SHOP TALK # 54:  
The Value of Postsecondary Certificates

The following information is taken from Certificates Count: An Analysis of Sub-baccalaureate Certificates, Brian Bosworth, December 2010, Future Works. The study was commissioned by Complete College America. The full report can be found online at www.completecollege.org.

According to the report, tough economical times call for extraordinary measures. In order to stay competitive in the global marketplace, postsecondary education takes on added significance. Americans are challenged to complete at least one year of education beyond high school. But going back to school can be tough for working adults. Still, dropping in for a couple of courses at the local college campus rarely makes a significant impact on long-term student success. States are therefore challenged to ensure that students have the opportunity to pursue a full range of higher education pathways that not only increase the likelihood of college completion, but also lead to sustainable careers.

A strategy too often underutilized, but one that can often deliver greater income returns than associate degrees, is certificates. For adults balancing jobs and family life, completing a certificate can be the most direct path to postsecondary and career success. Certificates can position individuals for immediate workforce success while establishing solid foundations for future academic achievement.

What are Certificates and Who Earns Them?
To be successful, certificate programs must be of high quality, rigorous enough to have real value, tailored to the job market, widely available, and designed for timely completion. The most popular programs, making up 43 percent of all certificates issued nationwide, are in nursing and allied healthcare. Fields like business, technology, construction trades, and mechanic and repair trades also attract large numbers of students who are generally eligible for federal and state financial aid. By contrast, certificates in service occupations and the humanities do not yield consistently positive returns. In Texas, workers are needed in healthcare, energy, and technology-based jobs as well as the growth industries of wind, biofuel, and energy efficiency.

In 2007-2008, approximately 750,000 certificates were awarded. This figure represents a modest increase over the past decade but a decline from the one million-plus certificates awarded in 1992-1993 before a regulatory crackdown. A little more than half of all certificates are issued by public sector institutions such as community and technical colleges. Research in Kentucky found that increases in average income for those who earned certificates of at least one year were nearly identical to returns from associate degrees.
Women account for close to two-thirds of certificate holders. A national goal is to double the number of long-term certificates awarded within the next five years, and then double that number again over the following five years. Certificates come in three categories, based on length of study:
- completion in less than one academic year;
- completion in at least one but less than two academic years; and
- completion in at least two but less than four academic years.

**Choosing a Certificate Program of Study**

Shorter term credentials (those of much less than a year in length) may be helpful in updating the skills of adult workers who are well launched in their occupations and who have good earnings history. However, shorter term certificate training may not have the same labor market value for young adults or for older and dislocated workers seeking to start a new occupation. In advising learners to consider education and training that lead to certificates, it is important to encourage discretion. Institutional culture and state policy play a significant role in community college certificate offerings. Program offerings may even have less to do with labor market needs than with interests of faculty or college leadership and with the inertia of resource-allocation practices.

**Recommendations**

Complete College America is a national nonprofit working to increase the number of Americans with a college degree or credential of value and to close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. CCA believes that to significantly boost America’s postsecondary graduation rate, we must reinvent higher education to meet the needs of the majority of community college students – learners who must balance the jobs they need with the education they desire. Certificates are an important part of the solution. Complete College America makes the following recommendations:

- count sub-baccalaureate certificates of a year or more toward national, state, and college-level attainment goals;
- set aggressive goals to double the number of long-term certificates produced within the next five years and then double that number again over the subsequent five years;
- reward long-term certificates with funding formula and other policy incentives;
- collect outcome data and promote labor market alignment; and
- focus on program completion by focusing tightly on student needs.

**What is Adult Education’s Role?**

Many adult learners are potential recruits for rigorous, high quality postsecondary education and training programs that lead to valuable certificates tailored to the local job market. With one of the largest and most diverse populations in the country, Texas’ commitment to advancing higher education is poised to play a critical role in national trends. But adult educators generally have little or no impact on what community colleges offer in terms of certificate programs. However, adult educators can play a critical role in helping learners develop career readiness and select a career pathway that fits their individual needs and potential. Adult learners “talk with their feet”. For many, completing a certificate can be the most direct path to college and career success. Adult educators can help these individuals by investigating the certificate training programs offered by local community colleges, and by promoting enrollment in those that appear to provide an appealing combination of relatively rapid postsecondary achievement as well as portable skills and knowledge. Community colleges need the adult learners over whom adult
educators have a meaningful influence. Opportunities for partnerships must be seriously pursued. Certificates count.