



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), private nonprofit colleges and universities, 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.

Update focus. The purpose of this committee staff update document is to: provide information on the number of certificates awarded in the state based on available data, and, to the extent possible, how that compares to other states; explain the role of government in overseeing and regulating certificate providers; identify the state agencies that have a role in certificate production and assessing workforce demands; and explain the next steps in the study.

Main Points

What are postsecondary sub-baccalaureate educational certificates? Definitions vary but these typically are described as shorter-term postsecondary credentials that focus on job-specific skills or knowledge. They are distinct from other credentials, such as professional certifications or occupational licenses. Certificate program types, length, and purposes are fairly diverse. Certificate programs can be either for credit or noncredit.

What are the benefits of these certificates? Educational certificates can be very beneficial to students and employers. Certificates are often viewed as a recognized credential that is responsive to current workforce needs that helps employers. For students, the benefits are a savings in time and money, compared to a degree, increased earnings potential, and improved job stability. Individual outcomes, of course, can vary considerably.

How does Connecticut compare to the rest of the nation? Although Connecticut appears to rank low among the states (11th lowest) when comparing the percentage of the population that hold educational certificates as the highest level of educational achievement, it has a high degree of overall postsecondary educational attainment (7th highest). However, a definitive conclusion cannot be made because there are serious data deficiencies.

What are the principal federal oversight mechanisms? There are three main elements: 1) the criteria set by the U.S. Department of Education for an institution to become eligible to participate in the Federal Student Aid (FSA) program; 2) the FSA requirement that eligible institutions report certain demographic and student debt data to a federal database; and 3) the mandate that schools participating in the FSA program to disclose student cost and completion rates to students and potential students.

Which state agencies are responsible for providing oversight and workforce data? The Board of Regents for Higher Education (BOR) oversees Connecticut's 12 community colleges and is the primary place that sub-baccalaureate certificate programs are offered in the public arena. The Office of Higher Education (OHE) is responsible for licensing schools and colleges, including the 57 private occupational schools that award the majority of certificates. The Department of Labor, the state's lead workforce agency, produces information on occupational demand, while the Office of Workforce Competitiveness serves as the governor's principal workforce development policy advisor.

Next Steps

1. Staff will be analyzing data from BOR, from OHE, and the nonprofit college association, to provide a more comprehensive profile of certificates programs and students during the next phase of the study.
2. Department of Labor and BOR personnel are combining community college student and employment data to allow for an examination of certificate graduates outcomes in terms of placement rates, employment relevancy, and earnings.
3. Department of Labor projections for both certificate completers and occupations that are related to certificates will be analyzed in terms of the alignment between graduates and available jobs.