

# Connecting Credentials

*BUILDING LEARNING-BASED CREDENTIALING SYSTEMS*

## **Equipping Adult Learners to Attain Market-Valued Postsecondary Credentials**

**Work Group Report**

**November 2017**

## Forward

Connecting Credentials is a collaborative effort of more than 120 national organizations and more than 3,000 stakeholders to make credentials easier to understand, use and interconnect. Credentials include degrees, certificates, diplomas, professional and industry certifications, licenses, and micro-credentials such as digital badges. Credentials connect people to jobs, education programs and career pathways.

In April 2017, Connecting Credentials convened five workgroups of diverse leaders in credentialing reform to tackle particularly challenging aspects of achieving the vision of a learner-centered credentialing ecosystem articulated in the 2016 [From National Dialogue to Collective Action: Building Learning-Based Credentialing Systems](#). The workgroups were asked to recommend actionable steps that should be taken to address the credentialing needs and priorities of diverse learners, especially adults with no recognized postsecondary education, in the complex and highly dynamic credentialing marketplace. With this equity focus, they addressed the following questions:

- **Building Trust in the Quality of Credentials:** How can we increase the quality, quantity and pay-off of credentials for all students, especially for those with no other postsecondary credentials?
- **Equipping Adult Learners to Attain Market-Valued Postsecondary Credentials:** How do we equip and empower adults with no postsecondary credential to navigate, persist and succeed in selecting and attaining postsecondary credentials that lead to educational and economic advancement?
- **Aligning Demand and Supply Signals:** What should be done to better align diverse credentialing processes and products with emerging employer hiring practices so that job applicants are evaluated based on what they know and can do, rather than who they know and where they went to school?
- **Improving Learner Mobility:** How can we improve credential stackability and portability, especially for adults with little or no prior postsecondary education?
- **Making All Learning Count:** How can we reliably and consistently recognize learning that takes place in informal and workplace settings?

This report and those of the other four work groups can be found at [www.connectingcredentials.org](http://www.connectingcredentials.org). Each workgroup started with the recognition that the predicted disruptions in our learning and credentialing systems already have begun to transform these systems. More diverse learners with different needs and priorities are engaging in postsecondary learning than ever before. The speed of change in the clusters of competencies required at work is accelerating. The proliferation of learning and credentialing options, including substantial expansion of work-based learning, continues unabated, leaving credential seekers confused about what credential and pathway to pursue and credential providers and their quality assurers trying to adjust to this changed environment.

Together, the workgroups contributed to our understanding of the interconnectedness and systemic nature of these challenges, identified leading-edge policies and practices to address these challenges and provided useful guidance for moving forward on multiple fronts.

## Introduction

Most postsecondary education and credentialing systems have been structured to serve young adult students entering straight from high school with the intent of earning a degree before entering the workforce. Non-traditional adult learners were treated as anomaly add-ons at the margin with little assistance offered for needs like childcare, work schedule accommodations, transportation and other work and life supports.

Today's world is very different. We know, for example, that:

- 38% of undergraduate students are older than 25;
- 40% of post-secondary enrollees are black, Hispanic, Asian, or multi-racial;
- At least 33% of undergraduate students receive Pell grants;
- Nearly half of all undergraduate students attend a community college;
- 58% of students balance responsibilities of work with their studies; and
- 26% of students are enrolled while raising children.

We also know that:

- The unemployment rate is for those with only a high school diploma is double the rate for those with a bachelor's degree, and those who didn't finished high school are three times as likely to be unemployed than those with a bachelor's degree; and
- The unemployment rate for African-Americans is twice as high as for whites, and for Hispanics/Latinos, unemployment is one-third higher than for whites.

Meeting evolving labor market demands and Lumina Foundation's Big Goal of 60 percent of Americans holding a quality post-secondary credential by 2025 will require engaging millions of adults who've never gone to college in attaining a postsecondary credential as well as reengaging millions more who have taken courses but never completed a program.

The U.S. has an enormous and expanding adult "could-be" learner population that needs to earn credentials to obtain family-supporting jobs and navigate career pathways.

This workgroup focused on addressing the challenges facing adult learners who have never earned a postsecondary credential, or perhaps even a secondary credential, by developing recommendations about the services and supports they need to succeed. The group asked, *What makes it difficult to earn a credential or to complete a training program? What factors get in the way of success? What propels adult learners toward credential completion and career advancement?*

Many adult learners encounter substantial head winds (e.g., increased barriers and time to degree) as they attempt to earn their first postsecondary credential. Issues can feel overwhelming and span work schedule conflicts, transportation, child care, financial aid, location of training, navigating educational institutions and career pathway options, and much more.

*Our goal is to make the learning the hardest part of the credentialing journey, not coping with the road blocks that stand in the way of completion and career launch. We need a supportive ecosystem in which*

*learners have tailwinds behind their efforts, rather than the present reality of having to cut through headwinds to succeed. It should be harder to fail than to succeed.*

The positive community impact of increasing the number of adult learners who earn a postsecondary credential can be profound, including reducing the need for public support, increasing employability, increasing community tax base and increasing the potential for success among children of those learners.

**The primary recommendation of this work group is that communities develop learner-centered support ecosystems where all adult learners can access the resources and services they need to succeed in earning postsecondary credentials and jobs with career pathways.**

## What Supports are Needed?

The supports needed by many adult learners are well understood, based on research and practice. They include:

- *Financial aid* – Federal rules prohibit financial aid for “smaller credential” programs (which may well be valuable for career path entry). Also, adults may be going to school part-time and not taking enough credits to qualify for a Pell grant or other financial aid. Additionally, most institutions have yet to provide Ability to Benefit pathways for adults without a secondary credential to obtain federal financial aid and work toward secondary and postsecondary education through career pathway programs. Make the financial aid rules more flexible to meet the needs of today’s students.
- *Dealing with educational debt* – Prior unpaid tuition is a huge obstacle for many adult learners, preventing release of prior transcripts and credits. Flexible rules and aid in paying off back tuition are needed to enable returners to pay off back tuition debt.
- *Placement/Locality* – Where and when providers offer training matters; location may be a long way from learner’s home or job, particularly in rural regions and in urban centers with weak public transportation systems. Workers reentering education often need it to be available at nontraditional times and days as well as in nontraditional modalities, such as distance learning.
- *Academic preparation* – Many entering adult learners need to strengthen foundational skills without derailing academic/occupational paths.
- *Flexible, inclusive credit transfer and credit for prior learning* – Adult students enter postsecondary education with many strengths and assets, which often go unrecognized now.
- *Family needs* – Adult learners come with a full life of circumstances to manage including care for dependents -- children to adults. Recognize and offer support services to help students succeed.
- *Support needs* - Transportation, secure housing, food, child care, counseling, wellness and mental health services are major examples of widely felt needs.
- *Pathway navigational help* – Many adult learners need help in understanding both how to navigate around educational institutions, learning plans, and career pathways.
- *Coaching/mentoring* – Adult learner success increases significantly when they receive consistent support, which can come from a coach, a mentor, and/or becoming part of a cohort of learners.

- *Special needs populations* – Some adult learners face barriers that are specific to their circumstance -- opportunity youth, those returning to their community from incarceration and persons with disabilities or advanced age, for example. Offer targeted support services.

The mix of supports needed varies by individual, and the continuum is essential. A recent study by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research entitled *Supports that Matter in Workforce Development Programs* strongly reinforces the importance of support services for learner success. Supports increase the likelihood of an adult learner earning a postsecondary credential and career-launching employment. The right supports at the right time can make all the difference, and connecting them so they can be readily accessed creates pathways for greater success.

## Creating an Ecosystem of Learner Supports

Work group members could easily identify evidence-based approaches that work on all of the support needs outlined above, islands of quality supports surrounded by vast seas of learners who do not have access to comprehensive supports. Today’s reality is that a learner’s ability to access a full range of quality supports depends on where they live and what institution/program they’re accessing.

**The primary recommendation of this work group is that communities develop learner-centered support ecosystems where all adult learners can access the resources and services they need to succeed in earning postsecondary credentials and jobs with career pathways.**

Elements of such an ecosystem should include:

- **Comprehensive supports are available to all who need them.** Connecting community assets into a continuum of organizations to deliver comprehensive supports to address the needs described above. The mix of who provides which services (educational institutions, community-based organizations, workforce or social service agencies) will vary by community. The key is ensuring quality, comprehensive supports are available to all learners - and their households - who need them.
- **Services are interconnected.** Communities have widely varying numbers of agencies that provide support services. Those services need to be provided in a unified way from the perspective of the learner. Providers should integrate their offerings so advisors and case managers can broker the needed services regardless of which agency provides them, and learners aren’t subjected to referral hand-offs and lost in transition from agency to agency.
- **High quality student advising and navigational support.** Every learner needs to be able to get the help they need to understand the local labor market, know the value of specific credentials in their market, figure out their choices both while in a credentialing program and in navigating career options and opportunities. This requires a combination of greatly improved information tools (such as applications that bring good information onto a learner’s smart phone) and well-equipped staff or volunteers in the community with realistic caseloads to provide advising and navigational support.

Which agencies play specific support roles will vary by community; the must-have is networks in which multiple organizations collaborate to deliver interconnected, quality supports at scale. We can’t improve supports to learners by operating in silos; rather, it requires operating as an integrated system that

reflects tight partnerships among relevant organizations. It is crucial for adult education and higher education institutions to continue to work with and augment partnerships with other agencies and community organizations in order to provide the learner a seamless experience.

That design expectation carries some important realities with it, including:

- Shared information systems about learners, their needs and status of supports;
- Common customer flow system and protocols that make services simple for learners to access;
- Staff and volunteer development, especially to deepen the understanding of the full array of supports and what various partners can provide; and
- Developing mutual accountability within the collaboration.

## Examples of Models

The following initiatives are models from across the country. These initiatives aim to address completion of training programs and support students with wraparound services to create a clear path for success. In each instance the best practice of combining support services is exemplified.

[Sparkpoint](#) is a United Way enterprise which houses centers to help families gain financial stability. Sparkpoint supports include free financial coaching, credit counseling and repair, career development and benefits screening. One Sparkpoint center operates out of Skyline College in San Bruno, CA. The service focus is on “bundling three key elements of financial success: managing credit, increasing income and building assets.” Students can take advantage of services like working with a coach to identify their goals, interview preparation and applying for scholarships.

The [Working Families Success Network](#) is a collaboration between the United Way and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). This initiative brings together foundations and funders, community based organizations and community colleges to advance approaches integrating services that support families as they become more financially stable. One case is CommonBond Communities Financial Opportunity Center. “CommonBond Communities provides affordable rental apartments and townhomes throughout 50 cities in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. CommonBond’s Financial Opportunity Centers provide employment counseling, financial coaching and income support counseling within its multi-family housing complexes.”

[Center for Working Families](#) (CWF) creates an opportunity to “improve the financial bottom line for low-income families by helping people boost earnings, reduce expenses, and build savings. The key to CWF’s success is that array of financial, employment, and income support services are *integrated*, all in *one place*, and are given through personalized, *one-on-one coaching*.” The three-strand approach combines financial coaching, workforce development coaching and income support coaching and can help to support students along their way to earning a credential. Southwest Solutions, a community based organization and CWF site, operates in Southwest Detroit. This model was used to support the work done under a successful Pathways out of Poverty grant funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. Students were able to choose one of three pathways (weatherization, deconstruction, and landscaping/urban agriculture) and take advantage of the supports that Southwest Solutions offered throughout their training and after placement in a job.

[Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund](#) (CFE) “provides both funding and focused technical assistance to mayors and their teams to help them embed systemic financial empowerment programs and policies into city services to improve individual and family financial stability.” This initiative outlines four keys to financial success: 1) asset building, 2) banking access, 3) consumer protection, 4) financial education and counseling. CFE Fund’s CityStart “offers mayors and their administrations a way to identify financial empowerment goals, convene key stakeholders, develop actionable strategies, and ultimately craft an implementation blueprint that is rooted in local insights and that prioritizes sustainability.” This approach includes two phases, 1) a municipal financial empowerment boot camp like experience that brings together local entities, and 2) implementation planning with entails carrying the boot camp momentum to designing a plan for action and narrowing down crucial stakeholders.

The [Excel Center](#) in Indianapolis is run by Goodwill Education Initiatives, the not-for-profit created by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana. This program provides a free opportunity for adults in Indiana to earn a high school diploma. Students are also able to earn college credit towards an advanced degree and industry recognized credentials. While in attendance, students can take advantage of free childcare, transportation, individual supports and college and career planning. The Excel Center has been operating since 2010 and has expanded to Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington D.C.

## Recommendations

As the examples suggest, in many places some of these recommendations are already in place. Where they are not, community partners should:

- Take public policy actions to set expectations that comprehensive supports will be provided to all learners who need them. Policy change can move this approach from being dependent on community partner relationships and become a norm at scale.
- Provide accessible supports in convenient locations (i.e., on the job or at school). This could be an on-location community-based organization to assist with income supports.
- Create a support model where learners can flow from one service to another as needed. Services would be fluid and accessible, perhaps integrated into the institution of learning (i.e., a foodbank location on a college campus in conjunction with the student services department)
- Equip staff and volunteer advisors to provide support in person or through tech-enabled mechanisms. For example, advise or answer questions by text or email to accommodate adult learner schedules. At present, advisors’ expertise is most often focused on campus activities rather than broader community supports.
- Instill a career- and learning-centric approach to service delivery. This culture shift would bring all organizations, public and private, together to focus on the key goals: helping learners build skills and gain employment. Supports such as transportation and child care remove barriers to both education and employment.
- Engage employers in this ecosystem, including providing supports to their workers that increase the likelihood that barriers won’t get in the way of continuing work and further learning.
- Use a common language among all organizations involved to assure all involved avoid confusion.

## Appendix A – List of Work Group Members

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*Participation in workgroup deliberations doesn't imply that the individuals listed or their organizations necessarily endorse any or all of the workgroup recommendations.*