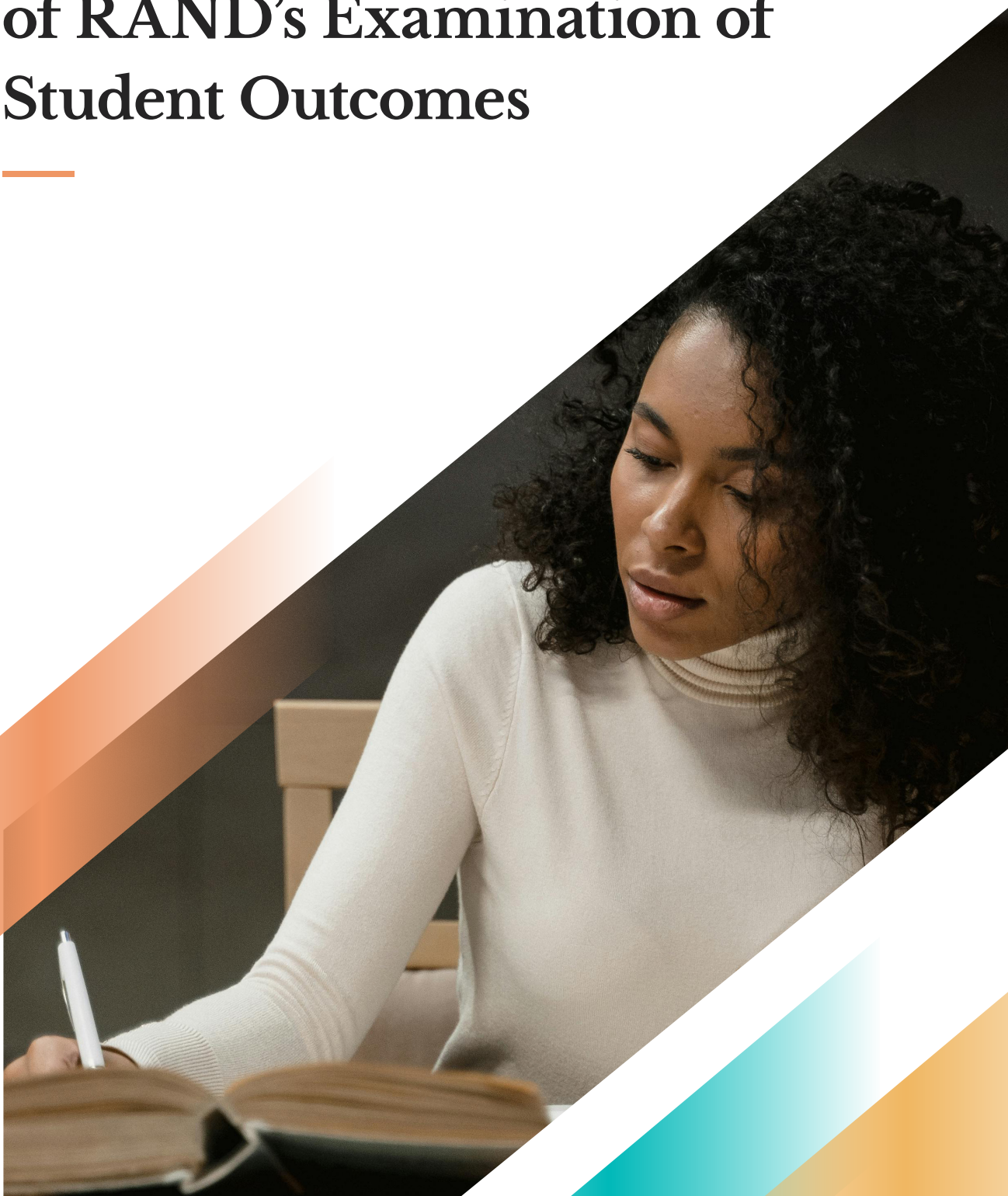




# Short-Term Credentials in Indiana: Executive Summary of RAND's Examination of Student Outcomes

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## About this Summary

Indiana has seen a marked growth in short-term credential attainment, making these credentials an increasingly important tool in the state's education and workforce development systems.

To better understand outcomes associated with short-term credential attainment, Ascend Indiana, with generous support from the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation to the CICP Foundation, engaged national experts at the RAND Corporation to evaluate Indiana's short-term credentialing landscape with the goal of informing future decisions on policy and practice.

RAND's report—Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana<sup>1</sup>—provides an in-depth analysis of educational and labor market outcomes of short-term credential attainment. This summary highlights key findings emerging from RAND's work.

## Introduction to Short-Term Credentials

Short-term credentials is a general term that covers skills training and credit certificates. As noted by RAND, **skills training** includes “workforce training and credentials earned through education and training providers that can lead to certificates of completion and/or industry certifications and licenses.”

**Credit certificates** “are awarded to students who complete a set of courses in a college that require less than two years of study.” Such certificates are classified by the state as being **short-term certificates** (requiring less than one year of course work) or **long-term certificates** (requiring up to two years of coursework).

While RAND finds that Indiana maintains data on short-term credentials in a manner that is on par with other states, data limitations prevented a thorough analysis of all short-term credentials. Most notably, there is limited data on skills training credentials, which precludes a robust analysis of associated outcomes. The state does, however, maintain robust data associated with credit certificates, which allows for the analysis summarized herein.

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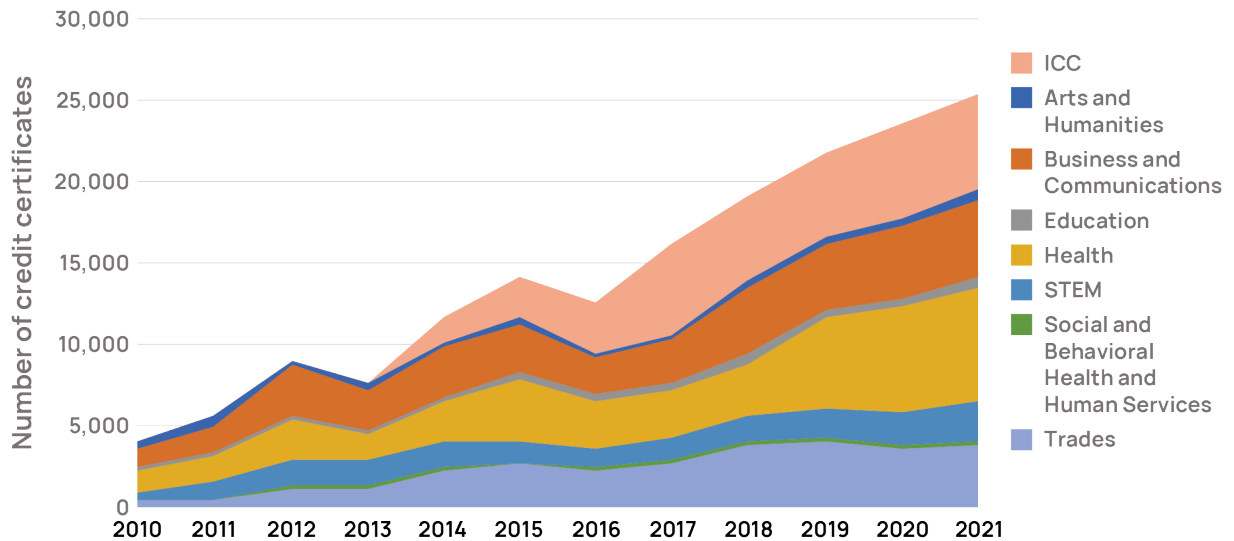
<sup>1</sup> Melanie A. Zaber, Brian Phillips, and Lindsay Daugherty. Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025. <https://www.rand.org/t/rra3407-1>.

# Growth in Credit Certificate Attainment

Indiana has made substantial investments to expand short-term credentials, aiming to incentivize alignment between education and workforce training programs across the state. These efforts have resulted in a dramatic increase in the awarding of credit-bearing certificates, which grew over 500% between 2010 and 2021, rising from 3,888 to 25,301 certificates across multiple fields. Health-related fields dominate both short-term and long-term certificate attainment, accounting for 42% and 26% of credentials respectively. Other prominent fields include Business and Communications and Trades.

Additionally, the Indiana College Core (ICC), introduced in 2014, now constitutes a significant share of all certificates awarded. Unlike other credentials, the ICC streamlines the transfer of general education coursework in high school into degree programs, aiming primarily to facilitate progression toward an associate or bachelor's degree rather than direct labor market entry.

**Growth in Credit Certificates by Field, 2010–2021**



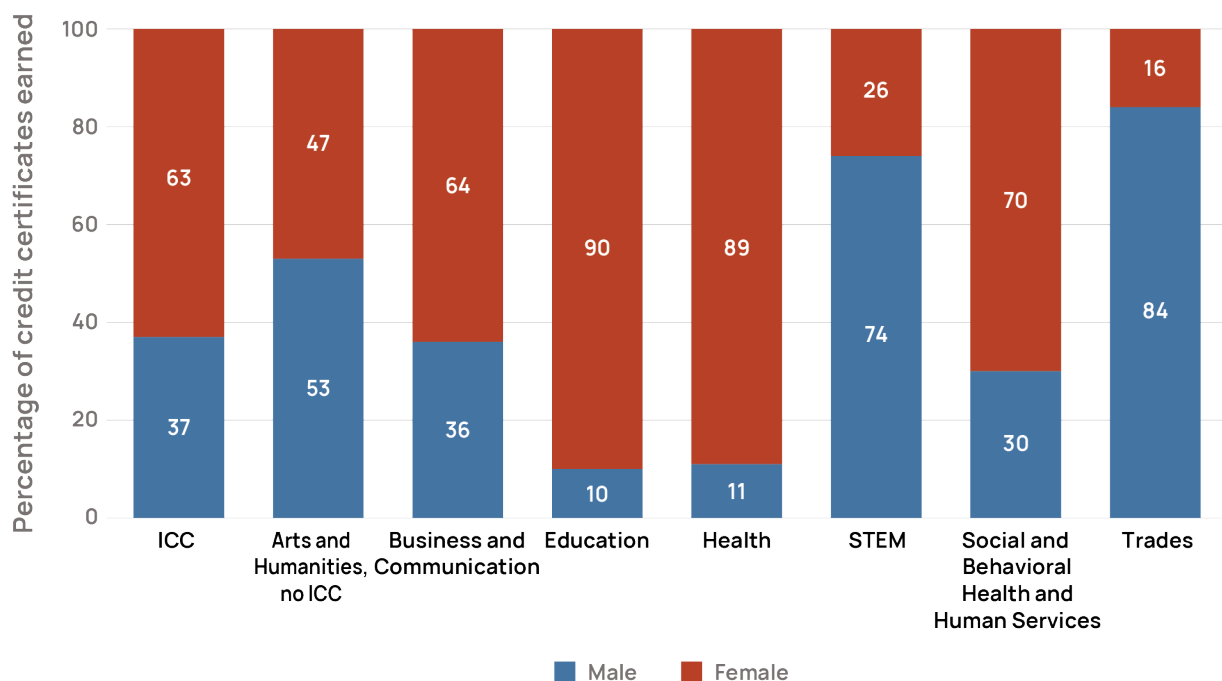
From: Zaber, Phillips, and Daugherty. Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana.

Data from CHE, provided to the authors by MPH. See the full report for additional detail.

# Demographic Characteristics of Credit Certificate Earners

Indiana’s credential earners show clear patterns by certificate type. Short-term and long-term (non-ICC) credit-bearing certificates are split fairly evenly between adults (25 and older) and younger learners. However, only 20% of ICC earners are 25 or older. High school students account for 38% of ICC certificates and 25% of short-term credit-bearing certificates, reflecting the efforts to boost credentialing in high schools. The racial make-up of certificate earners largely reflects the state’s population—80% White non-Hispanic and 10% Black.

**Share of Credit Certificates Earned by Field of Study and Gender, 2021**



From: Zaber, Phillips, and Daugherty. Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana. Data from CHE, provided to the authors by MPH. See the full report for additional detail.

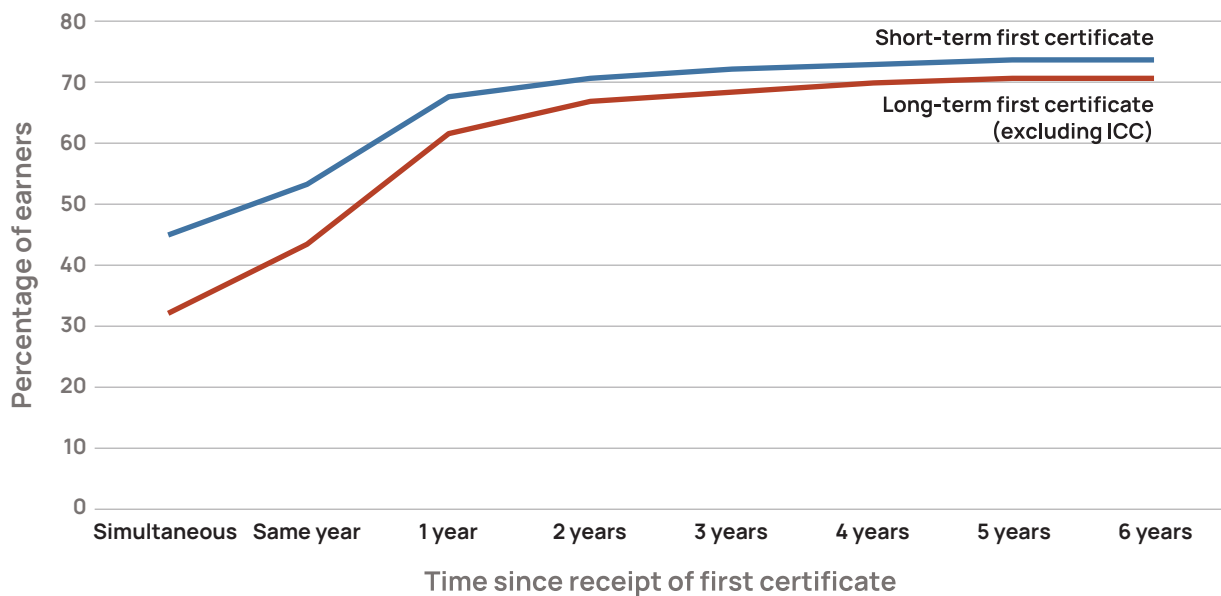
In 2021, women earned 58% of certificates overall but were underrepresented in high-earning STEM fields and in the Trades, which are dominated by men, while women predominate in Education and Health as shown in the figure above. Black and Hispanic students are overrepresented in Health fields but remain underrepresented in STEM and Trades.

# Educational Outcomes of Credit Certificate Earners

Most earners of credit-bearing certificates “stack”—earn an additional credit-bearing credential—typically within two to three years of completing their first certificate. In fact, over 70% of Indiana certificate-earners stack certificates and obtain additional credentials within three years, as shown in the graph below.

Many stack certificates within the same field of study and stacking is more common among ICC earners (over 80%), who often stack toward bachelor’s or associate degrees within four years. ICC earners are more likely than other long-term credit-bearing certificate earners to stack toward a bachelor’s degree but more commonly stack toward an associate degree. This finding emphasizes the purpose of the ICC, which is primarily to facilitate academic progression. Health field stacking rates are lower, and Black certificate earners stack at lower rates than their White counterparts. The lower stacking rates for women are largely driven by the fact that they are overrepresented in Health fields (where stacking is less common), but the lower stacking rates for Black certificate-earners is not explained by field of study.

**Percentage of Individuals Earning a Credit Certificate Between 2010 and 2015 Who Went on to Earn a Second Credit-Bearing Credential (or Stack Credentials)**



From: Zaber, Phillips, and Daugherty. Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana. Data from CHE, provided to the authors by MPH. See the full report for additional detail.

While stacking rates in Indiana surpass those often observed in other states, RAND cautions that the stacking analysis does not necessarily reflect students’ intentions to stack credentials or awareness of stacking options. Additionally, the stacking analysis does not incorporate data on program design, such as overlapping coursework across credential programs. Thus, it is unclear what factors are behind Indiana’s high stacking rates. In fact, state educational data demonstrates that much of the stacking is simultaneous, with certificate-earners receiving another certificate or a degree on the same date as their first certificate. Data limitations preclude researchers from assessing whether simultaneous stacking is by design or simply when educational institutions record completions.

## Wage Outcomes of Credit Certificate Earners

Using analytical techniques designed to isolate the impact of certificate attainment, RAND finds that, on average, earning a credit-bearing certificate leads to a 20% wage increase. This amounts to a \$4,712 annual wage gain over the six years that follow earning a credit-bearing certificate. While this increase is significant, average annual earnings remain relatively low at \$28,720 per year.

**Average Annual Earnings Before and After Certificate, by Credit Certificate Type and Earner Demographic**



From: Zaber, Phillips, and Daugherty. Examining Short-Term Credentials and Student Outcomes in Indiana. Data from CHE, provided to the authors by MPH. See the full report for additional detail.

While nearly all certificate programs provide an earnings boost, impacts vary by field of study and certificate type. Health-related certificates, for instance, saw a 46% gain in earnings post-certificate, moving average annual earnings from \$19,032 pre-certificate to an average of \$27,748 per year in the six years that follow certificate attainment.

Non-health certificates led to a 7% earnings increase, bumping average earnings from \$27,284 per year pre-certificate to \$29,220 per year post-certificate. Non-health certificates that yield statistically significant increases in earnings include programs in Engineering Technologies/Technicians, Construction Trades, Mechanic and Repair Technologies/Technicians, Precision Production, and Business, Management, Marketing, and Related Support Services.

## Conclusion and Considerations

Based on its analysis, RAND offers several thoughts for further consideration among the state's leaders. Specifically, RAND suggests that the state consider:

- Communicating the purposes of different credentials, including transfer-oriented credentials (the ICC) and occupationally focused credentials.
- Looking closely at certain fields to ensure that related credentials are serving individuals and the workforce.
- Assessing whether and how to target messaging to subgroups that may be underrepresented in fields that have larger earnings gains.
- Enhancing the collection of demographic information across credential programs.
- Researching learner intentions and awareness to support more-nuanced policymaking designed to encourage “productive stacking.”
- Continuing to collect and provide robust data on credential earners and strengthening data collection efforts where gaps remain.
- Ensuring consistent and complete reporting across credential types and streamlining multi-agency data requests to enable regular examination of outcomes.

In concluding, RAND notes that Indiana has been a leader in pursuing initiatives that support short-term credentials as a primary strategy for developing the state's workforce, and that as the state continues to encourage credentialing it will be important to regularly examine data and outcomes.