

Connecting Credentials

BUILDING LEARNING-BASED CREDENTIALING SYSTEMS

**Creating flexible credentialing pathways leading to
family-sustaining jobs to increase equity**
Work Group Report
June 2016

Background

Connecting Credentials is a collaborative effort of more than 100 national organizations and more than 2,000 stakeholders to make degrees, certificates, industry certifications, badges and other credentials easier to understand, use and interconnect. Postsecondary credentials (degrees, certificates, industry certifications, and more) are the currency through which skills and knowledge are recognized -- connecting people to jobs, education programs and career pathways.

Connecting Credentials aims at creating a more interconnected credentialing ecosystem — one that is student-centered and learning-based. Such a system is needed for several reasons: to ensure educational quality; increase access; align industry, education and issuers of credentials; multiply the benefits of increased attainment; reduce social inequity; and foster individual progress that results in market-valued credentials.

Participants at the National Credentialing Summit convened by Lumina Foundation in October 2015 identified five priority areas of focus needing more in-depth work. In January 2016, the Connecting Credentials team convened work groups focused on those five topics, charged with developing recommended actions. The work groups, which involved more than 100 leaders from across the country, included:

- **Developing common language** to serve as the basis for a connected credentialing system;
- **Using real-time data and technology** to empower credential users and create continuous feedback mechanisms;
- **Creating nimble end-to-end quality assurance processes** to support portability and trust of credentials;
- **Advancing scalable employer engagement approaches** to improve demand signals and increase relevancy and currency of credentials; and
- **Creating flexible credentialing pathways** leading to family-sustaining jobs to increase equity.

This report and those of the other four work groups can be found at www.connectingcredentials.org. An action plan integrating the work of all five groups will be released in summer 2016.

Introduction

Focusing attention through an equity lens, the “Creating Flexible Pathways to Family-Sustaining Jobs to Increase Equity” work group developed an action plan that supports a well-functioning credentialing marketplace with an eye toward increasing the number of learners and workers being served especially disparately impacted learners and workers across the United States. The work group used the Lumina Foundation’s “Equity Imperative” as a guide throughout their conversations.

Practitioners spanning K-12 through higher education, community-based organizations, workforce organizations and research leaders all contributed to a series of conversations to define the problem statement, and identify working assumptions, gaps and challenges. Dubbed “Pathways for Equity,” the work group then turned to policy levers and future recommended actions. Along the way participants shared resources and voiced common gaps and challenges that cut across stakeholders and communities.

Problem Statement

Learners and workers in the United States face a credentialing world that is often confusing and chaotic especially for disparately impacted populations. There are huge differences in the cost and quality of credentials. Credentials are rarely designed to stack, in part because of poor transfer and articulation policies and processes. A notable fraction of credentials don’t pay off, thus creating dead-ends for learners who have the least to lose. The credentialing marketplace lacks “truth in credentialing,” that is the ability to discern credential quality, portability and transferability. Learners, educators, advisors and career navigators all feel the consequences that come from of this lack of information. Prior to enrollment learners have limited information on credential quality, costs for comparable programs, return on investment and labor market payoff. In addition, consumer protection for learners is virtually non-existent.

The credentialing world that learners and workers face is mired in institutional and systemic obstacles. Fragmentation and “silos” are dominant in the credentialing marketplace with few incentives to meet learner, worker, and employer needs. Learners may face a geographic gap with limited or no access to “islands of innovation” that vary across regions or states, and that are not offered to scale. Current career navigation systems and services are insufficient. Front-line workers lack the ongoing, equity-informed professional development that enable them to meet learners’ needs, and keep current with dynamic labor market and occupational trends. Federal financial aid does not incent credit for prior learning, work-based learning, part-time learning, nor does it cover non-credit courses leaving a significant number of learners and workers with minimal or non-existent resources to achieve their career aspirations. Tools to accelerate completion and enhance learning—such as credit for prior learning, competency-based programs, and work-based learning—are not portable, transferable, nor universally available.

Although these problems are generally recognized, and even as innovative best practices have taken hold in most states, the cultural shifts and changes needed to implement and scale credentialing pathways is underestimated. Progress has been stymied by a lack of a “tipping point” for stakeholders to adopt credentialing pathways over the long haul. Lack of quality research and evidence about credentialing pathway completers—especially sub-baccalaureate credentials—impedes the acceleration of adoption of credentialing pathways and stackable credentials.

Working Assumptions

Despite the collective efforts of the supply side—K-12 and higher education institutions, training providers, and community-based organizations—many learners and workers are left behind. Systemic and institutional barriers dominated by fragmented funding silos impede access to and completion of credentialing pathways. A disproportionate number of dead-end credentials are awarded to disparately impacted populations.

Flexible credentialing pathways for all—across the education and training pipeline—need to be scaled. Stackable credentials and on ramps to these credentials need to be scaled to increase equity and benefit more learners and workers. On ramps to pathways for low-skill, low-income, minority, immigrant and other disparately impacted learners and workers are not sufficient. Credit for prior learning, competency-based programs, and work-based learning are proven strategies to accelerate completion and connect to the labor market. Even so, they are not the norm and most view them as optional to credentialing pathways.

The Pathways for Equity work group also recognized that equity within the credentialing arena cannot be significantly advanced through common language, data and technology, quality assurance, or employer engagement. To advance equity in credentialing federal and state policy levers and solutions must be considered.

Recommended Actions

Together the work group participants explored the possibilities for advancing pathways for equity. Our aim: to use an equity lens forming future action recommendations to the Connecting Credentials Initiative so that all learners, workers, and credentialing stakeholders benefit. Through conversation, questioning and revision the group forged the following recommended actions. Each recommendation is steeped in the collective knowledge and experience of the work group. The recommended actions are organized below by each component of the work group's charge.

Advance system alignment of career pathways initiatives enhancing connections of and coordination between K-12 education, adult education, developmental education, higher education, employment programs, youth development organizations and other related community-based organizations.

- **Develop and implement an equity agenda for quality credentialing pathways.** Intentionally design credentialing pathways and systems through an equity lens to assure learners aren't saddled with low-quality credentials and crippling debt.
- **Issue a "call to action" to the education and workforce system and credentialing providers to increase access, quality and success of credentialing pathways by disparately impacted populations.** Ensure that by closing the equity gaps credentialing pathways are able to reach more people.
- **Increase incentives, grants, and long-term investment in adopting credentialing pathways for disparately impacted learners and workers.** Ensure new dollars support the design, implementation and scale of guided credentialing pathways across systems from K-12 through higher education including on-ramps, co-enrollment, work-based learning and with credit for prior learning feeding into articulation/transfer agreements. Recognize and address access, cost, and volume issues to implement credentialing pathways in rural areas. This calls for shifting from islands of innovations to widespread credentialing pathways for all learners including more accessible, affordable options and financial aid for disparately impacted populations.
- **Aim policy levers at providing incentives and reducing barriers to creating flexible credentialing pathways to family-sustaining jobs.** Federal and state policy within the broader secondary, postsecondary, and workforce development arenas can provide more incentives, reduce barriers and increase opportunities to create flexible credentialing pathways leading to family-sustaining jobs. Policy lever options range from providing robust guidance including best practices, fostering incentives and expanding allowable costs to funding credentialing innovations. Credentials policy levers should be considered for Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Perkins Career & Technical Education Act, the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) as well for state policy.

Scale stackable credentials that promote seamless articulation and transfer including on-ramps for low-skill, low-income, immigrant and other disparately impacted learners and workers. Incorporate Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs), alternative credit options, competency-based programs, and work-based learning into credentialing pathways.

- **Build capacity of secondary and postsecondary faculty to innovate at the systems levels to re-design guided credentialing pathways.** This re-design innovation to include instruction, quality learning assessment, on ramps, stackable credentials, transfer and articulation agreements that incorporate credit for prior learning, work-based learning, and portability across institutions.
- **Promote, streamline and accelerate modular, stackable credentials by competency or competency clusters** including credit for prior learning.

See “Intersections” section for recommended actions for work-based learning.

Strengthen academic and career guidance and navigation supports, including professional development for front-line workers and efforts to reduce stigma about education, pathways, and training.

- **Bolster capacity-building of front-line staff supporting learners and workers across systems and programs** (e.g., educational advisors, career navigators and emerging positions) through ongoing, equity-informed training to provide a comprehensive navigation process including labor market data and trends.

Promote research into the effectiveness of career pathways and stackable credentialing initiatives including the long-term outcomes of individuals who complete stackable credentials.

- **Identify shared definitions and performance measures across major federal policy that affects the credentialing marketplace** (e.g., ESSA, HEA, Perkins, WIOA) including new forms of data reporting that provides a clear picture of the needs and status of disparately impacted populations (e.g., milestones and momentum points).
- **Fund increased and ongoing research of learner successes and needs especially disparately impacted populations** (e.g., study completers beyond first certificate/credential over time to second credential/degree).
- **Build online data tools for front-line practitioners and leaders that are easy to use**, aggregated, customizable, and that incorporate visual information to increase understanding of learner and worker outcomes, wages and labor market data.

Intersections with other Connecting Credentials Work Groups

From an equity lens credential transparency—truth in credentialing—is at the heart of the matter. In order to make informed decisions learners need to have accurate information on the labor market payoff, how credentials stack to continued education and training, disaggregated outcomes and connection to learning and workplace competencies. The recommended actions from the Common Language and Data and Technology work groups are critical to increasing the number of learners and workers completing credentialing pathways, entering and advancing in the workplace.

Early in the work group conversations the Pathways for Equity and the Employer Engagement work groups identified a vital intersection between their efforts—work-based learning. These two work groups collaborated to form the following recommended actions:

- Expand and sustain secondary and postsecondary work-based learning focused on real-world problem solving through project-based learning. Develop work-based learning models beyond internships, co-op education, and apprenticeship (e.g., simulated work environments, remote mentoring, embedded badges and credentials). Ensure work-based learning opportunities

beyond Career & Technical Education (CTE) students, and adapt models to ensure availability for learners living in rural areas.

- Build capacity of the supply side and the demand side to scale work-based learning working at the industry level beyond “one-off” coordination to increase efficacy. Cultivate and invest in intermediaries to coordinate work-based learning between learners and employers. Provide professional development in mentoring and instruction for front-line staff and supervisors working directly onsite with learners.

Work Group Members

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