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American National Standards Institute

Establishing an ANSI Standards Collaborative to Improve
Transparency, Trust and Quality in Labor Market Credentialing

The last decade has seen rapid growth in the number and variety of degrees, certificates, certifications, and "badges" being offered through a wide variety of credentialing organizations. Uncertainty about the quality and value of these credentials and about how they relate to each other is causing serious confusion in the labor market; driving up costs for employers, job-seekers and public funders; and exacerbating skill shortages throughout the country.

These problems derive largely from the lack of transparency and trust in the credentialing marketplace. Credentials represent documentation of competencies or qualifications with varying levels of assurance that this documentation can be trusted. Transparency is present when all labor market participants and stakeholders (such as funders and regulators) have equal access to complete, accurate, and up-to-date information on credentials, including their quality, their value, and the costs and conditions for acquiring them. Transparency also involves full information on how credentials relate to each other and clearly indicates the steps along pathways to other credentials and careers. Trust provides the necessary assurance that the information, including information provided by credentialing organizations, is complete, accurate and up-to-date, and that there are systems in place to review and reaffirm these assurances over time.

Transparency requires widely-accepted public-private consensus "standards" that provide a common framework and language for describing all key aspects of credentials, including competencies, assessments, scopes of application, relationships with other credentials, and market value. In order to fully leverage the power of recent advances in information technology, this common language must provide the detail and precision needed for semantic interoperability among widely used public and private web-based applications and data systems in education and workforce development. Similarly, trust requires standards for "conformity assessment" systems. The latter provide the needed assurance that what is being described about credentials and credential holders is accurate and complete and that credentialing organizations (e.g., higher education institutions, industry certification organizations) can be trusted to continue providing this assurance. Such assurance involves systems of assessment, quality assurance, and authentication and registry. This trust can build confidence only if the "accreditation" component also meets commonly accepted practices to ensure objectivity and impartiality.

The purpose of this project is to examine whether and how the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) could advance the development of such standards. A private non-profit, ANSI is the major organization for coordinating voluntary standardization and conformity assessment systems in the United States. It facilitates the development of standards by accrediting standards-developing organizations, and it accredits conformity assessment organizations to determine the fulfillment of standards requirements. It is very active in credentialing, especially in the certificate and industry certification markets, where it works with leading industry and professional organizations to establish standards and conformity assessment systems. ANSI also provides the bridge to global standards and conformity assessment initiatives, and serves as the official liaison to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and the International Accreditation Forum (IAF). This enables the United States to address its increasingly global credentialing challenges in cooperation with other countries. This bridge is

critical to allowing trans-Atlantic cooperation on such efforts as the Europass – an initiative to increase transparency in European labor markets by building on the Bologna and Copenhagen processes.

ANSI frequently establishes "standards collaboratives" to explore the need for improvements in critical domain areas in cooperation with leading standards bodies. For example, it established a Healthcare Information Technology Panel (HITSP) to harmonize and integrate standards for sharing healthcare information for clinical and business applications. It established similar panels, now called collaboratives, for Energy Efficiency, Homeland Security, Nuclear Energy, Biofuels, Chemical Regulation, and Electronic Vehicles. A standards collaborative provides a neutral forum and focal point for broad-based coordination among credentialing standards. The objective of the collaborative is to assess the standardization landscape, and carry out the development of a credentialing standardization roadmap. The standardization "roadmap" is intended to identify what standards are available or under development, what gaps exist, and what additional standardization activities are needed to advance the quality and transparency of the credentialing process in the United States; and to increase awareness of these activities to support the adoption and implementation of standards and conformity assessment among the public and private sectors.

The project will determine whether and how an ANSI Standards Collaborative could promote the adoption of widely-shared public-private standards and conformity assessment systems necessary to achieve transparency and trust in the credentialing marketplace. It also will explore whether and how such a collaborative could establish the foundation for a more open and comprehensive public-private data infrastructure. The envisioned infrastructure would provide improved semantic interoperability in ways that enable open data initiatives and promote an open applications marketplace for improving efficiency in the credentialing marketplace.

This project will build on and align existing efforts in this arena. Many formal and informal public-private standards already exist that can be leveraged and integrated within a shared framework for credentialing. In addition, previous efforts to address credentialing issues within specific segments of the credentialing marketplace, such as traditional degrees, postsecondary certificates, or industry certifications, or on different aspects of the problem, such as competency and qualifications alignment can be integrated and aligned within a framework addressing the full spectrum of credentialing.

This project will have two phases. Phase I will establish an ANSI steering group to examine the need for and potential scope of a Standards Collaborative on credentials, identify and recruit key stakeholders, and produce two deliverables: 1) a document spelling out the vision and roadmap for a standards collaborative to establish the necessary standards and conformity assessment systems for credentialing; and 2) a written plan for developing a "reference model" that aligns and integrates standards and conformity assessment efforts. This reference model would be the first and key step in the roadmap.

Phase II will establish an ANSI exploratory committee consisting of the steering committee and representatives of all the major stakeholders identified in Phase I. The exploratory committee will review the report made by the steering committee, and develop its own recommendations concerning the need and vision for a Standards Collaborative, the Collaborative's scope and composition, and the roadmap for moving forward, including the development of an organizing reference model. The Phase II report would provide the needed starting point for an ANSI Standards Collaborative on credentialing.

The project is funded by the Lumina Foundation. For more information, please contact Stephen Crawford (crawford@gwu.edu), Robert Sheets (bobgsheets@gmail.com), or Roy Swift (rswift@ansi.org).