



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

NON-DEGREE CREDENTIALS PRIMER



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Introduction

A non-degree credential is a qualification or achievement that equips an individual with skills or competencies for the workforce, excluding technical diplomas and associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. Examples of non-degree credentials include certificates, microcredentials, and certifications, among others. Non-degree credentials are offered by many different providers in Tennessee, including community colleges, technical colleges, universities, bootcamps, and other institutions and organizations.^A

Non-degree credentials can be valuable for individuals as well as the state. Value for the individual means better job prospects, increased wage potential, and other positive workforce-related outcomes. Value for the state means individuals who earn relevant non-degree credentials are available to fill high priority, in-demand jobs and occupations.

This legislative brief examines the different types of non-degree credentials, the providers of these credentials, and related initiatives in Tennessee and other states.

Background

What is a non-degree credential?

A standard definition of “non-degree credential” does not exist, which complicates discussions of the topic. For example, opinions differ as to whether a certificate obtained in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree, whether or not the bachelor's degree is ultimately obtained, should be considered a non-degree credential because it is generally obtained in pursuit of a degree. Additionally, some define a non-degree credential as any credential or award that is not an associate, bachelor's, or higher-level degree. Under this definition a technical diploma (e.g., TCAT diplomas) is a non-degree credential.

For the purposes of this legislative brief, OREA defines a non-degree credential as a qualification or achievement that equips an individual with skills or competencies for the workforce, excluding technical diplomas and associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. OREA's definition largely aligns with state law, which excludes degrees and diplomas from non-degree credentials when defining “quality non-degree credentials.”^B

Non-degree credentials include, but are not limited to, certificates (including bachelor's level certificates), microcredentials, certifications, registered apprenticeships, and occupational licenses.^C They are offered by community colleges, technical colleges, universities, bootcamps, and other institutions and organizations.^D Non-degree credentials vary in length (i.e., how long it takes to obtain the credential), provider, rigor, structure, and value. Those who pursue non-degree credentials could range from high-school-aged students without any work experience to senior professionals nearing retirement.

Non-degree credentials can be credit bearing or non-credit bearing. For credit bearing non-degree credentials, credit hours must be completed at a college or university. An individual must complete credit hours at a community college, for example, to obtain a certificate from the community college. For non-credit bearing non-degree credentials, however, credit hours at an institution of higher education are not required. Whether or not they are credit bearing, non-degree credentials can be combined with traditional degrees to enhance the skills of those already in the workforce or preparing to enter it.

^A Bootcamps are a provider of non-degree credentials. Bootcamps typically focus on technology-related skills and occupations, like information technology. Public organizations and private organizations, for-profit as well as non-profit, offer bootcamp programs.

^B See *TCA 49-4-902(33)*.

^C To learn more about registered apprenticeships, see OREA's 2024 report on the topic: <https://comptroller.tn.gov/office-functions/research-and-education-accountability/publications/higher-education/an-overview-of-registered-apprenticeships-in-tennessee.html>

^D Bootcamps typically focus on technology-related skills and occupations, like information technology. Bootcamp programs can be offered by public organizations and private organizations, for-profit businesses as well as non-profits.

Types of non-degree credentials

Currently, the most common types of non-degree credentials are certificates, certifications, microcredentials, registered apprenticeships, and occupational licenses. Given the rapid pace of change, however, the most common credential types may shift over time and new types of non-degree credentials may emerge. Exhibit 1 lists and defines common non-degree credentials in Tennessee, how long it takes to obtain them, and the credential provider.

Exhibit 1: Common non-degree credentials in Tennessee

Non-degree credential	Definition	Length	Credential provider
Short-term certificate	An academic program requiring roughly one year or less to complete (23 credits or fewer when at a community college) demonstrating competency with a given skill or set of skills.	3-12 months	Community colleges, technical colleges, and universities
Long-term certificate	An academic program requiring 24 credits or more (1-2 years) demonstrating competency with a given skill or set of skills.	1-2 years	Community colleges and universities
Professional certification	Industry-created qualification to work in a given role.	Significant variation (i.e., weeks to months to years) ^E	Industry organizations and businesses
Microcredential/Badge	A certification of an individual's learning and achievements, certified through assignment of a digital credential. Badges are the visual representation issued to students upon successful completion of a microcredential or demonstrated accomplishment or skill.	3-12 months	Community colleges, universities, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)
Registered apprenticeship	A work-based learning model that combines supervised on-the-job training, paid work experience, mentorship, and classroom instruction.	6 months-6 years (in general)	Employers, training providers, state government, and federal government
Occupational license	State-created qualifications to work in a given role.	Training hours (if any) or continuing education units may be required to obtain and maintain the license.	State government

Source: OREA analysis of information from THEC, TBR, Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance, U.S. Department of Labor, and others.

^E There are two factors that can contribute to the length it takes to obtain a professional certification. First, some certifications require individuals to have a certain amount of work experience prior to attempting the exam. Second, some individuals may need take a course, or several courses, to prepare for the content contained in the exam.

Certificates

Certificates are a type of non-degree credential offered by different institutions of higher education, most commonly community colleges and technical colleges. An individual typically must pass a set of courses as part of an academic program to earn a certificate. Tennessee community colleges provide both short-term (less than one year to obtain) and long-term (one to two years to obtain) certificates. Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) also provide certificates, which take less time to obtain than a TCAT diploma; a TCAT certificate takes roughly four months to obtain compared with the 12 months, on average, it takes to obtain a TCAT diploma.^F

Certifications

Certifications are industry-created qualifications to recognize mastery of a specific range of tasks in order to work in a given role. Individuals often must pass a test demonstrating mastery of the task(s) prior to obtaining the credential. The testing requirements for a certification are set by an industry organization, but the tests can be administered by a range of actors, including higher education institutions.

Microcredentials

A microcredential certifies an individual's learning and achievements within a narrow subject through the assignment of a credential, which can be physical or digital, referred to as a badge. When students receive badges, they are the visual representations issued to students upon successful completion of microcredentials or demonstrated accomplishment or skill.

In general, an individual must obtain 15 credits (or 300 clock hours) or fewer to earn a microcredential through a Tennessee higher education institution.^G Austin Peay State University's inclusive leader microcredential and UT-Chattanooga's iDEAs area specialist microcredentials are two examples from public universities in Tennessee.

Registered apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are "an arrangement in which someone learns an art, trade, or job under another." In the United States, some, but not all, apprenticeships are registered apprenticeships. A registered apprenticeship is a work-based learning model overseen by the U.S. Department of Labor or its state affiliates, like the Tennessee Office of Apprenticeship, that combines supervised on-the-job training, paid work experience, classroom instruction, and mentorship. Upon completion of a registered apprenticeship, apprentices receive a nationally recognized Certificate of Completion of Apprenticeship. As of 2023, registered apprenticeships in Tennessee generally lasted six months to six years depending on the occupation and employer.^H

Occupational licenses

Occupational licenses certify that an individual meets the minimum qualifications legally required to work in a given occupation. The minimum qualifications, which typically consist of an education component (e.g., training hours), passing a state-mandated test, and paying any relevant fees to the state, are set by state governments and relevant licensing boards.

^F Program lengths for TCAT certificates and diplomas can vary, with certificates ranging from less than one month to 13 months and diplomas between seven months and 25 months. Another variable is the number of hours a student spends completing training hours each week; OREA's estimates of the amount of time, on average, it takes to obtain TCAT certificates and TCAT diplomas assume 30 hours per week.

^G Some microcredentials require less than 15 hours (or 300 clock hours) to complete.

^H To learn more about registered apprenticeships, see OREA's 2024 report on the topic: <https://comptroller.tn.gov/office-functions/research-and-education-accountability/publications/higher-education/an-overview-of-registered-apprenticeships-in-tennessee.html>

Examples of non-degree credentials in Tennessee

Non-degree credentials are available in many different industries and occupations in Tennessee but are often found in the medical, manufacturing, logistics, and technology fields. Examples of certificates, a common type of non-degree credential, offered at community colleges, public universities, and TCATs are listed in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: Examples of certificates offered at public higher education institutions in Tennessee

Community college short-term certificates	Community college long-term certificates	University certificates	TCAT certificates
Advanced emergency medical technician	Early childhood education	Assistant behavior analyst	Correctional officer
Emergency medical technician	Paramedic	Data science	Truck driving
Quality improvement in long-term support and services	Medical coding	Editing and publishing	Nursing aide
Early childhood education	Advanced pharmacy technology	Road construction technology	Cosmetology instructor training
Entrepreneurship	Dental assisting	Spanish communication skills	Emergency medical technology

Source: OREA analysis of THEC's Academic Program Inventories.

Providers of non-degree credentials in Tennessee

Students can pursue non-degree credentials from various providers, including public institutions (like public universities, community colleges, and TCATs), private institutions (like private universities and technical colleges), and bootcamps, which can be offered by public as well as private entities.

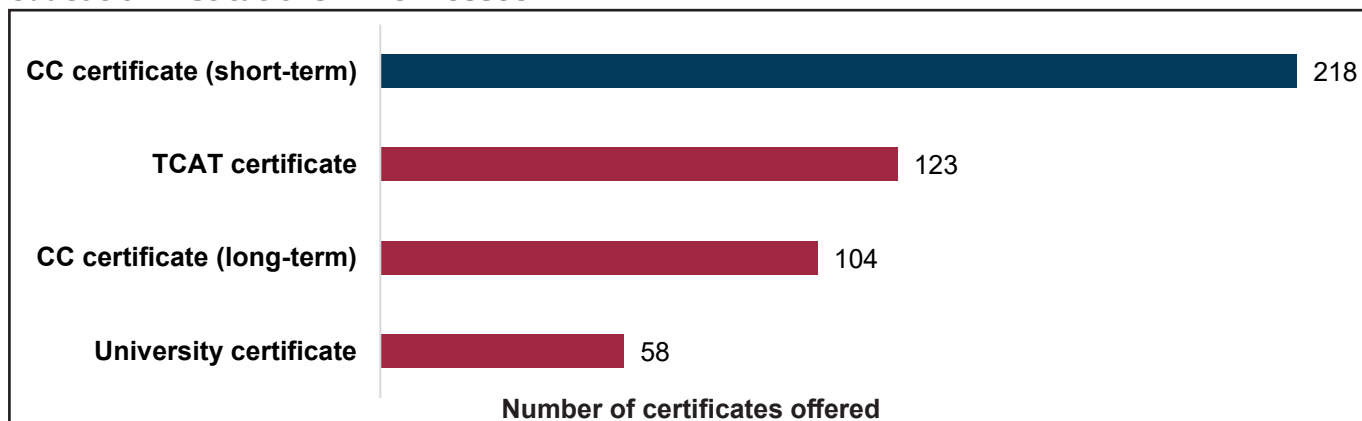
Public institutions of higher education

Most public institutions of higher education in Tennessee offer some type of non-degree credential, often a certificate. An important point to keep in mind in this section is the difference between an *offered* non-degree credential and an *obtained* non-degree credential. An *offered* non-degree credential refers to a credential offered by an institution of higher education. An *obtained* non-degree credential, by contrast, refers to a non-degree credential obtained by a student.

As of fall 2024, community colleges and TCATs account for most of the certificates offered (445) in public higher education institutions in Tennessee, as compared with the number offered (58) at four-year public universities.¹ Short-term (less than one year to obtain) community college certificates are the most commonly offered (218) non-degree credential at Tennessee's public institutions, followed by TCAT technical certificates (123), long-term community college certificates (104), and university certificates (58).

¹ According to THEC, universities, while always allowed to offer certificates, generally did not offer certificates. However, they have recently begun offering undergraduate certificates.

Exhibit 3: Short-term certificates (less than one year to obtain) from community colleges are among the most commonly offered type of non-degree credential from public higher education institutions in Tennessee



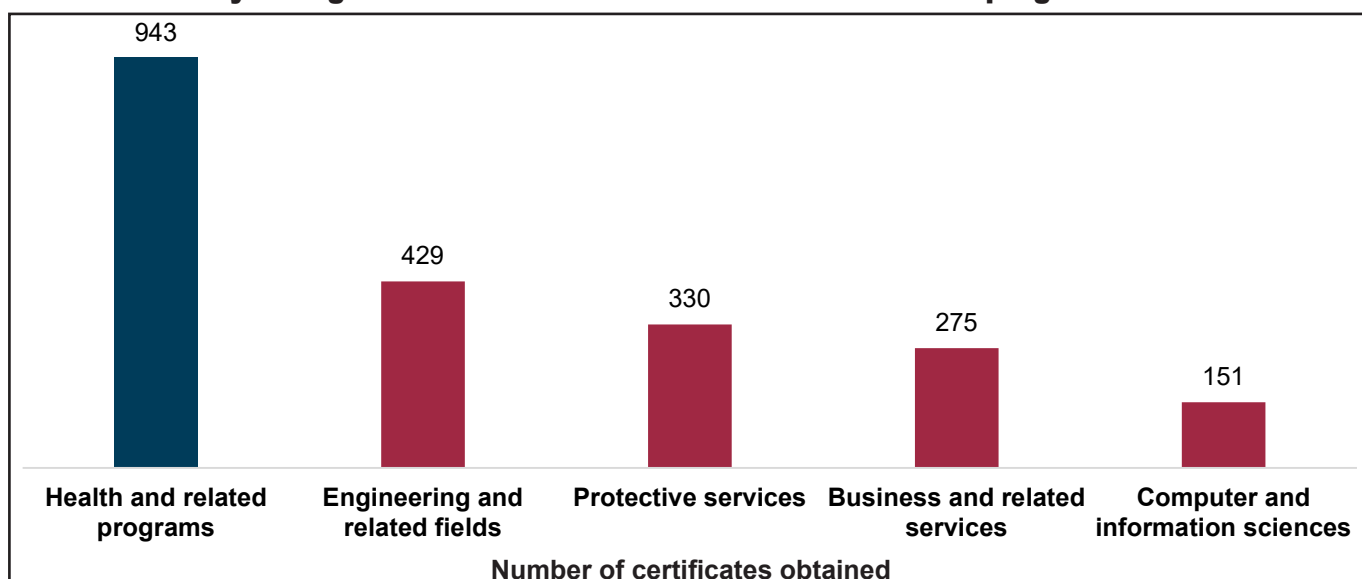
Notes: (1) Non-degree credentials at Tennessee public institutions are most commonly found in the Health Professions, Engineering Technologies, Business, Computer & Information Sciences, and Protective Services areas. (2) Data current as of October 2024.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC's Academic Program Inventories.

At community colleges, the short-term certificates most frequently offered are advanced emergency medical technician, emergency medical technician, and early childhood education. The long-term certificates (one to two years to obtain) most frequently offered are early childhood education, paramedic, and medical coding.

The two-year institutions offering the most certificates are Chattanooga State (48), Southwest Tennessee (43), Cleveland State (31), Nashville State (29), and Pellissippi State (29). The four-year public institutions offering the most certificates are UT-Knoxville (18), UT-Martin (8), Austin Peay State University (8), and Tennessee Tech University (8).

The most commonly *obtained* type of non-degree credential in Tennessee community colleges is a short-term (less than one year to obtain) community college certificate.¹ From academic year 2018-19 through 2023-24, 14,779 short-term certificates were awarded by community colleges (2,457 in the 2023-24 academic year). These certificates were concentrated in the health and related programs, engineering and related fields, business, and protective services program areas.

Exhibit 4: In the 2023-24 academic year, short-term certificates (less than one year to obtain) from community colleges were concentrated in health and related programs



Note: Data includes certificates received from academic year 2023-24.
Source: OREA analysis of TBR data.

¹ A student may obtain multiple non-degree credentials, so the number of students who receive credentials is less than the number of credentials received.

Private universities

Private universities can also offer non-degree credentials. These can include certificates at four-year universities as well as technical schools. Examples of non-degree credentials offered at private universities include Vanderbilt University's business management certificate and healthcare management certificate, Belmont University's high performing leadership certificate, and the William R. Moore College of Technology's welding certificate.

Bootcamps

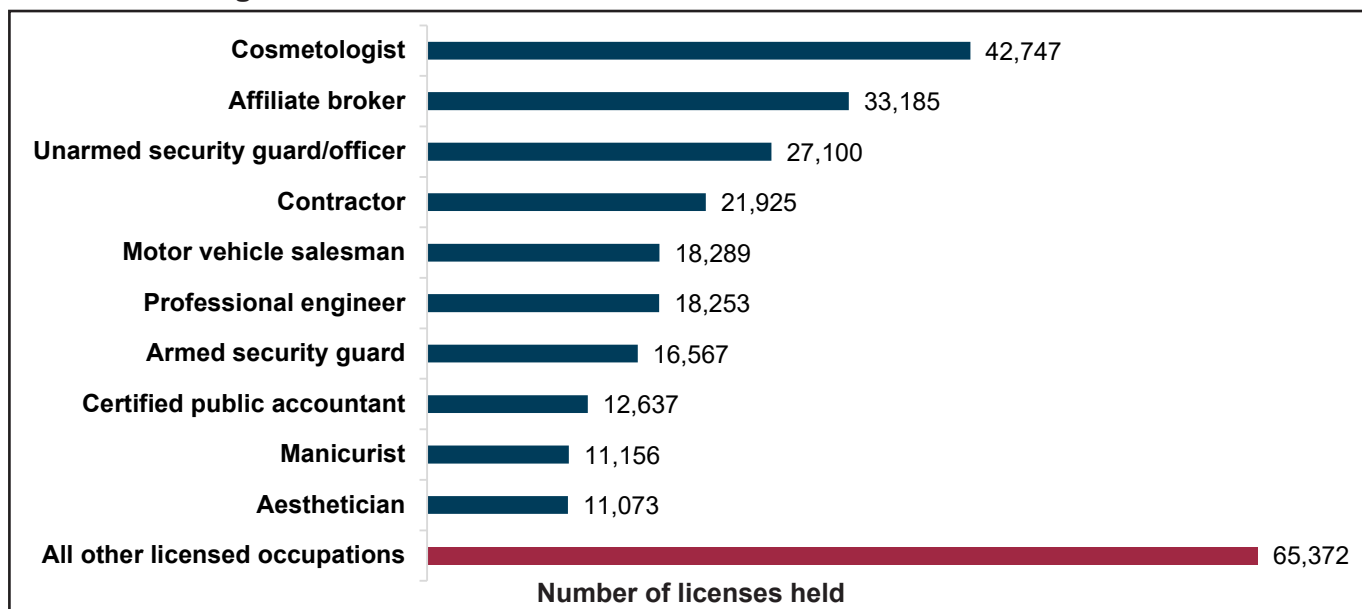
A bootcamp is generally a short, intensive set of training courses designed to rapidly train and reskill individuals. Bootcamps are typically offered in computer and technology-related fields. Public, private, and non-profit organizations provide bootcamps, and the cost varies by provider. Examples of bootcamps in Tennessee include UT-Knoxville's IT Technician bootcamp, Austin Peay University's Cybersecurity bootcamp, Motlow State Community College's AI Machine Learning bootcamp, Tech901's Database Fundamentals bootcamp, and Nashville Software School's Data Science bootcamp.

Occupational licenses

Occupational licenses certify that an individual meets the minimum qualifications legally required to work in a given occupation. State governments establish the minimum qualifications (e.g., competence, training, professional conduct) an individual must meet to obtain an occupational license to work in certain professions. Occupational licenses in Tennessee are largely overseen by the Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance (TDCI) and relevant licensing boards.^K

Overall, as of January 2025, there are 63 unique occupational licenses in Tennessee, which are overseen by TDCI. The most commonly held occupational licenses are cosmetologist (42,747), affiliate broker (33,185), and unarmed security guard/officer (27,100). Other commonly held occupational licenses can be seen in Exhibit 5. In total, there were 278,304 occupational licenses held in Tennessee as of January 2025.

Exhibit 5: Roughly 278,000 occupational licenses are held in Tennessee as of January 2025, with cosmetologist the most common one



Notes: (1) Counts include licenses overseen by TDCI but exclude those overseen by the Department of Health and the Department of Environment and Conservation. (2) All other licensed occupations include the remaining 53 licensed occupations in Tennessee.
Source: Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance.

^K The Tennessee Department of Health and Department of Environment and Conservation also issue certain professional licenses. For example, the Department of Health oversees licenses like dentistry, midwifery, and nursing.

In general, those seeking an occupational license must complete required training, pass an exam, submit an application, and pay a fee. Licenses are valid for a set period of time, after which reapplication is required. Licensing boards oversee multiple occupations; TDCI's 22 occupational licensing boards oversee the state's 63 occupational licenses. For example, the State Board of Cosmetology and Barber Examiners oversees the master barber, barber instructor, natural hair stylist, manicurist, eyelash specialist, cosmetology instructor, cosmetologist/aesthetician, cosmetologist, and aesthetician licenses. As of January 2025, the boards overseeing the most licenses were the State Board of Cosmetology and Barber Examiners (77,327), the State Board of Private Protective Services (45,103), and the Tennessee Real Estate Commission (42,566).

Professional certifications

A professional certification, also commonly referred to as a certification, is similar to an occupational license but differs in some respects. The primary difference is that professional certifications are issued by private organizations, such as industry groups, while occupational licenses are issued by the state.

The cost to obtain a professional certification and the time it takes to obtain one varies by certification. The renewal cycle also differs by professional certification.

Professional certification courses, such as Certified Clinical Medical Assistant, HVAC/R Certified Technician, Project Management, and Microsoft Excel, can be completed in a variety of settings, including at Tennessee's public institutions of higher education. Some higher education institutions, like community colleges and TCATs, prepare students to take the required test to obtain a certification as part of their programs. In some cases, the higher education institution may administer the certification exam during the program.

Current state initiatives to increase the availability and attainment of non-degree credentials

Most of the current state initiatives designed to increase the availability and attainment of non-degree credentials in Tennessee are led by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD), and Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). Notable initiatives include the Reimagining the Community College Experience pilot program, the Defining Quality Non-Degree Credentials taskforce, the Promoted Student Industry Credentials list, the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education grants, and the ApprenticeshipTN initiative.

Reimagining the Community College Experience pilot program

In fall 2023, TBR launched a three-year long "Reimagining the Community College Experience" pilot at four community colleges (Jackson State, Pellissippi State, Southwest, and Walters State). The pilot program is designed to improve student outcomes and the student experience at community colleges and is funded by a \$2.2 million grant.

Students at the four participating community colleges receive assistance with exploring career paths, building relevant career skills, and obtaining and stacking credentials ("stacking" refers to the completion of multiple related credentials that combine to produce higher-level skill sets, qualifications, and career opportunities). Across the four colleges, 48 credentials were embedded in 19 associate degree programs to start the pilot. Associate programs with certificates included as a part of the initiative include business, early childhood education, health sciences, information technology, and mechanical engineering. The initiative includes certificates such as culinary arts, cybersecurity, and emergency medical technician.

Each of the four community colleges has a unique plan for implementing the pilot program. Each of the colleges are embedding certificates or certifications in certain associate degree programs. Students in these programs will earn credentials as they complete specific courses. Walters State is also adding soft skills and career exploration opportunities into students' first-year experience courses and increasing the transferability of non-credit and TCAT courses, among other changes.

TBR plans to release an evaluation of the early outcomes of the pilot program in 2025.

THEC's Defining Quality Non-Degree Credentials taskforce

THEC organized a Defining Quality Non-Degree Credentials taskforce in 2021 to create a statewide definition for "quality non-degree credential," produce a policy agenda to increase the number of people obtaining such credentials, and develop associated data tracking policies.^L

After the taskforce completed its work in 2023, THEC drafted a definition for "quality non-degree credential" that was codified by Public Chapter 925 (2024). This definition was revised by Public Chapter 186 (2025) the following year. The 2025 revision added "registered apprenticeship, occupational license, or certificate" to the statutory definition of "quality non-degree credential." After the 2025 update, the statutory definition of "quality non-degree credential" is now "a credential, other than a degree or diploma, the receipt of which indicates satisfactory completion of a workforce training program that:

- has a defined curriculum, objectives, and results in the awarding of a credential upon successful completion;
- culminates in an industry certification, registered apprenticeship, occupational licensure, or certificate, but does not include participation in, or completion of, a program of professional development, continuing education, exam preparation, or similar objectives;
- may be articulated to other quality non-degree credentials, postsecondary degrees, or diploma programs;
- qualifies an individual for an in-demand occupation; and
- is not eligible for federal Title IV funding."

Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) Initiative

Created in 2019, the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) Initiative has awarded competitive grants to projects designed to address skills gaps across the state. Grant amounts have ranged from \$111,000 to \$2 million.

As of December 2024, three rounds of GIVE grants had been funded: \$25 million in 2019, \$25 million in 2021, and \$40 million in 2024. Some GIVE grants have funded projects that include non-degree credentials such as apprenticeship-related projects.

TDOE's Promoted Student Industry Credentials List

TDOE maintains the Tennessee Promoted Student Industry Credentials List. The list identifies valuable certificates and certifications that high school career and technical education (CTE) students can pursue and guides Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) formula funding to higher value credentials.

The list contains 238 credentials across 56 programs of study (i.e., accounting, barbering, mechatronics, and welding). The listed credentials are sorted into three tiers: recognized (tier one), valued (tier two), and preferred (tier three). Tier three (preferred) credentials are considered the most valuable.

^L The taskforce was composed of 14 individuals from 11 public and non-profit entities.

The number of students who obtain promoted industry credentials is a metric in three portions of the TISA formula. The number of students obtaining any tier of credentials is counted in the Ready Graduate and College and Career metrics. Additionally, the number of students who obtain tier two and tier three credentials are used as inputs into the high school portion of outcomes funding in the TISA formula.

Exhibit 6: In 2024, Tennessee's Promoted Student Industry Credentials List includes 238 credentials sorted into three tiers, with preferred (tier three) considered the most valuable

Tier	Credentials included in the tier	Examples of included credentials
Preferred (tier three)	104	Certified Pharmacy Technician, CompTIA Network +, Microsoft Office Specialist Certification, Tennessee Forest Worker Certification, and TN Board of Cosmetology & Barbering - TN Cosmetology 1010.
Valued (tier two)	80	Certified Logistics Technician, Certified Phlebotomy Technician, Google Data Analytics Certificate, Intuit Certified Bookkeeping Professional, and NIMS Pneumatic Systems Specialist.
Recognized (tier one)	54	AMSA Culinary Meat Selection & Cookery Certification, CIW Web Security Associate, Haas Basic Mill Operator, NC3 Lincoln Electric – Welding Safety, and OSHA 10 Construction.

Note: Listed credentials and categorization by tier current as of 2024.
Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

The list is updated annually with input from THEC, TBR, and TDLWD.

Apprenticeship TN

Apprenticeship TN is a marketing initiative launched in 2020 to raise awareness of registered apprenticeship opportunities for employers and workers across Tennessee. The Office of Apprenticeships in the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development administers the initiative and oversees registered apprenticeship programs. The office also works directly with employers, communities, associations, and organizations to develop and implement new apprenticeship programs. Other state departments and entities also support apprenticeship efforts, including the Departments of Human Services, Correction, Education, and Economic and Community Development, as well as TBR and THEC.

State funding of non-degree credentials

State funding for non-degree credentials comes from multiple sources. In some cases, funding is direct, such as when a student uses a Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship to obtain a non-degree credential. Funding is indirect in other cases, as with Apprenticeship TN, a marketing initiative aimed at raising awareness of registered apprenticeship opportunities statewide.

Lottery scholarships

The Tennessee Promise scholarship and the Tennessee Reconnect grant, funded by the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS), can be used by students to obtain some non-degree credentials like short-term certificates, long-term certificates, and in some cases microcredentials. TELS does not cover the cost of professional certifications and other non-degree credentials. Tennessee Promise provides recent high school graduates with state financial assistance to pursue an associate degree, certificate, or diploma at Tennessee public universities, community colleges, and TCATs. Tennessee Reconnect and TCAT Reconnect provide similar financial assistance to adult learners pursuing an associate degree, academic certificate, or technical certificate at certain higher education institutions in Tennessee, including community colleges and TCATs.

The Wilder-Naifeh grant is another TELS program that helps students obtain non-degree credentials. The grant provides \$2,000 per academic year to pursue a technical certificate or degree at one of Tennessee's TCATs.

Other TELS programs may also be used by students to obtain a non-degree credential.

Outcomes-based funding formula

Tennessee's outcomes-based funding formula (OBF) incentivizes community colleges to offer non-degree credentials and ensure students' success in obtaining them. OBF outcomes for community colleges include short-term certificates and long-term certificates, for example. The OBF also includes an outcome for workforce training provided to students.

Examples of policies and supports for non-degree credentials in other states

Policies and supports for non-degree credentials in other states have centered on ensuring quality, supporting affordability, and promoting expansion. OREA reviewed five other states that, like Tennessee, have undertaken initiatives that either directly or indirectly impact non-degree credentials. Comparable efforts in Tennessee are noted in the sections on Florida, Missouri, and Indiana.

Texas

Texas launched its Texas Credentials for the Future Initiative in 2021. The initiative encourages University of Texas institutions to expand and scale access to non-degree credentials, especially microcredentials. The initiative includes the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Texas at Arlington, the University of Texas at El Paso, and six other University of Texas institutions.

The University of Texas system provides students at participating institutions, as well as university faculty and staff, with access to microcredentials through Coursera, an online learning platform referred to as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC).

Florida

Florida's Reimagining Education and Career Help (REACH) Act was passed in 2021 and requires the creation and maintenance of a Master Credential List. The list includes "state-approved degree and non-degree credentials of value that prepare Floridians for in-demand occupations." The public has easy access to the Master Credential List, which guides state and federal funding for such credentials.

The Master Credential List sorts available credentials into four categories: degree programs, non-degree programs, industry credentials, and registered apprenticeships. Each category includes a list of credentials, where each credential is offered, and the median earnings for the credential.

In Tennessee, THEC maintains an Academic Programs Inventory of all awards and credentials available at each public institution of higher education in the state. Outcomes (e.g., median earnings, etc.) for those who obtain credentials and the degree of employer demand for different credentials are not tracked and reported on, however.

Missouri

Missouri provides information online about different degrees and credentials in the state, including employability and wages for those who have earned different types of credentials. The public can also

find where certain types of credentials (including degrees and certificates) are offered in the state through MOScores, an online tool. MOScores displays how long it takes to obtain different types of credentials and, for some credentials, includes outcomes, such as employment rate by type of credential and the industries in which credential holders are employed.

In Tennessee, TBR maintains several online dashboards that provide information similar to that included in Missouri's online tool. For example, TBR's Employment and Earnings dashboard displays median wages and employment rates five years after completion by program area (which can include multiple degrees and certificates). Further, a College Profiles dashboard shows the employment rate in Tennessee, the top industry of employment, and earnings for graduates of each TCAT and community college.

Virginia

Virginia created the FastForward program in 2016 to increase the number of workers with credentials in certain high-demand occupations. FastForward credential programs typically last 6-12 weeks, with students responsible for one-third of the cost and the state responsible for two-thirds, which can total up to \$3,000.

Credentials are offered through Virginia's community colleges and are available across 19 career fields. Examples of available credentials include certified phlebotomy technician, commercial driver's license, heavy equipment operation, nurse aid program, and pharmaceutical manufacturing technician certification.

Indiana

Indiana created a last-dollar Workforce Ready Grant program in 2017 to help students pay for tuition and mandatory fees for certain high-value certificate programs from particular providers. Some certificate programs included in the grant are CNC machine operator, HVAC technician, child development associate, dental assisting, cloud systems administration, and collision repair. In order to qualify, dependent students must be enrolled full time; independent students must be enrolled at least half time.

Indiana's Workforce Ready Grant is similar to Tennessee Promise and Reconnect as it is a last-dollar scholarship that helps students pay for tuition and mandatory fees. However, unlike the Tennessee programs, the Indiana program is only available to students pursuing certain credentials and awards.

Considerations

The following three considerations provide a framework for evaluating non-degree credentials in Tennessee and promoting greater transparency, oversight, and accountability.

Quality and value

The elements that constitute a high-quality non-degree credential program are a rigorous training curriculum covering relevant content and skills, effective instruction, and demonstrable proof of improved competence among those who obtain the credential.

The Tennessee General Assembly, based on input from a THEC working group, codified a definition for "quality non-degree credentials" in 2024 and revised it in 2025. The definition stipulates that quality non-degree credentials must have a set curriculum with defined objectives, result in a credential, and qualify an individual for an in-demand occupation. While this definition is helpful, it does not ensure that the non-degree credentials in Tennessee are high quality. Instead, it serves as a framework for the minimum requirements of what a non-degree credential must have in order to be considered a quality non-degree credential.

TDOE's Tennessee Promoted Student Industry Credential List identifies valuable certificates and certifications that high school CTE students can pursue, but it does not include information about the financial benefits (e.g., better job prospects, increased wage potential, etc.) associated with specific credentials. Additionally, TDOE's list is primarily focused on K-12 students, and a similar list is not available for students beyond high school.

Value is another consideration for the individual as well as the state. For the individual, value means better job prospects, increased wage potential, and other positive outcomes associated with obtaining a non-degree credential. Value for the state means individuals are earning relevant non-degree credentials and filling high priority, in-demand jobs and occupations.

Affordability

The affordability of a non-degree credential varies widely. The financial cost to the individual can range from no cost to thousands of dollars depending on the specific credential and the credential provider. For example, an individual pursuing a short-term emergency medical technician certificate at a community college could receive financial assistance from Tennessee Promise or Tennessee Reconnect to cover tuition and mandatory fees, so long as they meet program eligibility criteria. In addition, students receiving state financial aid to pursue, for example, an associate degree or bachelor's degree may obtain non-degree credentials on the path to their degree.

Data and accountability

Data on non-degree credentials is limited, especially for credentials offered by providers other than community colleges, TCATs, and universities. THEC's Academic Programs Inventory lists all academic awards available at each public institution of higher education in Tennessee, but an equivalent inventory for private providers is not available. The Academic Programs Inventory also does not contain information on other types of non-degree credentials, such as professional certifications.

The limited data means there are significant knowledge gaps concerning the availability and demand in the marketplace for certain credentials, outcomes for individuals who obtain specific credentials (e.g., earnings, jobs and occupations, employment rate, etc.), and other important statistics. TBR publishes some outcomes data related to certificates in various dashboards, but more data is needed, such as which non-degree credentials are in demand, the quality and value of different credentials, and jobs individuals take after obtaining such credentials.

More data would allow researchers to perform thorough evaluations, establish accountability mechanisms, and conduct return on investment assessments. Increased data and information could also inform related decisions by policymakers, such as whether to include additional non-degree credentials in the state's outcomes-based funding formula used in public higher education.

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