

# **Focus Group Findings for New Items to Measure Educational Certificates among Adults in the United States**

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**Prepared for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) by:**

**Avar Consulting  
1395 Piccard Drive, Suite 100  
Rockville, MD 20850**

**American Institutes for Research  
1000 Thomas Jefferson Street  
Washington, DC 20007**

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## INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In 2010, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) piloted the Adult Training and Education Study (ATES), which focused on measuring the prevalence of sub-baccalaureate educational certificates, industry-recognized certifications, and state licenses in the U.S. adult population. The results of the ATES pilot study indicated that measurement of educational certificates was potentially unreliable. Given these results, NCES undertook additional item development activities, including focus groups, aimed at improving measurement of educational certificates.

In September and October of 2012, Avar Consulting, in partnership with the American Institutes for Research (AIR), conducted three focus groups with certificate holders to better understand the terminology adults use to describe sub-baccalaureate educational certificates. The focus groups also assessed the workplace benefits and value of these certificates, as well as their role in education, training, and meeting job requirements. Based on data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), NCES targeted the three broad fields that most commonly awarded educational certificates in recent years. These fields were:

- Cosmetology
- Construction, manufacturing, repair, and transportation
- Healthcare services

One focus group was conducted per field, for a total of three focus groups.

Focus group participants had completed an organized sub-baccalaureate program of study in the applicable field at the postsecondary level, and they had earned their certificate in the past five years (in 2007 or later).<sup>1</sup>

Potential focus group candidates were recruited by advertising on Craigslist and canvassing (distributing flyers to local businesses and schools). Qualified respondents received a \$60 honorarium for their participation. All focus groups consisted of 8 to 10 participants.

An experienced moderator from Avar Consulting led the focus groups. The moderator used a guide (see Appendix A) to ensure that study objectives were met. Avar, AIR, and NCES revised the guide after each focus group, as required, by adding, modifying, or deleting questions.

The focus group discussions were held in downtown Washington, D.C. Groups lasted 90 minutes and were audiotaped. All participants signed a participation consent form prior to the discussion.

This report summarizes results from these focus groups.

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<sup>1</sup> In fields where there was a challenge recruiting eligible participants, the date was extended to the past nine years (2003 or later).

## **LIMITATIONS**

A qualitative research methodology, such as focus groups, seeks to develop direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents involved in this type of research, the study should be regarded as exploratory in nature. Results should be used to generate hypotheses for decision making and further testing. The non-statistical nature of qualitative research means the results cannot be generalized to the population under study with a known level of statistical precision.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The following bullet points highlight the key findings to consider when writing questions to measure the prevalence of sub-baccalaureate educational certificates:

- Most participants referred to their educational certificate as a ‘diploma’ or ‘certificate’.
- Participants attended trade school, technical school, or community college to obtain certificates. Some participants in the construction, manufacturing, transportation and repair group also had military training.
- Educational programs or apprenticeships were common routes to a certification and/or license.<sup>2</sup>
- Participants had trouble recalling the number of hours or credit hours required to complete their training because of variation in measurement (credits, semesters, externship hours, modules).
- Participants often reported taking continuing education after initial completion of the certificate or diploma to earn additional certificates of completion.

Detailed findings from each of the focus groups are presented below. Where appropriate, verbatim comments from respondents are provided in support of the findings.

## **GROUP 1: COSMETOLOGY**

Among the 9 participants, 8 had completed between 1,400 and 1,600 hours of coursework in cosmetology. About half of the respondents had enrolled as full-time students and almost all had completed their coursework in about 10 to 14 months.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to certificates, many participants also held certifications and/or licenses, which provided the moderator with an opportunity to have the groups discuss the distinctions between certificates and these other credentials. Generally, participants pursued a certificate to gain the knowledge required for a licensing test, while the license is distinct because it allows each person to work in their field. Some participants did not make a similar distinction between certificates and certifications, while other participants did.

## **Job Education**

Participants earned their cosmetology certificate, mostly referred to by participants as a “diploma,” from a variety of local institutions in the Washington, D.C. area. In addition to “community college”, the schools attended had the following terms in their names: “academy, “institute,” and “beauty school.”

All participants had less than five years of experience. Several had an associate’s degree, a few had a bachelor’s degree (with majors in psychology, interior architecture, accounting, criminal justice, and business), and one had enrolled in a master’s degree program. Most participants earned their postsecondary degrees prior to attending cosmetology school. They earned the cosmetology certificate because it was more marketable.

When asked to provide a list of courses they had taken as part of their cosmetology certificate, participants identified over 20 courses, ranging from general coursework, such as business management, psychology, electricity, and marketing, to applied cosmetology coursework, such as waving, shampoo and draping, hair structure, hair color, waxing, cutting, and curling. One participant shared the value of the general coursework courses:

*“Salon management, customer service, retail, marketing, time management were very important courses.”*

Following each class, participants were required to pass a written test (including knowledge of theory). They also had to pass a practical test, which could include demonstrating their skills on mannequins or on “live” people. Upon successful completion of the training, participants said they earned a certificate, diploma, or associate’s degree.

## **Obtaining a License**

Following successful completion of the coursework, participants took another test, which included both written and practical exams, to earn a state license. Participants usually made appointments a month in advance to test for state licensure. Candidates noted that they were evaluated by both a theoretical exam and a skills demonstration. Most participants shared that the test lasted all day. As one said:

*“In California, you come really early in the morning... practicums takes 4-5 hours, then a break, then a written test which takes 3-4 hours.”*

Some participants also mentioned that states may conduct background checks and factor them in to the licensure decision. The completion of education requirements from trade schools and/or community colleges does not guaranteed state licensure, which the cosmetology graduate must have in order to practice.

One participant noted:

*“It should be stressed... just because you complete your training does not guarantee your license. In Virginia, they are being far more selective. If you have a criminal history, they*

*will take that into consideration, they have hearings and you can plead your case [if rejected] to see if you are deserving...”*

Upon hearing about this experience, other participants were surprised, noting that most took both portions on the same day and were informed at the end of the day whether they had passed the exam.

### **Job Requirements and Opportunities for Advancement**

Participants answered a series of questions about the process of interviewing for a job and advancing in a career. When asked about the types of qualifications/requirements employers sought, participants noted the importance of possessing skills. Employers look for the type of educational credential earned, kinds of courses taken, whether one has a state license and the expiration date of the license. Some employers also ask applicants for a “skills demonstration.” The following responses were typical:

*“Skills. When they interviewed me, she said, I’m going to lie down, give me a facial. When I was done, I got an hour’s pay, and I got a job.”*

*“She told me what she was looking for... she didn’t take my word for it... show me your skills.”*

Cosmetologists also may be hired as an assistant without formal training and move up to a “stylist” position after completing on-the-job training and gaining experience. For example, a salon might assign assistants to a mentor or have them “shadow” an experienced cosmetologist. Employers may hire someone as an apprentice (without a state certification) for 6-12 months and then require them to attend school to obtain additional skills. Acquisition of additional skills through “extension” or continuing education-type courses is common.

All participants shared that such continuing education and learning new techniques were very important in the cosmetology profession. Many salons encourage and expect employees to take additional classes and partially pay for them. Some salons also provide workshops to provide new and additional training for their employees. A few participants said that they go to New York or international shows/conventions to learn about trends, marketing, and products. When looking for a job, participants stated that they look for a salon that encourages additional training.

All participants agreed that job and career advancement require continuing education and acquiring additional skills. The following statements summed up the general sentiment:

*“Growth is up to how hard people are willing to work.”*

*“It all depends how far you want to take your career. One can be very entrepreneurial.”*

*“There are no limitations of what we can and cannot do. We can be very flexible.”*

## Description of Training/Skills on a Resume

The final series of questions asked participants under what sections/headings they would list their qualifications on a resume. All participants identified “Education” as the appropriate section heading. They would list the name of the school attended, the year they graduated, the name of the program, the name of the degree/certificate, the number of hours necessary to complete the program, the year they earned their state license (and the license expiration date), and other additional/continuing education experience or awards received (e.g., hairdresser, make-up, employee of the month) Under this section, they also would include specialties, such as:

- Nail Technician
- Barbering
- Aesthetics

## Additional Questions

At the end of the standard focus group protocol, the participants fielded additional questions from observers. Several observers inquired about the difference between a certificate and a certification. Most participants did not make a distinction between these terms and used them interchangeably. The following were typical comments:

*“If we received a certificate of completion, then we are certified.”*

*“Being certified’ or ‘having a certification or certificate’ usually means that a cosmetologist obtained a ‘right’ to use a popular vendor’s products or a particular skill set that is in demand. The classes or programs to receive such a certification are typically much shorter, usually taking a few days to complete.”*

*“I received my diploma from the academy... completing my 1500 course hours. And then I went on to obtain my certificate in make-up artistry... I was able to receive my certificate as a Redken® color specialist. There are programs, typically much shorter. I also got a certificate of completion...”*

Another follow-up question inquired about the difference between an “educational certificate” and an “industry recognized certification.” Some participants thought these two terms had the same meaning. Others noted that a certificate is earned based on the number of hours completing a course, while certification means one is qualified by the state to practice.

## **GROUP 2: CONSTRUCTION, MANUFACTURING, TRANSPORTATION, REPAIR**

Most participants reported completing their training in 6-12 months. However, some participants dedicated considerably more or less time to earning their credentials. For example, one participant completed his training in three days, while another spent four years in an apprenticeship program. All respondents indicated that their training consisted of both classroom studies to learn theory, as well as more “hands-on” practical training (where they received their training and/or in the field).

### **Job Education**

Participants earned their educational certificate from a variety of institutions, most of which were located in the Washington, D.C. area. Their education came from a wide range of providers, including a community college, the military, a union, an “adult center,” and an “institute.”

Some participants had multiple certificates, degrees, and/or certifications. Those who had received training from the military indicated that was their most important qualification. Others had received additional certificates and/or certifications in specialized areas in order to stay current in their field and increase their earning power.

Some participants also learned their job skills through apprenticeship programs, which were seen as superior to training in a traditional educational setting. Instead of taking time off to attend and pay for school, apprenticeships allowed students to learn while receiving practical hands-on training and work experience. These apprenticeships tended to be organized through a union or an employer. The following comments express the value some of the participants placed on apprenticeships:

*“...I think it would have been better just to start as an apprentice.”*

*“If I could do it all over again, I would be a mechanics helper because... I think you learn more hands-on.”*

*“[In] an apprenticeship you can learn and support your family ... Such an advantage over taking four years out of your life and struggling going through a community college.”*

Participants said it matters which school people attend for their training, due to variation in the quality of the training and the relationships the schools have with unions and employers, which provide valuable contacts for finding jobs.

Participants were asked about their motivations for completing their training or program of study. Their motivations included having control over job prospects, possessing marketable skills, being attractive to employers, learning the skills necessary to eventually start their own business, and gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to pass licensing and certification exams.

## **Certificates, Licenses and Certification**

Upon successful completion of their training or program of study, participants said they earned a certificate or a diploma. In addition, most stated that they went on to receive a license and/or certification in their field from an agency other than the school they attended, such as the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. As noted above, participants indicated that one of the reasons they received their training was to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to pass licensing or certification exams.

*“I think that the reason I did it is it ... really helped me sit for the licensing exam.”*

## **Job Requirements and Opportunities for Advancement**

Participants answered a series of questions about getting a job in their field and methods for advancing in their career. When asked about the types of qualifications/requirements sought by employers, participants shared that they needed to document/demonstrate that they possessed the knowledge and skills of their trade. Participants also shared that employers were looking for the types of certifications and licenses earned, actual work experience (including use of certain tools/equipment), and whether potential employees had their own tools.

*“The main thing I saw most employers want, especially for HVAC technicians, is like two years’ experience ... CFC certification, reliable transportation, your own tools...”*

Other common examples of the qualifications sought by employers included customer service skills, flexible hours, promptness, endorsements, and specific types of experience, such as commercial or residential experience. Participants saw training from the Army, union membership, ASE certification, CFC certification, and security clearances as the most important credentials.

Participants felt that taking recertification tests and having and maintaining licenses and/or certifications with various government agencies and professional organizations were necessary to stay qualified. The following responses highlight participants’ thoughts on staying qualified:

*“To stay qualified doing what I’m doing is don’t lose your license.”*

*“My licenses for my occupation I have to maintain with the various states.”*

*“Every five years you have to ... take that particular test again.”*

Participants considered additional training helpful for career advancement. All participants agreed that continuing education and acquiring additional skills was key to job and career advancement. It was noted that some employers provide money for additional training. In addition, some stated that one of the benefits of additional training is the potential to earn more money.

## GROUP 3: HEALTHCARE SERVICES

All participants were female. Most participants had less than five years of experience in their field; a few had seven years of experience.

### Training and Education

Participants received their training from a variety of institutions, most of which were in the Washington, D.C. area. Most participants had gone to schools with names that included “college” or “community college”; one participant had gone to an “academy” and one to a “training institute.”

Whether the particular school they attended was important in their field was a point of minor disagreement among the participants. Participants saw the quality of teachers as an important part of getting a quality education, regardless of the school’s reputation. At the same time, they agreed that a reputable school probably has better/more experienced teachers.

In particular, having attended a school that has a good reputation may be an advantage when applying for a job. For example, the quality of the graduates that employers have been in contact with through internship or externship programs may vary across schools.

A few participants felt that the particular school one attends doesn’t matter. They felt that the ability to apply the skills learned in class, experience, qualifications, and interviewing ability are more important for getting and succeeding at a job than the particular school one attended.

Participants made the following comments on this topic:

*“It does matter where you go because of the staffing... who they had teaching you also makes a difference. When you have doctors teaching you things like anatomy and physiology it’s different than when you have a medical assistant teaching you things like anatomy and physiology.”*

*“I don’t think it matters what school you went to, I think it matters on your qualifications and your experience, and you know what you’re doing.”*

*“It’s nice to be able to have a school that has a reputation, it looks great on your resume, but when it really comes down to it... what really matters is how you take those skills and apply it to your job.”*

All respondents indicated that their training consisted of both classroom lectures focused on theory and more “hands-on” practical training. All participants also had to complete an internship or externship in order to complete their program of study.

Schools measured completion time in different ways, including classroom and internship/externship hours, semester hours, modules, quarters, and credits. The length of the training programs varied, ranging from one academic semester to 18 months. Other participants reported having completed 160-hour, 9-month, and 16-month programs. Regarding completion

time and sequencing, there was a range of responses, from those who reported completing their program of study full-time without breaks to those who reported doing so part-time and with breaks in-between.

Participants often received credentials, such as certificates, diplomas, and associate's degrees, from their institution upon completion of their program of study. However, some schools did not issue credentials.

Most participants also indicated that they had a license or certification from an agency other than the school/organization where they received their training. Some participants had multiple certificates, degrees and certifications.

Participants were asked about the differences between diplomas, certificates, and certification. Responses varied. For example, some participants thought they are basically the same thing. However, others indicated that a diploma or certificate symbolizes the completion of a course or program of study whereas certification includes a test that often leads to a state license (i.e., requires an evaluation and issuance of a credential by an agency other than the school they attended).

### **Job Requirements**

Participants were asked a series of questions about the process of interviewing for a job and how they would describe their qualifications to someone familiar with their occupation. Participants responded that they would:

- share their education and training,
- explain the coursework taken,
- describe the skills learned,
- mention the certifications and licenses received,
- indicate their years of experience,
- document the types of continuing education they had completed, and
- highlight personality/character traits, such as being organized, hard-working, and working well under pressure.

Two comments that provide examples of the balance between presenting occupation-specific qualifications and personality/character qualifications include:

*“I would explain all the experience I have, not only as a nurse, but at ... CNA, tech, biology, phlebotomy. So I would explain all my experience in the medical field.”*

*“Also that ... I'm an honest worker, willing, able, and just all around ... well rounded.”*

However, not all participants mentioned their education when responding to this question. When asked why their education/training and educational credential were not mentioned, participants

responded that work experience means more than classroom learning and that for certain professions a credential is not needed. For example, two participants said:

*“My work experience means more to [employers] than something I learned for ten months ... my overall work experience carries more weight”*

*“For a medical assistant, you do not have to be registered or certified ... that’s not a requirement ... I just received my registry last year, so I was working for six years without a registration, so it doesn’t really matter ... my work experience supersedes that.”*

### **Resume Activity**

Participants brought the most recent copy of their resume to the focus group discussion. During the discussion, participants described what they had listed in the “Education” section of their resume, if they had “Education” as a section in their resume. Participants reported including the following (listed alphabetically) in this section:

- Certificates
- Certifications
- Colleges and vocational schools attended
- Continuing education classes and seminars attended
- High school diploma and name of high school attended
- License and license number

When asked if any participant used a different section heading instead of/in place of “Education”, they offered two alternatives:

- Education and Certificates
- Education and Training

Some participants included subsections within “Education” (or the equivalent section) to organize or distinguish between different types of training and education accomplishments.

Other resume sections reported by participants include: skills, summary of qualifications, professional experience, work experience, clinical experience, awards and certifications, and work and volunteer experience.

When asked where continuing education is listed on their resume, some participants responded that it is listed at the end of the “Education” section and that items within the subsection are ordered by the magnitude of involvement or hours required to complete them. Other participants responded that continuing education was included in the “Awards and Certificates” section of their resume.

# Appendix A – Moderator’s Guides

## **COSMETOLOGY – MODERATOR’S GUIDE**

*The moderator will introduce herself or himself, go over rules and logistics, reference the observers, and explain the purpose of the group.*

### **WELCOME**

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate.

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

- Introduction of Facilitator/Moderator
- Introduction of Rapporteurs/Note Takers: Max Li and Steven Fink
- Reference to Observers and Staff: Stephanie Cronen and Allie Brawley

### **PURPOSE**

We have been asked by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and other federal statistical agencies to help them understand more about:

- job education,
- training,
- preparation,
- skills, and
- other similar qualifications people may have.

You were invited here because you are local residents who may have these types of qualifications, and we need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us on this important topic.

Again, we are pleased that you are able to join us for this discussion and thank you again for agreeing to participate.

## LOGISTICS AND GROUND RULES

### Schedule/Time

- WE WANT YOU TO DO THE TALKING.
  - We would like everyone to participate.
  - I will ask a series of questions and solicit your responses to those questions.
  - I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
- THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.
  - Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
  - Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
  - We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
- WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE.
  - We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
  - We want to ensure confidentiality of the discussion.
- WE WILL BE TAPE RECORDING THE GROUP AND TAKING NOTES.
  - We want to capture everything you have to say.
  - We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.
- PLEASE BE FULLY PRESENT AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE.
  - We need input from each of you.
  - Please set aside anything that might be a distraction.
  - We especially ask that you turn off electronic devices such as cell phones, electronic reading devices, laptops, etc.

### OPENER

*The opening "question" is intended to be friendly, conversational, somewhat relevant to the topic, and easy so respondents feel relaxed and part of a positive discussion.*

- 1. Let's get started with some introductions. Tell us your name, what your area of specialty is, and how long you have been working in this field.**

For the next hour or so we are going to talk about your work, education, training, skills, and qualifications that you might have.

## **TRAINING AND LEVEL OF EFFORT**

First, I'm interested to hear what kinds of similar or different training you all have.

**2. To start, I'd like to hear what you think is the most important training people need to get a job like yours.**

- a. Some may not be working in the field of cosmetology or may be unemployed. We want to know about jobs in the cosmetology field.*
- b. May want to probe to get an idea of who has or is currently working in the field of cosmetology.*

**3. What kinds of training or preparation did you have to undertake to learn the skills you need for your job?**

- a. We want to know what program of study and other training they may have taken and/or completed.*

**4. Tell me about where you got your training or learned the skills you need for your job. Is where or how you got your training important in your field?**

- a. We want to know about the types of schools and providers where individuals receive their training in cosmetology.*

**5. How long did it take you to complete your training?**

- a. Probe about credit hours (semester, trimester, or quarter).*
- b. Probe about whether completed part-time or full-time.*
- c. Probe about sequencing, i.e., whether completed all at once or periodically (e.g., with breaks in between).*

**6. What courses did you have to take?**

- a. *Note that in some programs, there may be requirements in addition to courses. Probe for these additional non-course requirements.*
- b. *Probe on whether the courses were part of a formal program of study designed to lead to a credential, such as a certificate or diploma.*
- c. *If not answered in #5 above, ask again if taken full-time or part-time, and/or all at once or staggered over time, or some other arrangement.*

**7. What kind of tests did you have to take? Or on the job skills tests?**

- a. *Probe about written tests, oral examinations, practical examinations (i.e., demonstrations of skills in real-life situations), internships, etc.*
- b. *Did you have to get a certificate or vocational diploma in order to obtain the knowledge or skills needed to pass a licensing exam?*

**JOB REQUIREMENTS**

Now, I'm interested to hear about what kinds of similar or different job experiences you all have.

**8. When you applied or were recruited for your job, what kinds of qualifications did your employer ask you about? What was most important for you to have to get your job?**

- a. *Key: what does it take to **get a job** in this field?*
- b. *What are the qualifications to get a job in this field: training, experience, etc.?*
- c. *What's **required**, i.e., must have it to get a job?*
- d. *What's **not required, but nice to have** to get a job?*
- e. *What qualifications are unique to your field that would not be relevant to other employers who are not in your field?*

**9. What other things are important in your field to help you advance?**

- a. *Key: what does it take to **advance** in this field?*

*Note: If responses to questions #8 and #9 above indicate that participants may have more than one type of certificate or other qualification, probe about:*

- a. *What other certificates or qualifications they have,*

- b. *What order they got them in,*
- c. *Which one is/was the most important to getting a job and/or advancing in the field,*
- d. *And why?*

**10. If you knew someone who wanted to do the job you do, how would you tell them to go about getting the skills they need for the job?**

- a. *How would you describe it to someone like me who doesn't know a lot about this field or who was just starting out in this field?*
- b. *Would you use different language to describe these qualifications to people who have been in your profession a while? Do you use different terms for it, such as an abbreviation or acronym or something like that?*

**RESUME ACTIVITY**

*This is a concrete example intended to focus respondents on short, succinct descriptions of their qualifications which could provide insight into what is important to highlight in the short, succinct survey questions we are interested in designing.*

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

Let's focus now on a resume activity that will give us more insight into what's important in this field. We want to hear how someone would demonstrate on a resume or job application form that they had the qualifications and skills necessary for a job in this field.

**11. SECTION HEADINGS: If you were preparing a resume or completing a job application form, under what section headings would you list the kinds of qualifications we have been talking about? Or if you were reviewing a resume or job application form, under what section headings would you expect to see the kinds of qualifications we have been talking about?**

- a. *In other words, if you were applying for a job what section headings would you use in your resume or job application to organize the qualifications we've been talking about so that a potential employer could easily find and see what's important in this field?*

b. *Or, if you were a hiring manager reviewing resumes and looking for the right person to hire, what section headings would you be looking for in the resume or job application to find the qualifications that are important in this field?*

**12. LANGUAGE: What, specifically, would you put under each section heading, or what specific language would you expect to see under each section heading?**

a. *In other words, what specific terms or words or phrases or language would you put in under each section heading of your resume to refer to the qualifications we've been talking about that are important in this field?*

b. *Of, if you were a hiring manager, what specific terms or words or phrases or language would you be looking for under each section heading of a resume or job application to find the qualifications what we've been talking about that are important in this field?*

**BENEFITS OF QUALIFICATIONS**

*Now, I want to hear about what you consider the benefits of getting your training.*

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

**13. Here is a list of some benefits that you may or may not have received from getting your training.**

List of benefits:

- To get a job in a new field
- To get a promotion or pay raise
- To stay current in my field or expand skills in my field
- To start my own business
- To get a professional certification or license

**What is missing from this list?**

**Are there things on this list that don't apply to you? If so, why don't they apply to you?**

*Once you have a complete list, ask:*

- a. How important were these benefits in motivating you to get your training?*
- b. Would you have completed your training if these benefits were not available?*
- c. Are some of these benefits more important than others? If so, which ones and why?*

**14. How would you describe your educational background (or accomplishments) to someone else?**

**15. How would you explain to someone what qualifications you have in this field?**

- a. If education is NOT mentioned, ask why not.*
- b. What role did education/schooling play in becoming qualified in this field?*

#### **QUESTIONS FROM OBSERVERS**

**16. Check to see if there are any follow-up questions from Observers.**

## **CONSTRUCTION, MANUFACTURING, TRANSPORTATION, REPAIR MODERATOR'S GUIDE**

*The moderator will welcome participants, introduce herself or himself, introduce staff and observers, explain the purpose of the group, and go over rules and logistics.*

### **WELCOME**

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group; we appreciate your willingness to participate.

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

- Facilitator/Moderator: James Dotson
- Rapporteurs/Note Takers: Max Li, Brad Hannon, and Steven Fink
- Observers: Refer to List from Stephanie Cronen.

### **PURPOSE**

We have been asked by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and other federal statistical agencies to help them understand more about:

- job education, training, and preparation,
- job skills, and
- job qualifications people may have.

You were invited here because:

- you are local residents who have skilled jobs that require formal training,
- and we need your input.

We want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us on this important topic.

Again, we are pleased that you are able to join us for this discussion and thank you again for agreeing to participate.

## LOGISTICS AND GROUND RULES

- Schedule/Time: 90-minutes from 7:30 to 9:00 PM
- Ground Rules
  - WE WANT **YOU** TO DO THE TALKING.
    - *We would like everyone to participate.*
    - *I will ask a series of questions and solicit your responses to those questions.*
    - *I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.*
  - THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.
    - *Every person's experiences and opinions are important.*
    - *Speak up whether you agree or disagree.*
    - *We want to hear a wide range of opinions.*
  - WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE.
    - *We want you to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.*
    - *We want to ensure confidentiality of the discussion.*
  - WE WILL BE TAPE RECORDING THE GROUP AND TAKING NOTES.
    - *We want to capture everything you have to say.*
    - *We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.*
  - PLEASE BE FULLY PRESENT AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE.
    - *We need input from each of you.*
    - *Please set aside anything that might be a distraction.*
    - *We especially ask that you turn off electronic devices such as mobile phones, electronic reading devices, laptops, etc.*

## OPENER

*The opening "question" is intended to be friendly, conversational, somewhat relevant to the topic, and easy so respondents feel relaxed and part of a positive discussion.*

- 1. Let's get started with some introductions. Tell us your name, what your occupation or area of specialty is, and how long you have been working in this field.**

## **TRAINING AND LEVEL OF EFFORT**

For the next hour or so we are going to talk about your work, education, training, skills, and the qualifications that you have.

First, I'm interested to hear what kinds of similar or different training you all have.

- 2. What kind of preparation, training, or program of study did you have to complete to learn the skills you need for your job?**

### ***Notes for Discussion***

- a. Some may not be working in their field of training or may be unemployed. Nevertheless, we want to know about training or preparation to become a/an: Automotive Service Technician/Mechanic; Electrician; HVAC & Refrigeration Mechanic/Installer; Commercial Bus/Truck Vehicle Operator; and Welder.*
- b. We want to know what program of study and other training they may have taken and/or completed.*
- c. **Probe:** Note that in some training programs, there may be requirements in addition to courses. Probe for these additional **non-course requirements.***

- 3. Where did you get your training or learn the skills you need for your job?**

### ***Notes for Discussion***

- a. We want to know about the types of schools and providers where individuals received their training.*

- 4. Is where or how you got your training important in your field?**

- 5. How long did it take you to complete your training or program of study?**

### **Notes for Discussion**

- a. **Probe:** Find out **how they measure completion time** (clock hours, credit hours, etc.) If credit hours, determine if credit hours were semester, trimester, or quarter.
- b. **Probe:** Find out if completed **part-time or full-time**.
- c. **Probe:** Find out about **sequencing**, i.e., whether completed all at once or periodically (e.g., with breaks in between).

**6. Why did you complete this training or program of study? What was your reason or what were your reasons for doing so?**

**7. Did you receive some sort of credential at the end of your training to document that you had successfully completed the training? If so, what credential did you receive?**

### **Notes for Discussion**

- a. The most typical examples that would be awarded by a school or training program would be an educational certificate, diploma, or degree (e.g., AA or AS degree).
- b. **Probe:** If they don't mention an education credential, ask if they did get an education credential that was part of their job training.
- c. **Probe:** It is important to distinguish between a) the credential they received as part of their training or program of study **given by the school or organization where they received their training** and b) any additional credential they had to get that was independent of their training or program of study (e.g., license or certification) **given by the state or other institutional body**.
  - Typically, there is a separate process for obtaining each: generally, the **school** would award an **educational credential** (e.g., diploma, certificate, or degree); whereas the **state or another institutional body** would issue any **related license or certification**. People can, theoretically, go to school and receive an educational credential, and not apply for or obtain a related license or certification. Participants may not think of them separately; however, we need to try to probe about the distinction to see if they make one or not.

- Probe for what people received that was **connected with their training or program of study** (e.g., educational certificate, diploma, or degree), AND any **additional related credential they had to get independent of their training or program of study** (e.g., state license, or professional license or certification).
- We are particularly interested in the relationship between an education program and a professional licensing or certification program. For example, did they take the education program to get the educational credential, or so they would be qualified for the professional credential? Which was more important to them? Which would be more important to an employer?

## **JOB REQUIREMENTS**

Now, I'm interested to hear about what kinds of similar or different job experiences you all have.

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart or write them down on paper. Moderate the discussion to focus on qualifications that are unique to their occupation, rather than qualifications that would be common across occupations.*

- 8. When you applied or were recruited for your job, what kinds of qualifications did your employer want you to have? What was most important for you to get the job you have in your field?**
  - a. Key: what does it take to **get a job** in this field?*
  - b. **Probe:** Probe, if needed, to distinguish between what is **required**, i.e., must have it to get a job **VERSUS** what is **not required, but nice to have** to get a job?*
- 9. Once you complete the basic training and meet the basic qualification to get a job in this field, what other things are important to help you stay qualified or advance in your field? Do you have/did you complete any of these <<use terms that the participants used>>?**
  - a. Key: what does it take to **advance** in this field?*

### ***Notes for Discussion***

- a. **Probe:** Probe for the order in which they got the additional training or credentials.
- b. **Probe:** Probe for which is/was the most important to maintaining skills or qualifications (*i.e., staying qualified*) and/or advancing in the field, and why.

## **LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY**

Now, I want to hear about how you talk about your training and qualifications in your field.

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

- 10. If you were on a job interview and were talking with someone who knew something about your occupation and they asked you to explain your qualifications for the job, what would you tell this hiring manager?**

### ***Notes for Discussion***

- a. **Probe:** If training/education is mentioned, ask what role did training/education/schooling play in getting those qualifications.
- b. **Probe:** If different language is used (e.g., training/education is NOT mentioned), ask why.

## **RESUME ACTIVITY**

*This is a concrete example intended to focus respondents on short, succinct descriptions of their qualifications which could provide insight into what is important to highlight in the short, succinct survey questions we are interested in designing.*

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

Let's focus now on a resume activity that will give us more insight into what's important in this field.

For this activity, I want you to look back on your responses to the last question (#10).

- 11. If you were looking for a job and were preparing a resume for your job search, under what section headings would you put the qualifications you just discussed?**

#### **QUESTIONS FROM OBSERVERS**

- 12. Check to see if there are any follow-up questions from Observers.**

## **HEALTHCARE SERVICES – MODERATOR’S GUIDE**

*The moderator will welcome participants, introduce herself or himself, introduce staff and observers, explain the purpose of the group, and go over rules and logistics.*

### **WELCOME**

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group; we appreciate your willingness to participate.

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

- Facilitator/Moderator: James Dotson
- Rapporteurs/Note Takers: Brad Hannon and Steven Fink
- Observers: Refer to list from Stephanie Cronen.

### **PURPOSE**

We have been asked by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and other federal statistical agencies to help them understand more about:

- job education, training, and preparation,
- job skills, and
- job qualifications people may have.

You were invited here because:

- you are local residents who have skilled jobs that require formal training,
- and we need your input.

We want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us on this important topic.

Again, we are pleased that you are able to join us for this discussion and thank you again for agreeing to participate.

## LOGISTICS AND GROUND RULES

- Schedule/Time: 90-minutes from 7:30 to 9:00 PM
- Ground Rules
  - WE WANT **YOU** TO DO THE TALKING.
    - I will ask a series of questions and solicit your responses to those questions.
    - We would like everyone to participate.
    - I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
  - THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.
    - Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
    - Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
    - We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
  - WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE.
    - We want you to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
    - Therefore, we ask that you keep the names of all you meet here and what is discussed here confidential.
  - WE WILL BE TAPE RECORDING THE GROUP AND TAKING NOTES.
    - We want to capture everything you have to say.
    - We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.
  - PLEASE BE FULLY PRESENT AND ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE.
    - We need input from each of you.
    - Please set aside anything that might be a distraction.
    - We especially ask that you turn off electronic devices such as mobile phones, electronic reading devices, laptops, etc.

## OPENER

**1. Let's get started with some introductions. Tell us your name, what your occupation or area of specialty is, and how long you have been working in this field.**

a. ***Intent:** The opening "question" is intended to be friendly, conversational, somewhat relevant to the topic, and easy so respondents feel relaxed and part of a positive discussion.*

## TRAINING AND LEVEL OF EFFORT

For the next hour or so we are going to talk about your **work, education, training, skills, and the qualifications** that you have.

First, I'm interested to hear what kinds of similar or different training you all have.

### 2. What kind of preparation, training, or program of study did you have to complete to learn the skills you need for your job?

- a. **Intent:** Determine how to ask people on a mailed survey about their educational certificate program. We want to know what program of study and other training they have completed.
- b. **Note:** Some may not be working in their field of training or may be unemployed. Nevertheless, we want to know about training or preparation to become a/an: dental assistant; emergency medical technician (EMT); licensed practical or licensed vocational nurse (e.g., LPN); massage therapist; medical/clinical assistant; nursing assistant or aide; and pharmacy technician.
- c. **Probe:** Note that in some training programs, there may be requirements in addition to courses. Probe for these additional **non-course requirements**.

### 3. Where did you get your training or learn the skills you need for your job?

- a. **Intent:** Confirm that participants got their training from an educational institution, and clarify the type of institution it is. We want to know about the types of schools and providers where individuals received their training (e.g., community college, trade school, vocational school, etc.).

### 4. Is where you got your training important in your field?

- a. **Intent:** Determine if it matters in their field who the provider is (i.e., the institution from whom participants completed their program of study).

**5. How long did it take you to complete your training or program of study?**

- a. **Intent:** *Confirm that the individual completed a meaningful program of study, AND determine the level of effort required to complete the program of study and what language is used to talk about level of effort.*
- b. **Note:** *Typically, level of effort or completion time will be measured in calendar time (e.g., years, months, weeks, etc.), clock hours (e.g., 900 hours, 1500, etc.), or credit hours (e.g., semester, trimester, or quarter).*
- c. **Probes:**
  - *Make sure to find out how **completion time** is measured. One way to frame this is to ask how the school tracked their progress: did they earn school credit hours; did they earn clock hours; or did they earn something else? If credit hours, determine if credit hours were semester, trimester, or quarter.*
  - *Find out if completed **part-time** or **full-time**.*
  - *Find out about **sequencing**, i.e., whether completed all at once or periodically (e.g., with breaks in between).*

**6. Did you receive some sort of credential from the place you took the training to document that you had successfully completed the training? If so, what credential did you receive?**

- a. **Intent:** *Determine the words participants use to describe what they got at the end of their program of study **from the institution where they completed their program of study**. The most typical examples of credentials that would be awarded by a school or training program would be an educational certificate, diploma, or degree (e.g., AA or AS degree).*
- b. **Probe:** *If they don't mention an education credential, ask if they got an education credential.*
- c. **Notes:**
  - *We are NOT concerned in this question about any certification or license participants may have.*
  - *It is important to distinguish between a) the credential they received as part of their training or program of study given by the school or organization where they received their training and b) any additional credential they had to get that was independent of their training or*

*program of study (e.g., license or certification) given by the state or other institutional body.*

- *Typically, there is a separate process for obtaining each: generally, the school would award an educational credential (e.g., diploma, certificate, or degree); whereas the state or another institutional body would issue any related license or certification. People can, theoretically, go to school and receive an educational credential, and not apply for or obtain a related license or certification. Participants may not think of them separately; however, we need to try to probe about the distinction to see if they make one or not.*
- *The focus for this question is what people received **that was connected with their training or program of study** (e.g., educational certificate, diploma, or degree), NOT any additional related credential they had to get independent of their training or program of study (e.g., state license, or professional license or certification).*

## **LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY**

Now, I want to hear about **how you talk about** your training and qualifications in your field.

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

**7. If you were on a job interview and were talking with someone who knew something about your occupation and they asked you to explain your qualifications for the job, what would you tell this hiring manager?**

*a. **Intent:** Determine what language is used to describe and what emphasis is placed on the program of study participants completed and the credential they received from the institution where they completed their program of study.*

*b. **Probes:***

- *If training/education is mentioned, ask what role did training/education/schooling play in getting those qualifications.*
- *If different language is used (e.g., training/education is NOT mentioned), ask why.*

## RESUME ACTIVITY<sup>i</sup>

Let's focus now on a resume activity that will give us more insight into **what's important in this field**. For this activity, I want you to **look at the copy of the resume** you brought with you. If you don't have a resume, that is OK. You will still be able to participate in this activity.

*MODERATOR: List responses on flip chart.*

**8. For those of you who do have a copy of your resume with you, how many of you have a section called "EDUCATION"? (Show of hands). Tell me what you put under the "EDUCATION" section.**

- a. *Intent: The primary purpose of this activity is to determine what participants put under the "EDUCATION" section of their resume in their own language.*

**For those of you who do not have a copy of your resume with you or who do not have an "EDUCATION" section in your resume, tell me where on your resume you would put the training you went to school for and the credential (i.e., educational certificate or diploma) you received from the place where you took that training.**

- a. *Intent: This is a follow-up on the primary question above. The purpose is to determine under what heading on their resume participants would put their training and the credential they received from the place where they took their training.*

**What other sections do you have on your resume and what did you put under those sections?**

- a. *Intent: The purpose is to determine how participants organize the other information contained in their resumes.*
- b. *Note: Clarify that we do not want participants to read everything in their resume; rather just identify the types of information they have in each section.*
- c. **Probes:**
- *For common section headers that they mention, ask if anyone would call the section header something else.*

- *If participants need more guidance, ask what they would put under the following sections of a resume:*
  - LICENSES AND CERTIFICATIONS
  - SUMMARY OF QUALIFICATIONS
  - AWARDS OR PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

## **QUESTIONS FROM OBSERVERS**

**9. Check to see if there are any follow-up questions from Observers.**

## **OPTIONAL QUESTIONS**

*If time permits and **only if there is a need**, one or more of the questions below may be asked.*

## **JOB REQUIREMENTS**

**10. If you knew someone who wanted to do the job you do, how would you tell them to go about getting the skills they need for the job?**

*Notes for Discussion*

- a. *If education/training/schooling is not mentioned, ask why.*

## **BENEFITS OF QUALIFICATIONS**

**11. Here is a list of some benefits that you may or may not have received from getting your training.**

List of benefits:

- To get a job in a new field
- To get a promotion or pay raise
- To stay current in my field or expand skills in my field
- To start my own business
- To get a professional certification or license

**What is missing from this list? Are there things on this list that don't apply to you? If so, why don't they apply to you?**

**a. Probes:**

- *How important were these benefits in motivating you to get your training?*
- *Are some of these benefits more important than others? If so, which ones and why?*
- *Would you have completed your training if these benefits were not available?*

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<sup>i</sup> NOTE: Prior to the focus group, ask participants to bring a copy of their resume with them to the focus group. Explain to participants that they do not have to spend time updating their resume; just bring the most recent copy they have. Also let participants know that if they do not have a resume that this is OK; it is NOT a requirement to participate.