

Understanding Quality: The Role of States in Supporting Quality Non-Degree Credentials

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the U.S. economy, resulting in more than 52 million people filing for initial unemployment benefits between mid-March and mid-July. Today, one-third of individuals in the workforce believe they will need additional education and new skills to find comparable employment if they lose their job. Moreover, thirty-five percent of adults are planning to change careers if they lose their job.¹ Governors and states have a key role to play in helping individuals make transitions that improve their livelihood. In the short-term, displaced workers can use non-degree credentials to quickly reskill and reenter the labor market. In the long-term, policymakers should understand the variety of credentials that can be earned in diverse learning environments and modernize the process by which credentials are deemed as valuable – a win-win for workers and employers.

States also play a critical role in quality assurance, by sharing information with individuals and employers about quality credentials and credentialing bodies through a variety of programs administered by states.

This includes career and technical education programs and state eligible training provider lists. This issue brief provides guidance about how states can identify which credentials meet quality thresholds and are likely to empower workers, highlights states that are leading on this issue, and offers recommendations for state policymakers. As governors reopen their state economies and citizens seek employment opportunities, there are several recommendations states can follow to ensure they are supporting quality credentials:

- 1. Develop standardized definitions of the different types of non-degree credentials**
- 2. Understand and assess the quality of credentials**
- 3. Ensure that non-degree credentials are accepted as college credit and embedded into degree programs**
- 4. Seek out examples of state leadership in supporting worker upskilling and reskilling, leading to quality credentials**

¹ Public Viewpoint: Covid-19 Work and Education Survey,” Strada Education Network, April 7, 2020, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/publicviewpoint>.

Background: Non-Degree Credentials Can Support Individuals Impacted by the Pandemic

Though job losses due to COVID-19 have occurred in virtually every sector, shifting consumer demands, some accelerated by the pandemic, are creating job growth in a few areas. For example, employers have increased hiring for jobs which support online shopping and package delivery.² In those cases where displaced workers may seek employment opportunities in these job growth sectors, they are more likely to require new skills.

Non-degree credentials allow a pathway for individuals to quickly pivot to new positions, and many can be earned in a much shorter time than degrees. Many non-degree credentials are also compatible with virtual learning, which is critical amid widespread social distancing protocols. Furthermore, certifications and certificates are accessible to individuals from a variety of educational backgrounds, from those without a high

school diploma all the way to those with a post-doctoral education. Similarly, they are accessible to individuals with different levels of work experience. Some non-degree credentials require no prior work experience, while others can require multiple years as a practitioner. That non-degree credentials can be of value to individuals at all education levels and every stage of their career is a powerful inducement for pursuing these credentials. This is increasingly recognized by workers: for those who are considering education and training within the next six months, three out of five adults say they would enroll in non-degree programs, including certifications, certificates, and courses for reskilling or upskilling.³ Therefore, non-degree credentials are poised to play an outsized role in economic recovery efforts as dislocated workers look to upgrade their skills to expand their employment opportunities. One form of non-degree credential that has value are certifications.

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² Arianne Cohen, "Who is Hiring during the Coronavirus? Try These Industries if You Need a Job Now," *Fast Company*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90478987/who-is-hiring-during-the-coronavirus-try-these-industries-if-you-need-a-job-now> and Jazmin Goodwin, "Here are the Companies Mass Hiring During the Pandemic," *USA Today*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2020/04/01/coronavirus-hiring-cvs-walmart-zoom-among-companies-seeking-workers/5097510002>.

³ "Public Viewpoint: Covid-19 Work and Education Survey," Strada Education Network, April 7, 2020, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/publicviewpoint>.

Certifications are particularly valuable for workers and employers because the skills and competencies are defined by the industry and are transparent. This allows the worker with these certifications to directly communicate their skills and abilities to potential employers, and provides employers with third-party verification that an individual can perform the tasks associated with a job. Such certifications have been shown to lead to good jobs, according to a recent Gallup report that showed that nearly forty-nine percent of individuals with a high school diploma and a certification had a “good job,” defined along the lines of compensation, among other metrics. While certifications benefited all groups, they were particularly advantageous for workers with a high school diploma

and no postsecondary education.⁴ Individuals with certifications are also more likely to be employed and to feel confident they have the necessary education and training for their job for the next five years.⁵

Certifications assess competencies that have been identified by people working in the industry and are therefore aligned with employers’ needs and provide better assurance of value for workers. In some cases, these certifications are aligned with a defined set of competencies for groupings of jobs. This alignment with the skills needs of employers ensures that certifications provide entry into a career pathway, reducing the uncertainty for workers selecting a credential, and allowing individuals to understand which certification is the right one based on their career goals.



⁴ Gallup, Inc., “Professional Certifications Offer Workers with No College Degree a Pathway to Good Jobs,” <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/professional-certifications-offer-workers-with-no-college-degree-a-pathway-to-good-jobs>.

⁵ Ibid.

Recommendations

1. Develop standardized definitions of the different types of non-degree credentials

There is a great deal of confusion about the various types and applicability of credentials in the marketplace. Adding to this confusion, credentialing terms such as certificates and certifications are often interchanged and misused. Although they sound similar, they are in

fact very different. State leaders can ease confusion by providing guidance on standardizing the definition of all non-degree credentials (e.g., certificate of achievement, certificate of apprenticeship, assessment-based certificate, certification, and badge) across state agencies and programs. Standardized definitions provide greater transparency about the purpose and elements of each non-degree credential.

Defining Credentials

The term “credential” encompasses all the different forms by which knowledge, skills, and/or experiences are recognized. Credentials include degrees, certifications, certificates, occupational licenses, diplomas, and (more recently) digital badges. More than 738,000⁶ different types of credentials currently exist in the U.S. This illustrates the complexity and diversity of the credentialing system and why confusion has arisen among these various terms.



Certifications

are associated with a mastery of a specific set of competencies and include a standardized assessment. The competencies for each certification are developed with input from employers and are often associated with a specific job or set of job roles. Certifications are typically awarded for a limited time, after which they can be renewed.



Certificates

can be awarded under several conditions: completion of a course or training module, completion of a set of related courses, completion of a program (like an apprenticeship program), etc. Not all certificates include an assessment or measure learning outcomes. Certificates can be associated with the skills needed for specific job roles, or more general skills like workplace safety, or leadership.



Badges

and other micro-credentials are highly variable. Like certificates, they are awarded for a number of reasons, from completion of specific tasks to completion of a program. In some cases, badges are merely a digital representation of an already awarded certification or certificate. For this reason, it can be challenging for individuals to understand how badges can support their entry or re-entry into the workforce.



Licenses

are awarded by a government agency to grant legal permission for an individual to practice an occupation (e.g., registered nurse, professional engineer). Licenses are time-limited and generally require renewal. Similar to certifications, licenses can be revoked for incompetence or unethical behavior.

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⁶ Credential Engine, *Counting U.S. Secondary and Postsecondary Education Credentials*, September 2019, <https://credentialengine.org/counting-credentials-2019-report>.

2. Understand and assess the quality of credentials

Given the anticipated demand for and current taxpayer investment in non-degree credentials, it is imperative that consumers can differentiate quality credentials resulting in positive outcomes from those with poorer outcomes.⁷ Assessing the quality of certifications and certificates can be challenging, but there is a set of core

questions that can be used to screen for quality. The following questions are meant to provide guidance on which credentials are likely to support workers success in the workforce. If these questions can be answered in the affirmative, it generally indicates a quality credential. The questions were developed by Workcred to be answered using easy-to-find, publicly available information.

CERTIFICATIONS	CERTIFICATES
Was industry involved in creating the credential, and to what extent?	
Are there any formal endorsements by industry?	
Is it accredited by a third party, such as ANSI National Accreditation Board (ANAB) or National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA)?	
Is the credential supported by a national or international standard (e.g., ISO/IEC 17024:2012, <i>Conformity assessment—General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons</i> , and ASTM E2659-18, <i>Standard Practice for Certificate Programs</i>)?	
To assess validity of skills: Does the certification support a recognized occupation or specialty?	To assess the assessment of competencies: Does it have an assessment that measures learning outcomes, and what form does that assessment take?
To assess the assessment of competencies: Does it have a standardized examination?	To assess the quality of the instruction: How is the content taught or made available?
To assess the maintenance of competencies: Does it have processes for expiration, recertification, and revocation (due to unethical or incompetent conduct)?	To assess the quality of the instruction: Is the content taught by recognized subject matter experts?
To assess validity of skills: Is this certification connected to state licensure? Which states recognize the certification (e.g., all, a majority)?	To assess the appropriateness of the instruction: Do the teaching strategies support achieving the learning outcomes?

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⁷ “Public Viewpoint: Covid-19 Work and Education Survey,” Strada Education Network, April 7, 2020, <https://www.stradaeducation.org/publicviewpoint> and Congressional Research Services, *Institutional Eligibility for Participation in Title IV Student Financial Aid Programs*, February 14, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43159.pdf>.

3. Ensure that non-degree credentials are accepted as college credit and embedded into degree programs

State policymakers can also encourage colleges and universities to embed certifications into relevant two- and four-year academic degree programs. For example, a nursing major could earn a certification as a phlebotomy technician, or a cybersecurity major could earn multiple certifications (e.g., Security+, Certified Ethical Hacker, and CISSP) as part of their degree programs. Certifications can be used as a significant milestone within degree programs, resulting in students earning a certification while pursuing their degree or earning a certification at the end of a degree program. Certifications earned on the paths to degrees may also improve students' summer employment prospects and work-based learning experiences during the academic year, as well as lead to promotions and wage increases. Such efforts provide more opportunities for students, and help enable life-long learning, particularly for adult students who are more likely to need more modular modes of learning.

State leaders may also provide individuals long-term career opportunities along career pathways in their state by connecting non-degree credentials to other credentials. Many types of non-degree credentials can be aligned with career pathways. Certifications provide a particularly useful example since they are based on competencies. The competencies assessed in the certification process can be aligned with education and training programs as well as with other credentials to create a set of stackable credentials that are part of a career pathway.

As a clear example of these principles, the University of Memphis Experiential Learning Credit (ELC) Program offers college credit for a variety of certifications and licenses such as those for a paramedic, child development associate, or phlebotomist. Students who hold these certifications and licenses earn college credit which counts toward degree programs at the University of Memphis. The ELC program decreases the time to earn a degree, eliminates the need for individuals to repeat coursework, and reduces the cost of a college education. It is also a strategy to help states meet their postsecondary attainment goals in building a skilled workforce.



4. Seek out examples of state leadership in supporting worker upskilling and reskilling leading to quality credentials

States are on the forefront of developing solutions to help individuals identify opportunities to gain new skills that are needed by employers and validated through a certification process leading to a quality

credential. Many workers displaced by the COVID-19 pandemic will likely need to reskill or upgrade their skills to become reemployed and will seek short-term programs leading to non-degree credentials aligned with employer needs. The following examples highlight three different approaches that illustrate states' leadership in supporting worker upskilling and reskilling.



Connecticut: Unemployment insurance recipients in Connecticut have access to an online learning platform where they can discover new career pathways, identify courses that they can take to upgrade their skills, and prepare for a certification. The platform is administered by [SkillUp CT](#), a partnership between the Connecticut Workforce Development Council, the Governor's Workforce Council, and the Connecticut Department of Labor.



Ohio: Ohio's [TechCred](#) helps employers invest in upskilling their workforce. Employers apply to be a part of this program and, if accepted, are reimbursed up to \$2,000 when a current or prospective employee earns an eligible technology-focused credential. TechCred developed a [list](#) of eligible credentials, many of which can be earned totally online.



Tennessee: Tennessee focused on addressing the needs of grocers, retailers, and logistics employers who experienced a hiring surge as the pandemic emerged. The [Tennessee Talent Exchange](#) was launched by the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Grocers and Convenience Store Association, Tennessee Retail Association, and Hospitality TN. This online portal matches out-of-work Tennesseans with employers that have job openings, with plans to connect to postsecondary education and in-demand credentials.

About the National Governors Association & Workcred

The National Governors Association (NGA) is the nonpartisan voice of the nation's governors in all 55 states, commonwealths, and territories. Workcred, a nonprofit affiliate of the American National Standards Institute, focuses on strengthening workforce quality by improving the credentialing system, ensuring its ongoing relevance, and preparing employers, workers, educators, and governments to use it effectively. The NGA Center for Best Practices has partnered with Workcred to deliver this resource to governors' education and workforce policy advisors and other relevant stakeholders.