

Findings from the National Education and Employment Survey

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The Lumina Foundation—through Goal 2025—is committed to improving the nation’s postsecondary education system by increasing the proportion of Americans with high-value degrees, certificates, and other credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. The Foundation asked NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) to conduct a national survey of adults titled the National Education and Employment Survey (NEES). The purpose of the NEES was to determine the percentage of adults in America who hold a “high-quality” postsecondary certificate, license, or certification as their highest credential, where “high-quality” was defined by whether the holder of the postsecondary credential was working in a related field.¹

The total sample size, which included an oversampling of African Americans and Hispanics, was 9,539. The NEES was administered by both web and telephone during January-February 2016. The total number of completed surveys was 1,870, while another 20 were partial completes (defined as those with enough data at least through Question 24 out of a total of 62 questions).

Overall, the age range of the survey population was between 25 and 64 years old. About 16 percent of the population identified themselves as of Hispanic origin. In terms of race, about 13 percent were African American, 77 percent were white, and the remaining 11 percent were of other races. The population was evenly divided between male and female. About two-thirds had a sub-baccalaureate education, while 56 percent had no degrees. About two-thirds of the population was employed and well over half (56 percent) were employed full-time.

MAIN FINDINGS

Prevalence of Professional Certifications/State or Industry Licenses, Postsecondary Certificates, and Work Experience Programs

- About one-quarter of the survey population had a currently active professional certification or state or industry license. A little under one-fifth (19 percent) had earned a postsecondary certificate. Another 27 percent reported that they had completed a work experience program.
- In general, there was little difference in the prevalence of these work-related credentials by ethnicity. However, African Americans were more likely to report such credentials than whites. For example, 28 percent of African Americans had earned postsecondary certificates compared with 17 percent of whites.

- Over four-fifths of respondents with a professional certification or license reported that this was required by a federal, state, or local government agency (such as a state board) to be employed in that field. Of those who had completed a work experience program, a little over half (51 percent) reported that the work experience program would help them earn a professional certification or license.

High-Value Credentials

- About 80 percent of those with certifications/licenses said their most important certification or license was for their current job and the percentage tended to be somewhat higher among Hispanics than non-Hispanics. Thus, about 20 percent of the survey population held high-value professional certifications or state or industry licenses.

¹ We use the term “high-value”—a term that other studies have used to indicate value in the labor market—interchangeably with “high-quality” in this report

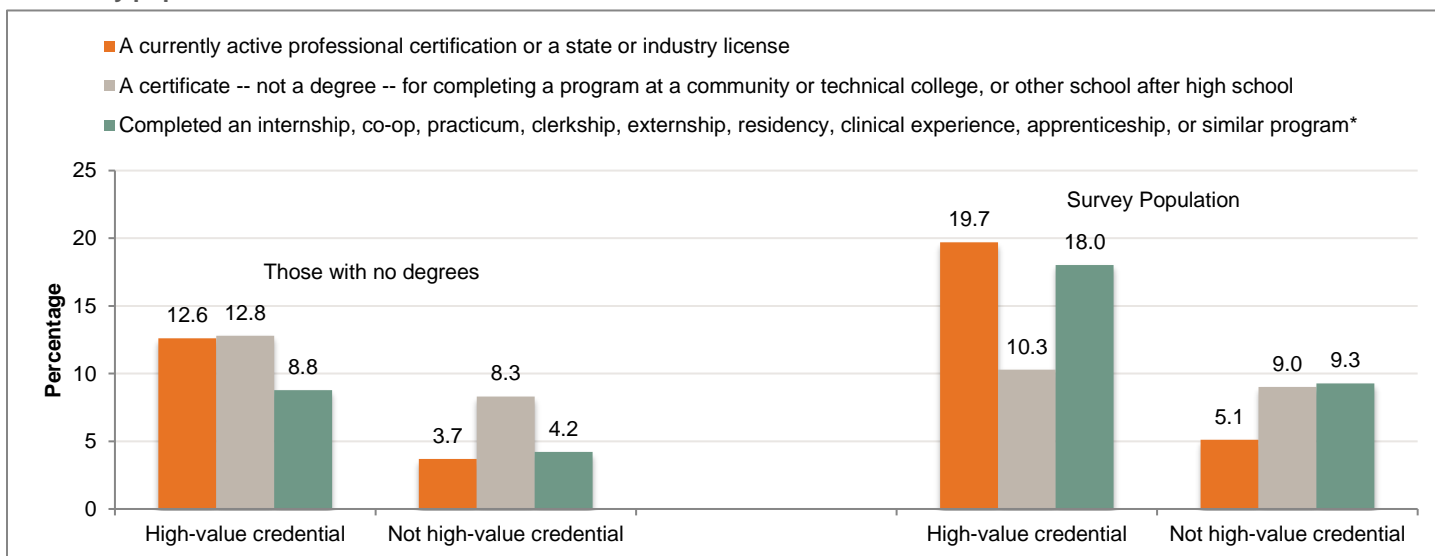
- About 53 percent of those with a postsecondary certificate were working in fields somewhat or very related to the postsecondary certificate. Thus, the percentage of the survey population holding high-value postsecondary credentials was about 10 percent. A somewhat higher proportion of high-value certificates was earned at community colleges than non-high-value certificates.
- About two-thirds (66 percent) of those who had completed a work experience program were currently working in a field somewhat or very related to the program. Thus, about 18 percent had a “high-value” experience that enabled them directly or indirectly to work in a related field. There appeared to be some association between being part of a formal education program and whether the work experience program ranked as “high-value.”
- In general, the earnings of full-time workers tended to be higher for those with work-related credentials who were also working in a related field compared with those who had credentials but were working out of field or had not earned such credentials.
- Not surprisingly, respondents with credentials working in a related field rated the credential much more highly in terms of usefulness with respect to various employment-related outcome: getting and keeping a job, increasing pay, keeping them marketable to employers and clients, and improving work skills. However, even those working out of field tended to value the credential in keeping them marketable to employers or clients or in improving work skills.

Those with No Degrees

As noted earlier, the group with no degrees—56 percent of the survey population—is of particular interest because the types of work-related credentials discussed here could offer members of this group a gateway to gainful employment and perhaps higher pay.

- Overall, about 64 percent of those with no degrees had no work-related credentials. About 16 percent had a professional certification or state or industry license while 20 percent had a postsecondary credential. Only 13 percent had completed a work experience program.
- Among individuals with no degrees who had work-related credentials, the percentages with high-value credentials for the three types of credentials were quite high—close to or higher than in the overall population (Fig. 1). Over three-quarters of those with no degrees but with a professional certification or license reported working in a related field compared with 80 percent in the overall group of certification/license holders. Sixty eight percent of those who had completed a work experience program reported working in a related field and this was a little higher than the 66 percent we reported earlier among all those who had completed a work experience program. Compared with the other two types of work-related credentials, the percentage of high-value credentials was a little lower for those with postsecondary certificates (61 percent) among the group with no degrees but still higher than in the overall population of certificate holders (53 percent).
- Thus, among those with no degrees, 13 percent had high-value professional certifications/state or industry licenses; 13 percent had high-value postsecondary certificates; and 9 percent had completed a high-value work experience program.

Figure 1. Prevalence of work-related credentials—high-value and not high-value—among those with no degrees and among the survey population



Note: *A small percentage (less than one percent) who reported they were currently in a work experience program were excluded from the graph.

- Like the general population of credential holders, those working in field rated the credential much more highly than those working out of field, in terms of employment-related outcomes. However, compared with the overall population of certification/license holders not working in field, those with no degrees tended to be more optimistic about the value of the credential in terms of getting and keeping a job, keeping them marketable to employers or clients, and improving their work skills.

Overall, it appears that technical training and education offers high value to participants in that it enables a substantial number of credential holders to work in related fields directly or indirectly. African Americans, in particular, appear to seek out these credentials to a higher degree than their counterparts. Working in related fields appears to be positively related to earnings, providing a gateway to middle-income jobs.

FUTURE STUDIES

Focus Groups and Surveys Focused on the Non-Degreed Population

Given Lumina's interest in the non-degreed population, the next phase of the study should focus on this group in particular. Lumina can still leverage the national survey proposed by several federal agencies to get a national estimate. Interviews and focus groups with individuals would help shed light on why respondents choose to obtain a work-related credential and why, once they have obtained such a credential, they are unable to work in their related field. A set of interviews with programs offering these work-related credentials could help identify components of programs that better position the credential holder to succeed. A more focused survey with a larger sample would allow us to more directly address questions regarding employment outcomes.

A Longitudinal Study

A longitudinal study would allow for stronger inferences about the value of a credential/degree. Following multiple cohorts of 18-year olds over time would enable a comparison of outcomes of those who eventually obtain a high-value credential versus those who do not.

Leveraging Existing Data

Related to the point above, existing longitudinal surveys (Education Longitudinal Study, National Education Longitudinal Study, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) could be leveraged to address some of the questions above. These datasets have a rich set of variables, including achievement/cognitive data that would lend themselves to matched-sample analyses.

ABOUT NORC

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research organization headquartered in downtown Chicago with additional offices on the University of Chicago's campus, the DC Metro area, Atlanta, Boston, and San Francisco. NORC also supports a nationwide field staff as well as international research operations. With clients throughout the world, NORC collaborates with government agencies, foundations, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide data and analysis that support informed decision-making in key areas, including health care, education, economics, crime, justice, and energy. NORC's decades of leadership and experience in data collection, analysis, and dissemination—coupled with deep subject matter expertise—provide the foundation for effective solutions.