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Paper Title: Predictors of Certification Attainment: How Do They Differ from Unionization and Licensure?

Paper Abstract:

This paper examines the phenomenon of occupational certification in the United States, asking “who is most likely to get certified” using a national survey dataset, the Survey of Income and Program Participation. I find that much of the demographic variance in certification attainment – for example, based on gender, race, and geographic location – can be attributed to differences in the distribution of individuals across occupations, not within-occupation variance. However, there are stark differences in certification attainment on the basis of individuals’ educational background. Rather than function as a substitute for undergraduate education, it appears that the majority of certifications are being used as a supplement to college degrees. Interestingly, I find evidence that individuals with a prior history of unemployment and underemployment are more likely than others to choose certification voluntarily, suggesting that some workers may be choosing certification as a form of human capital investment to hedge against precarious employment. I compare predictors of certification with other major forms of occupational closure, namely labor union membership and occupational licensing, and find that certification is becoming nearly as prevalent of a labor market phenomenon as licensing in some segments of the labor market. Finally, I compare certified and uncertified workers in terms of wages, and argue that certification functions as a means of closure providing some of the benefits of unionization for some workers. However, these benefits are very uneven across occupations and certification programs.