and current students to be able to compare and select the certificate program that best meets their needs

BOR's management processes should be improved. BOR should: improve its tracking of student information; develop a written definition of educational certificates; and create a system-wide marketing plan.

BOR should adopt a uniform naming convention for noncredit programs offered by the community colleges. The community colleges need to reduce the confusion that can ensue because certificates with the same name differ in many aspects.

Certain BOR practices should be standardized. The approval process for new noncredit programs should be consistent but maintain approval at each community college level. All 12 community colleges should consider incorporating the cost of taking a national certification exam into the cost of tuition and fees as some do now.

OHE should audit data submitted by independent colleges and universities, and develop a cost estimate to fund curriculum evaluators. Ensuring the accuracy of data and appropriate curriculums are important oversight functions.