

Connecting Credentials

Action Plan FAQ

What is the action plan?

The seven-point Connecting Credentials action plan is a major marker in moving from national dialogue about the need to transform our credentialing systems to collective action for building a well-functioning and sustainable credentialing ecosystem that is in sync with the needs of 21st century learners, educators and employers. The plan outlines key areas of work and specific actions in each that employers, educators, government agencies, communities, researchers, policy organizations, and funders can take to collectively build the tools, policies and practices needed to make the diverse credentials in the marketplace work well for learners and employers. The key areas for action are:

1. *Develop scalable ways to engage employers in the credentialing marketplace.*
2. *Empower learners to navigate the credentialing ecosystem.*
3. *Develop common language centered on competencies.*
4. *Create an open, interoperable data and technology infrastructure.*
5. *Foster shared understanding of credential quality among stakeholders and reciprocity among quality assurance processes.*
6. *Pursue public policy agenda that advances equity in the credentialing ecosystem.*
7. *Promote field-based development of new credentialing tools, policies and practices.*

For each area for action, the plan provides:

- Rationale and top-priority challenges driving the call for action;
- Principles to guide action;
- Recommended actions;
- How these recommendations can be carried out; and
- Examples of major efforts underway that can be built upon.

What is the action plan's overall goal?

The goal is to create a learning-based credentialing ecosystem in which:

- 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 students, workers and employers.
- Learners and employers – the consumers of credentials – can make informed choices about the value of different credentials for their needs and 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 of and interoperability among all credentials.

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Why do we need an action plan?

No one group can reshape the nation's fragmented and dysfunctional credentialing system. Coordinated actions must be taken by diverse stakeholders to achieve critically needed changes in credentialing policy and practice. More than 100 organizations are co-sponsoring Connecting Credentials, reflecting widespread agreement that we need change and the opportunities and readiness to forge partnerships for shared action.

We need to work together to improve transparency in how all types of credentials are developed, what they mean, their value, and how they connect and relate to each other. We need to develop common language that allows credential users to compare and connect credentials, interoperable data systems to inform decisions and quality assurance mechanisms that assure credentials' quality and portability. We need to scale efficient and equitable ways to help learners, employers, educators, credential providers and accreditors navigate this increasingly complex, high-stakes credentialing marketplace.

The plan highlights important changes already taking place throughout the country. These forward-looking innovations inform the emerging shared vision of a redesigned 21st century credentialing system and this action plan is intended to serve as the blueprint for achieving that vision. These innovative efforts need to be connected and leveraged to encourage an entrepreneurial and open-source approach. More creative change initiatives are needed at every level – national, state, local/regional, and among affinity groups.

Trying out new approaches is important because it grounds policy and practice in the realities of what's discovered through testing models. Experimentation provides a basis for peer learning and exchanges of ideas and tools, supporting the spread of innovation. Its lack of formality means that adjustments of strategy can be made quickly, and practitioners can adapt as they learn without having to wait for formal policy change.

Why do we need these changes?

In our knowledge-based economy, postsecondary credentials are the currency through which people's competencies, upward mobility and employability are assessed and recognized. Credentials connect people to jobs, help employers find the skilled workers they need, and link educational and training programs to each other—often via structured pathways. The rapidly growing array of postsecondary credentials in the U.S. marketplace offers great potential opportunity – to increase social mobility and economic opportunity for learners and better support employers' talent sourcing and development needs. But we're not realizing that potential today. Too many learners face a credentialing marketplace that is confusing and chaotic, and contains too many dead ends, especially those who are low-income, minority and otherwise underserved and underrepresented. Employers have had mixed results leveraging credentials for hiring and career advancement.

What is a credential?

A documented award by a responsible and authorized body that attests that an individual has achieved specific learning outcomes or attained a defined level of knowledge or skill relative to a given standard. Credential, in this context, is an umbrella term that includes degrees, diplomas, licenses, certificates, badges, and professional/industry certifications. They are offered by many providers, including education institutions, technical schools, industry associations, the military, and third-party organizations.

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What do you mean by “credentialing ecosystem”?

A well-functioning credentialing ecosystem uses strong interconnections among learners, educators, employers, and government, and the agility of entrepreneurship and decentralization to produce value for diverse stakeholders. Strong interconnections are supported by common language, interoperable data and technology infrastructure, transparent and trustworthy quality assurance processes and supportive policies. In an adaptive credentialing ecosystem, policy and practice is grounded in what works – in the realities of what is learned by testing models. Experimentation provides a basis for peer learning and aids the spread of innovation.

How was the plan developed?

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.

More and more leaders in education, business, government and the technology community recognize that transformational change in the credentialing marketplace are needed if we are to achieve this goal. There are now 100 plus co-sponsoring organizations and the number continues to grow.

More importantly, these co-sponsoring organizations and leaders throughout the credentialing ecosystem are taking actions to address weaknesses in our current systems. They are beginning to change policies and practices and build capacity to provide credentialing pathways and supports needed to increase attainment of quality credentials among all learners. They are improving the scope and interoperability of data systems and experimenting with new forms of outcome focused quality assurance. They are developing new forms of digital credentials to provide greater depth, flexibility and trust in the credentialing marketplace. Much of that work is being done in partnerships that combine the strengths of multiple credentialing stakeholders.

How can I use the plan?

The plan contains 25 recommended actions and more than 100 specific ideas for concrete, important work people at all parts of the credentialing ecosystem can take to achieve those actions. These are found in each of the seven priority areas, labeled “recommended actions” and “how this can be done”. In addition, in the section on field-based development, the plan offers potential starting points for 13 types of credentialing stakeholders to consider. The plan also provides links to important work already underway, which you can use to inform decisions about the design and implementation of your actions.

In addition, you can use a database of more than 100 related initiatives that are underway, found at www.connectingcredentials.org. Look for partnerships to join and other approaches relevant to your work to examine.

How can users share in what is being learned?

Going forward, the action plan will be housed at www.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 our plans and be accountable to one another. So as you work on some dimensions of the action plan, please tell us about your work, so that we can include it in the resources available at www.connectingcredentials.org.

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How is the action plan different than the credentialing registry?

Connecting Credentials is focused on supporting the 100+ national organizations and hundreds of state/regional/local groups involved in aspects of credentialing connect with each other to collectively build the tools, policies and practices needed to make the diverse credentials in the marketplace all work well for employers and learners. That work has two aspects: the national dialogue and action plan for credentialing reform; and development and testing the Connecting Credentials Framework -- a tool for analysis and connectivity among diverse credentials by offering a way to describe all credentials in terms of the competencies they represent.

The *Credential Transparency Initiative* is developing an important component of the infrastructure needed to support a transformed credentialing ecosystem. It is creating a first-of-its-kind voluntary, web-based registry that allows no-cost sharing of comparable information from credentialing organizations about the range of credentials and how these credentials relate to each other. As part of this effort, it is developing common terms for describing key features of credentials and credentialing organizations that can be used to present comparable information via Internet search engines such as Google and testing practical software applications for employers, students, educators and other credential stakeholders.

How does the plan relate to the Connecting Credentials Framework?

The Connecting Credentials Framework is another potential building block of learning-based credentialing systems. The beta version of the Framework is currently being field tested as an analytic tool that allows users to think through interrelationships among credentials and can be applied in both educational and workplace environments. The Framework uses competency descriptors as a mechanism to profile the level and types of knowledge and skills associated with any credential. It is organized around two learning domains – knowledge and skills (specialized, personal, social) – and breaks out competencies in those domains into eight levels based on the relative complexity, breadth and depth of learning.

How will we know that the plan made a difference?

Connecting Credentials is creating 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-sponsors to help develop the dashboard – forging a shared understanding of how progress should be measured.

How does the plan relate to Lumina Foundation’s 2025 goals?

The drive to increase postsecondary attainment to 60 percent by 2025 is based on the reality that higher levels of knowledge and skills are required in today’s economy and society. In pursuing this goal, Lumina Foundation is committed not only to increase the number of credentials earned, but also to ensure the quality of those credentials. We want to ensure that all postsecondary credentials –from badges and other forms of “micro-credentialing” all the way through advanced degrees and post-doctoral study -- represent genuine learning of knowledge and skills that students need to succeed in the workplace and in life.

This plan is an important step forward in redesigning the nation’s current postsecondary system into one that is truly learning-based and student-centered. It provides guidance on how to connect diverse credentials to create clear and multiple pathways for students as they seek to build –and rebuild—their careers and lives. These actions also address our nation’s need for talent development to usher in a new era of innovation and success.