

# Increasing access through noncredit education

By Madelyn A. Arballo

Noncredit programs have been welcoming students and promoting career and college pathways for decades, regardless of individuals' educational, personal or immigration status. These programs provide a safe space to engage with faculty, staff and peers. Simply stated: noncredit education transforms the lives of adults within a safe space as they seek jobs, higher wages, life enrichment, college preparation and support during college.

Take for example, Liliana, a Mexican immigrant who arrived in the United States with no knowledge of English and quickly discovered the Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) noncredit English as a Second Language Program in Walnut, California. Over a number of years she acquired enough English and writing skills to earn her high school equivalency certificate. However, she was motivated to follow her intended career pathway in college because of the availability of a noncredit vocational ESL business course sequence. She has almost completed an associate degree in business with future plans to earn a master's degree in business and gain full-time employment. Although Liliana's experience is her own, noncredit education is a valuable resource for countless students to achieve their potential and goals.

## WHY NONCREDIT?

In 2018-19, more than 47,000 students took noncredit courses at Mt. SAC, many of whom were seeking college readiness and/or career skills for immediate employment. Given the variety of coursework options and flexible scheduling, noncredit students are able to customize their programs in ways that support their short- and long-term goals, as illustrated by Liliana's successful journey.

Although it is not the case in all states, noncredit education in California community colleges is free, which eliminates some of the financial barriers faced by students. Further, there is flexibility in scheduling courses during the evening, weekends or on a compressed calendar to be responsive to student or employer demand. Noncredit programs also are well known for engaging and delivering a personal touch to students, while utilizing a case management approach that includes embedded counseling and wrap-around services to address such things as homelessness and food insecurity.

Each noncredit student has a unique pathway and these programs offer multiple access points for students.

## SUPPORTING CREDIT SUCCESS

Supporting credit is a growing role for California noncredit programs. This is due to the 2017 landmark legislation California Assembly Bill 705, which essentially ended the long-standing practice of placing credit students into extended sequences of remedial math and English courses based solely on standardized assessments. Placement is now determined through multiple measures that include transcripts, prior coursework, certifications, interviews and other means.

As a result, students can enroll directly into transfer-level math and English courses without taking years of remedial coursework. Although the intent is to promote increased equity and access for all students seeking transfer-level coursework and degrees/certificates, some students still do not feel prepared for the higher placement.

A solution to knowledge gaps is the availability of noncredit educational options to credit students who may not be ready for transfer-level coursework. As a result of the new policy, most colleges now offer primarily transferable math and English with very few or no courses below transfer level. In order to address potential gaps in preparation, some colleges are pairing credit co-requisite math and English foundational courses with transfer



Certified nursing assistant students at Mt. SAC.



courses to improve course success. However, some colleges need to utilize noncredit instruction by offering the co-requisite as a free noncredit course. This enables students to avoid accumulating non-transferrable units.

Flexible noncredit interventions to AB705 are becoming more common in California community colleges for students who either do not feel prepared for credit-level courses or who drop out of transfer-level math or English classes. Many noncredit programs offer short-term intensive boot camps prior to enrollment that focus on essential skills needed to succeed in transfer-level courses.

Mt. SAC takes the practice a step further by providing a safety net for students who drop transfer-level math or English courses at any point during the semester. Noncredit open-entry, open-exit courses are available with curriculum focusing on specific skills that students need for success in transfer-level courses.

One noncredit student, German, took advantage of these short-term, competency-based interventions. He enrolled at Mt. SAC to show his teenage children that employment after high school was not their only option. He began in noncredit because he didn't have the confidence to consider taking college courses. However, after taking the noncredit course, he not only

concerned about student deficiencies in math skills needed for a credit pharmacology course. Since it's essential that nurses calculate doses correctly, noncredit faculty created a contextualized math skills course to improve student achievement in credit pharmacology.

This successful collaboration has yielded a 12 percent higher course success rate when students take the noncredit pre-requisite. Another co-requisite noncredit course was designed with the natural sciences faculty targeting science literacy, teaching students how to read and comprehend textbooks and lab reports. Students who complete the noncredit course have an 87 percent success rate in credit science courses.

### CAREER EDUCATION

Noncredit pathways in short-term vocational programs include a broad spectrum of vocational offerings, which can be tailored to fit the needs of students and employers and address labor market need. These vocational courses also enable students to explore fields of study through noncredit courses that are free and do not require completion of college credits.

Mt. SAC provides students with noncredit "mirrored" courses that allow noncredit students to enroll in credit courses, complete the same work as their credit classmates and gain skills needed for immediate employment in their field of study at no cost. This approach

This ensures a natural bridge to credit for students who had not envisioned pursuing a degree when they first enrolled in noncredit.

There is an incorrect stereotype that noncredit classes only cater to students who have not yet begun credit-level courses. This is not the case for many students who take advantage of noncredit courses both during and after their college experiences. In fact, students often find that noncredit courses provide them with the support and direction that they need even after they finish their degree.

Alexandra was in the process of completing her associate degree for transfer but was still unsure of her career pathway and major. A flyer for a six-week noncredit personal care attendant course caught her attention and after taking the course she was convinced that healthcare was her perfect career fit. Alexandra is now enrolled in a nursing bachelor's degree program and will graduate in June 2020.

### THE FUTURE OF NONCREDIT

Over the past two years, Guided Pathways structures have helped California community colleges focus students and expand access while also designing their institutions to be more "student ready." These approaches are familiar to noncredit programs as faculty and staff have been employing these student-focused practices for many years with great success.

As colleges identify areas for growth, noncredit courses and programs are effective, easily implementable solutions to student preparation, transfer-level course outcomes, regional employment needs and student barriers such as fees and credit accumulation. Critical to the success of the noncredit student journey is recognizing the student's desired goal and potential as well as the collaborations with credit and employers. ■

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enrolled into credit English but also chose to pursue an associate degree in drug and alcohol counseling. He's been able to secure employment in his field of study as he completes his degree.

Offering a noncredit pre-requisite or co-requisite is not a new concept, and at Mt. SAC the role of noncredit in credit student success continues to grow. For example, two years ago, Mt. SAC nursing program professors were

allows students to become marketable to employers who are interested in hiring students with the right skills, rather than credit certifications. These students also can smoothly transition into credit programs without retaking any courses. Many of Mt. SAC's mirrored noncredit courses are articulated with credit, which enables students to switch to the credit track and convert their noncredit coursework into credit units.