

CONNECTING CREDENTIALS

FROM NATIONAL DIALOGUE TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Summarizing an action plan to improve credentialing

NATIONAL DIALOGUE

In 2015, Lumina Foundation and Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) joined forces to establish the Connecting Credentials initiative and together launched a national dialogue on how to build a well-functioning and sustainable credentialing ecosystem that is in sync with the needs of 21st century learners, employers, and the economy.

In today's knowledge-based economy, postsecondary credentials are the currency through which people's competencies and employability are recognized. Credentials include degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, badges, diplomas, and micro-credentials. They are offered by many providers, including colleges, universities, technical schools, industry associations, the military, and third-party organizations. Credentials connect people to jobs, help employers find the skilled workers they need, and link educational and training programs to each other, often through structured pathways.

The proliferation of educational options and wide array of postsecondary credentials in the U.S. marketplace provide a great national opportunity. They can help increase social mobility and economic opportunity for learners and help employers meet their talent needs in an increasingly competitive, rapidly changing and uncertain global economy.

To ensure the nation seizes these opportunities, collective action is needed. Too many learners face a credentialing marketplace that is confusing and chaotic, especially those who are low-income, minority, and otherwise underserved and underrepresented. Employers have had mixed results leveraging credentials for hiring and career advancement. Beyond using college degrees as a rough proxy for work readiness, many employers find it difficult to understand the array of credentials in the marketplace. Employers often struggle to communicate what competencies they need from workers – particularly in the midst of rapid labor market changes – in ways that learners and educators can understand.

Too many learners face a credentialing marketplace that is confusing and chaotic, especially those who are low-income, minority, and otherwise underserved and underrepresented.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

More than 100 organizations are co-sponsoring this national dialogue – including accrediting, standards and certifying organizations; business and industry groups; education organizations and associations; foundations and philanthropic organizations; labor organizations; policy, research and change-management organizations; student organizations; and technical and data services and communications providers.

Critically needed changes in credentialing policy and practice can only be realized by coordinated actions taken among diverse stakeholders.

In October 2015, 200 leaders representing more than 150 organizations convened for a National Summit on Credentialing to take the first step in articulating a shared vision for a 21st century credentialing system. The discussions made it clear that critically needed changes in credentialing policy and practice can only be realized by coordinated actions taken among diverse stakeholders.

Following the summit, five work groups composed of 100 national experts in various areas of credentialing met several times in early 2016 to develop recommendations for stakeholders at all levels to consider as they undertake change efforts inspired by our shared vision.



SHARED VISION

A 21st century credentialing ecosystem increases opportunity and results for all learners and employers and is characterized by the following:

- All learning matters – wherever it is obtained.
- All credentials are based on learning outcomes and competencies.
- Credentials are portable, transferable, transparent, useful, and easily understood by learners and employers.
- Learners and employers – the consumers of credentials – can make informed choices about the value of different credentials and about their investment in pursuing these credentials.
- Credentials are supported by comprehensive digital records that communicate what learners know and can do, aggregate learning from multiple providers, and provide access to learners' actual work products.
- Technology and common language enable transparency and interoperability among all credentials.

SEVEN AREAS FOR ACTION

Seeking to realize this vision, the Connecting Credentials partnership has forged an action plan, one that calls for collaborative work across *all* of the following seven areas:

- 1 Develop scalable ways to engage employers in the credentialing marketplace.** Employer engagement is critical to help our nation achieve educational equity and optimal talent development. Strengthening employer engagement is essential because it improves the relevance and value of credentials for learners and employers by aligning learning with labor market demands.
- 2 Empower learners to navigate the credentialing ecosystem.** In the ever-evolving worlds of education and employment, individuals must understand where they stand and what their choices are in terms of learning opportunities, credentialing and employment options. Better tools to navigate the credentialing highway are essential.
- 3 Develop common language centered on competencies.** We must create a common language framework supported by technology platforms and able to link all credentials. Such a framework can simplify communication among those who provide, earn and use credentials (e.g., postsecondary institutions, industry associations, certifying organizations and licensing agencies, learners, employers, and other credential providers).
- 4 Create an open, interoperable data and technology infrastructure.** A well-functioning credentialing ecosystem requires a comprehensive open data and technology infrastructure that can capture what employers need through job ads and interviews, link data on all of the credentials awarded by providers to illustrate connections with other credentials and career opportunities, and enable individuals to control and manage their credentialing information.
- 5 Foster shared understanding of credential quality among stakeholders and reciprocity among quality assurance processes.** We must increase transparency about credentialing quality assurance processes through the use of common language and concepts about quality. Such steps are needed to improve understanding of the value of different credentials; increase trust in and use of different credentials; and enable stakeholders to cross-reference different quality assurance processes to facilitate transfer and mobility within the credentialing ecosystem.
- 6 Pursue public policy that advances equity in the credentialing ecosystem.** Federal, state, and institutional policies influence how learners, employers, educators, quality assurers, and others use and value credentials. Policy – both incentives and sanctions – drives funding for services, infrastructure, innovation, capacity building, and evaluation. Policies can either aid or hinder the development of credentialing pathways that support learner success.
- 7 Promote field-based development of new credentialing tools, policies, and practices.** More than 125 initiatives are already underway that address aspects of the credentialing challenge. These islands of innovation need to be connected and leveraged – and used to spur new innovations. Creative initiatives – well-informed by research – must occur at all levels to help inform policy change, build infrastructure, and increase understanding and ownership of a marketplace of diverse credentials.

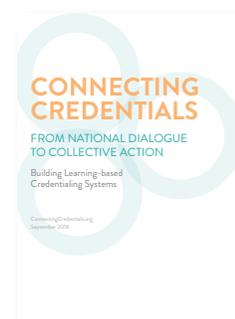
ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

The plan provides numerous recommendations for specific action by employers and employer associations, professional societies, accreditation bodies, certification bodies, education and training providers, state government, federal government, entrepreneurs, philanthropic community, student organizations, social and economic justice organizations, and researchers. The plan also provides examples of critical work already underway in each of the seven areas for action.

Action plans are always subject to change, and this one will be no exception. The plan will be housed at connectingcredentials.org, where it will be updated regularly. We will work to capture changes as they occur in the credentialing ecosystem; who is carrying out these changes; when they take effect; and what resources are used to create these changes. Communicating progress will be an important next step for our partnership – to help us refine plans and be accountable to one another.

Connecting Credentials will also create a dashboard that will show *if* and *how much* the needle is moving on credentialing change that better supports learners and employers. We will engage our co-sponsor organizations to help develop the dashboard – forging a shared understanding of how progress should be measured. We believe this is essential for improving the credentialing ecosystem.

To obtain printed or digital copies of the full action plan, gain access to numerous resources on credentialing, and follow the progress of the many stakeholders working to improve the credentialing ecosystem, visit: connectingcredentials.org.



September 2016



luminafoundation.org



skilledwork.org

View the full list of co-sponsor organizations at connectingcredentials.org