

Increasing Credential Transparency in Postsecondary Education

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FOUNDING PARTNERS



INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen explosive growth in the number and types of postsecondary credentials¹ that document learning, with much of this growth coming in the form of non-degree certificates. Understanding credentials, and the learning they each represent, is of critical importance for college and university leaders in their efforts to support student success and enhance institutional performance.

For that reason, the American Council on Education (ACE), Credential Engine, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and EDUCAUSE, have joined together to create this resource with the goal of introducing institutions to the concept of “credential transparency.” As we explore below, greater credential transparency can support postsecondary institutions in important ways, such as by communicating the life and career relevancy of credentials to students and employers, aligning program curriculum with education outcomes, integrating student information and technological systems, and connecting credentials from other institutions, businesses, and organizations.

CONTEXT

Driven by a growing demographic of nontraditional learners who will continue to need flexible learning opportunities to respond to technological disruption and automation throughout their lives,² the rise of new credentials means that students in postsecondary education have more choices than ever before. As of 2019, Credential Engine has identified over 730,000 unique credentials being offered across postsecondary educational institutions, massive open online course (MOOC) providers, nonacademic organizations, and secondary schools.³ Beyond the tremendous size of this marketplace, students also have more paths to credentials to consider than ever before, such as through internships, online programs, competency-based programs, accelerated programs, prior learning assessments, documented credit, professional certificates, and bootcamps. For example, the number of certificates conferred at colleges and universities has doubled at public institutions and increased by 20 percent at private, nonprofit schools since 2000.⁴ These context changes are impacting institutional business models and a broad set of practices.

This accessibility and diversity of credentials is creating demand among stakeholders for more transparency about their content, purpose, and outcomes. Students want to know how credentials fit together so they can transfer what they have learned across colleges and universities and into the labor market. Colleges and universities look for ways to communicate their ability to deliver on the outcomes of their educational programs and evaluate whether learning and credentials from other venues are comparable in order to ease transfer and recognition of prior learning, which may improve time to credential completion for their learners. Employers are managing talent acquisition, retention, and development, in part, by understanding the credentials that individuals hold. Public policymakers should consider whether taxpayer funds are being used to pay for credentials of value, and community organizations that provide credentials should be able to assert their value and quality.

1 For purposes of this resource, we define “credential” as 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. See <http://connectingcredentials.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Glossary-of-Credentialing-Terms.pdf>.

2 Soares, Louis, Jonathan S. Gagliardi, and Christopher J. Nellum. 2017. *The Post Traditional Learners Manifesto Revisited: Aligning Post-secondary Education with Real Life for Adult Student Success*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/The-Post-Traditional-Learners-Manifesto-Revisited.pdf>.

3 Credential Engine. September 2019. *Counting U.S. Postsecondary and Secondary Credentials*, 2nd edition.

4 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cts.asp.

To meet this demand, credential transparency as a design principle strives to provide clear, comparable, persistent information about credentials, including their cost, competencies, relationship to other credentials, quality assurance processes, and value in transfer and in the labor market based on shared standards or frameworks.⁶ Transparent data about credentials make them easier to understand and compare so that stakeholders such as students/learners, postsecondary institutions, employers, public policymakers, and community organizations can make more informed decisions about the value of educational investments. A healthy ecosystem of transparent credentials facilitates the documentation, recognition, transferability, and portability of learning across education, work, and community settings for all types of credentials and providers.⁵

Given the scale and richness of the postsecondary education sector, technology will be needed to provide comprehensive, open, searchable, and comparable data about all types and levels of credentials from all types of postsecondary providers. The Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL) is an open-source machine-readable schema, or language, for describing credentials and their connections on the open web.⁶ The CTDL has defined over 450 terms related to describing credentials, including requirements, delivery, costs, financial assistance, duration, jurisdiction, competencies, learning opportunities, assessments, quality assurance, review processes, and much more. Credential Engine (a nonprofit organization formed by higher education, employer, and quality assurance entities) has deployed an open Registry based on this language that is currently being used by nearly 200 colleges and universities to provide greater credential transparency for more than 6,000 credentials. Institutions looking to increase credential transparency should strongly consider incorporating these technical resources into their plans.

The needs are clear and the technology is ready. What is needed now is leadership to build institutional cultures supportive of credential transparency. This resource outlines key considerations for institutional leaders, faculty, and staff to foster greater credential transparency.

CREDENTIAL TRANSPARENCY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Efforts to ensure greater credential transparency will manifest in different ways according to each institution's history, structure, and mission. As such, we sketch broadly supportive role-based considerations that could be integrated into a variety of institutional efforts and policies. While the list below is not intended to be exhaustive, we hope it will be helpful as you consider moving toward greater credential transparency on your campus.

- Board members: Consider credential transparency in any review of institutional policies, procedures, and disclosure statements. Highlight and update institutional strategic differentiators in publications and communications.
- Presidents: Incorporate credential transparency into strategic priorities and ensure organization has tools and incentives for reporting outcomes and other credential data, and that each campus function area is communicating and cooperating in a holistic manner on how to best achieve credential transparency as an institution.
- Senior IT leadership: Consider how best to include credential transparency and data management support within procurement processes. Support professional development for staff to lead data

5 Everhart, Deborah, Evelyn Ganzglass, Carla Casilli, Daniel Hickey, and Brandon Muramatsu. 2016. *Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
<https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Quality-Dimensions-for-Connected-Credentials.pdf>.

6 Educause. 2018. *7 Things You Should Know About Credential Transparency Description Language*.
<https://library.educause.edu/resources/2018/12/7-things-you-should-know-about-credential-transparency-description-language>.

transparency and discoverability on institutional websites.

- Academic leadership: Look for opportunities to leverage credential transparency into academic program reviews and self-studies, such as by documenting program differentiation, competency maps, or assessment plans.
- Faculty: Work together to articulate and align curricular, instructional, and assessment practices for each credential offered at the institution.
- Registrar: Define operational procedures supporting credential transparency, such as regular audits of academic catalogs, student information systems, program guides, data warehouses, and public websites. Support mapping relevant course and degree data to CTDL.
- Information technology staff: Learn about using open data standards for more effective integrations. Obtain globally unique identifiers for all credentials so that credential changes are well managed. Automate the CTDL encoding and transmission of relevant course and degree data.
- Reporting, institutional research, and analytics staff: Build efficient data reporting workflows by ensuring staff have appropriate and consistent access to credential source systems, establishing reusable credential reports, etc.
- Continuing and Online Education Leadership: Integrate competencies into programs designed to help adult and nontraditional learners advance their careers. Leverage your entrepreneurial spirit to innovate and scale.

We believe credential transparency has the emergent potential to establish a virtuous cycle benefiting institutional staff and faculty, employers, and most importantly, students. Institutions that clearly communicate their credentials to prospective students can expect to enroll students seeking those credentials. Students that make more informed enrollment decisions can be expected to benefit from that programming through deeper engagement, greater persistence, and eventual success. Employers benefit from highly qualified applicants with the competencies required for critical roles and can be expected to support institutions via endorsements, preferential tuition benefits, or student loan repayment benefits.

As we look to bolster public confidence in our higher education system and improve student outcomes, embracing credential transparency principles can be an important part of those efforts. Credential Engine's CTDL framework and registry provide important tools that can assist institutions in these efforts. The models and forms of education will surely change, but credential transparency can be an enduring proactive banner for leaders to earn and maintain the public's trust.