Certificates are a “valuable new currency” in the information economy (National Alliance of Business 2000). Traditional credentials no longer suffice as knowledge has exploded, new fields and occupational specialties are emerging, jobs and organizations change rapidly, and working lives lengthen. A postbaccalaureate or postmaster’s certificate enables adults to acquire market-demanded competencies in a short time (Driscoll 1996). Many certificate seekers are currently employed adults looking for focused, flexible, interdisciplinary, and highly relevant educational opportunities (Patterson et al. 1998; White 1997). Certificate programs “may serve as good introductions to adult students considering, but cautious about, entering degree programs” (University of Wisconsin 1996, online, p. ). They may be the foundation for further training or a follow-up to previous training (NA B 2000). The massive market for certificates has been estimated at 40-50 million people, but it is difficult to determine how many are awarded outside mainstream institutions (Kohl and LaPidis 2000). The most popular certificate programs are those related to health care and information technology (e.g., e-commerce, Internet publishing, online teaching) (Kohl and LaPidis 2000; N A B 2000).

Quality. Some certificates are tied to industry and professional standards. However, there is no comprehensive quality assurance system for certificate programs similar to that for college degrees. The relevance of a collection of certificates demonstrates competency, are master’s degrees still relevant? On the other hand, certificate earners may have cutting-edge skills but lack a broader perspective (Kohl and LaPidis 2000). Learners should ask critical questions about program sponsors, course content, updating refreshers, and whether the certificate is recognized and valued by employers or transferable to degree programs (Driscoll 1996).

Currency. The relevance of course content is a critical issue in short-term programs. A relearners acquiring competencies that will soon be obsolete? Institutions offering certificates should have in place a review process (Hutton 1997) or sunset clause (Patterson 1998) to revise or retire programs that no longer align with workplace needs. A fast-track approval process helps get new programs established quickly to meet changing demands (ibid.).

Certificates can help adults upgrade skills or change career paths while accommodating their personal needs and learning styles. However, learners and providers should be wary of an uncritical focus on delivery over content as well as the bottom-line orientation of employers who may fund certificates as good investments in worker skills. These concerns should not overshadow the key elements of a good certificate program: quality of the subject matter, learning outcomes, and the validity of the credential (Irby 1999).

Resources


The University of Virginia’s Computing Survival Skills program addresses the ongoing technology training needs of staff with a series of workshops that result in a certificate in computer troubleshooting skills.

Brown, B. L. Vocational Certificates and College Degrees. ERIC Digest No. 212. Columbus, O H: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1999. (ED 434 248) <ericav.org/digests.asp>

Compares the economic benefits of career certificates and college degrees, their employment outcomes, and their role in the lifelong learning patterns of career-focused individuals.


T he number of students enrolled in degree and certificate programs at Western Governors University, a virtual university, is significantly lower than projected. These enrollments may be the result of the amount of time it took to plan and implement programs.

Driscoll, M. “Professional Development: Certification Programs.” Training Scene 26, no. 3 (March 1996): 5-8. (ED 397 262)

Discusses the benefits of certificate programs; lists 12 questions to ask, pertaining to programs’ sponsors, content, recognition, and refresher requirements.


Some private sector providers of certification in computer skills may be unscrupulous operators who issue certificates without ever testing learners. The information technology industry is attempting to establish standards that will enhance the value of certificates.


Presents a rationale for business educators considering offering industry-oriented certification courses. Focuses on the options, requirements, and the benefits for educational institutions, students, and business and industry.


A dvisory committees and surveys of students and employers were used to revise the human resources and personnel management certificate programs at the University of Calgary. Revisions were done in the context of resource constraints, postsecondary competition, and declining enrollment.

Examines factors behind the growth in certificate programs and the differences between university and nonuniversity providers. Utilizes the opportunities and threats for institutions and for learners.


A analysis of recent occupational data suggests that postsecondary educational credentials have varied effects on early labor force outcomes. Some credentials have greater value in the work force than associate’s degrees, and their effects often differ for men and women.


Investigates the burgeoning market for postbaccalaureate credentials; discusses certification for employability and the issues surrounding quality assurance and accreditation.


The possibility of completing degree and certificate programs solely through distance education offers the potential for the most dramatic changes in access and opportunity. The number of distance education degree and certificate programs offered at higher education institutions has nearly doubled.


Developments in postbaccalaureate certificate programs are outpacing the capacity of existing quality assurance mechanisms. In addition, the efficiency and vocational directness of such programs may induce the expectation that all postsecondary education should be offered this way.


This comprehensive directory of certificate programs throughout the country provides data on how to get certified in a career, how long it will take, how much it costs, and what to expect on the job.


Describes how businesses are collaborating with education providers to develop standards and curricula for employer-recognized credentials; discusses certification for employability and the issues surrounding quality assurance and accreditation.


Certificate seekers were more likely than associate degree seekers to attain a postsecondary credential (55% versus 43%, respectively); within 5 years of initial enrollment, 50% had earned a certificate, and 4% had earned an associate’s degree.


Shared governance of graduate certificate programs by graduate schools and continuing education schools would take advantage of different strengths: graduate schools offer quality assurance, and continuing education has a market orientation and understanding of work force development needs.


Presents results of a survey of universities offering graduate certificate programs and analysis of programs at Indiana University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Arizona State University, the University of Colorado-Boulder, and the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies.


Describes the Information Technology Career Ladder program at Clayton College and State University (Georgia), the first competency-based, three-tiered (certificate, associate, bachelor’s degree) IT program at a U.S. university.


Electronically delivered degree and certificate programs must meet three criteria: quality assurance, faculty security, and financial support that facilitates institutional competitiveness. The demand for higher education will shift substantially toward the global marketplace.


Recommends expanding undergraduate and graduate certificate programs to meet the needs of the adult student market. Notes that such development should not diminish but strengthen ongoing and new degree programs.


Responses from 27 of 51 participants in an executive certification program indicated that most were motivated by enhanced job and promotion opportunities, especially those aged 20-39. Over 50% received financial assistance or time off from employers for study.

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