CONNECT THE CREDENTIALS

A new effort aims to change the nation's fragmented credentialing system

By Dennis Pierce

Over the past 30 years, the number of industry certificates awarded by colleges and universities has surged more than 800 percent, according to Lumina Foundation. At the same time, new forms of credentials—such as badges—also have emerged. And while there are more than 4,000 organizations granting certifications in the U.S., fewer than 10 percent of these are accredited or reviewed by a third party.

This hodgepodge of disparate credentials is "chaotic," the foundation says, and it means students and employers often struggle to understand what various credentials mean, how they are related and whether they're high quality.

To address this challenge, Lumina Foundation has launched an ambitious effort to develop a more interconnected, transparent system for certifying knowledge and skills within the United States—and it's hoping community colleges will be at the forefront of this work.

"We need industry 'conductors' who can create some harmony among all the different musicians playing in this orchestra," said Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina, during an Oct. 5 summit in Washington, D.C.

Creating a system of credentialing that is more tightly woven and easier for students and employers to understand is something that Lumina has been working on for several years, says Holly Zanville, who leads the Connecting Credentials initiative.

In 2011, the foundation released the first draft of its Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), a framework for describing what college graduates should know and be able to do. While this document was useful, it only covered degree programs.

"In talking with community colleges, we realized the credentialing environment was much larger than we thought," Zanville says, "and that we ought to expand our focus."

In June, Lumina unveiled a beta Credentials Framework for proposing a common language to describe various levels of knowledge and skills in order to help stakeholders compare the value and suitability of different types of credentials. The foundation also began a national dialogue on the issue through a new website, ConnectingCredentials.org, and in early October it convened the first Connecting Credentials Summit. The event brought together representatives from business, labor and higher education to examine the problems created by the current credentialing system and discuss possible solutions.

So far, nearly 90 organizations have joined the effort, including the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). In November, AACC received a grant from Lumina to identify a network of community colleges to review their credential practices in an effort to develop a national credential framework.

"Community colleges and industry partners need to come together and agree on what skills those credentials should include, so employers across the board can look at those credentials like they would look at higher-level degrees," says Eloy Oakley, president of Long Beach City College in California.

"There's a common understanding of what a history major knows, what kind of skills that person gains no matter what college or university he or she attends," Oakley explains. "It's much less coherent when you look at some of the credentials that many educational institutions are producing today."

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UNPACKING THE PROBLEM

Under the current system of credentials, it's hard for people to know which postsecondary education or training programs they should pursue to get the job they want or develop the skills they need to stay relevant in today's workforce, Lumina says. It's also difficult for students to know how credentials translate from one job or program to another and which ones are reputable or valid.

The current system also challenges employers, who struggle to understand whether candidates are qualified for the jobs they're looking to fill, based on the credentials they hold.

Credentials are supposed to be "signalers" of what knowledge and skills a person has, says Jen Worth, senior vice president of workforce and economic development at AACC. But "if those signalers aren't universally understood, then they can't be universally adopted," she notes. "We're trying to figure out what universal signalers work across multiple sectors, and how we can make sure those signalers are relevant and are taught at our 1,100 institutions across the country—at a standard that is of such a high quality that any industry partner who hires one of these individuals can be confident they are getting the best product."

This is no small undertaking. "It's not as simple as lining up a deck of cards and making sure they all face the same direction, and that we put the reds with the reds and the diamonds with the diamonds," Worth says.

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> - Linda Head, associate vice chancellor of workforce development, Lone Star College System

Some industry sectors, such as advanced manufacturing or health care, have established benchmarks for defining and measuring what workers should know. "Those benchmarks are laid out so we can ensure quality," Worth says, "and that assurance of quality then translates to the employers who would hire that worker. If you have a nursing credential from one institution, it should look and feel like a nursing credential from another institution, and hospitals can know exactly what [skills] each of those people have."

But many other industries have not established a common definition for the skill sets their workers need to have. "This creates variation," Worth says, "and that variation is a challenge, because it means we can't signal to our employers as effectively as we should."

What's more, the rapidly evolving nature of some industry sectors makes it hard to pinpoint the skills that employees will need to be successful. In those sectors, "there is never really an end point," Worth says, and employees must refresh their skills continually.

In describing these challenges, Worth says there are two key issues. The first is, how can community colleges clearly define the kinds of content that students should be learning in a way that has meaning for both students and employers? The second is, how can they look for models that will work across multiple sectors and multiple kinds of community college systems?

CREATING TRANSPARENCY

Community colleges are beginning to make progress on this first issue by partnering with employers, industry trade associations, four-year colleges and universities, and high schools to develop well-defined career pathways with multiple entry and exit points, leading to a series of stackable credentials that students can build upon as they advance in their career. AACC is encouraging this work through its new Pathways Project announced earlier this year.

"Part of the puzzle is not only creating credentials that communicate clearly to employers, but also creating these in a way that a student can continue to build on them," Oakley says. Long Beach City College is using a federal Labor Department grant to create career pathways that "align our curriculum from high school through community college and into the workforce," he says.

One example is the school's electrical program, which used to lead only to an associate degree. "We realized that many students just wanted to take enough classes to be certified as electricians or to do other work in the field," Oakley says. "We began to

FIVE KEYS TO A BETTER CREDENTIALING SYSTEM

A reshaped U.S. credentialing system should have several key attributes, Lumina Foundation says. It should:

- **Be easily understandable.** All postsecondary credentials—from badges to degrees and beyond—should be based on competencies, making them easier to understand and use by students, employers, educators and workforce agencies.
- **Assure quality.** Users must be able to rely on the quality of credentials, including their accuracy in representing the competencies possessed by a credential holder.
- **Be up to date.** Credentials should be continually updated and validated to ensure they stay relevant to employer needs.
- **Be interconnected.** All students should understand how credentials connect and be able to see several pathways to increase career and economic mobility. Users also must be able to combine credentials to fit their needs and inform their education-career planning, including job transitions.
- **Enable comparisons.** Stakeholders must be able to compare the value of various credentials and determine which credential best fits their needs.

Source: "Making the Case for Reforming the U.S. Credentialing System," Lumina Foundation, 2015

create clear credentials that allowed them to pursue those goals, while still giving them meaningful credits—so if they wanted to pursue an associate degree or eventually a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, those credits could be counted toward that end goal. And then we worked backwards into the K–12 system and [defined] courses students could take in high school that would allow them to reach that credential more quickly once they enrolled in community college."

Creating pathways with a structured sequence of credentials is easier to do in the electrical field or other industries with well-established standards, Oakley says. Other fields require more work.

Chris Bustamante, president of Rio Salado College in Arizona, was one of the speakers at the Oct. 5 Connecting Credentials Summit. During the opening session, he described how Rio Salado and two other community colleges in his state worked with 20 companies in the insurance sector to create an 18 credit-hour certificate program to give people a general foundation of knowledge.

"They helped to develop the curriculum along with us, and we're providing that certificate in insurance management," he says. "We're trying to make it stackable so that it's applicable to degree programs as well, and it leads to something beyond the certificate. The insurance sector values it; there are 15,000 new jobs that are going to be available in Arizona within the next three to five years, and [these companies are] guaranteeing students interviews and internships."

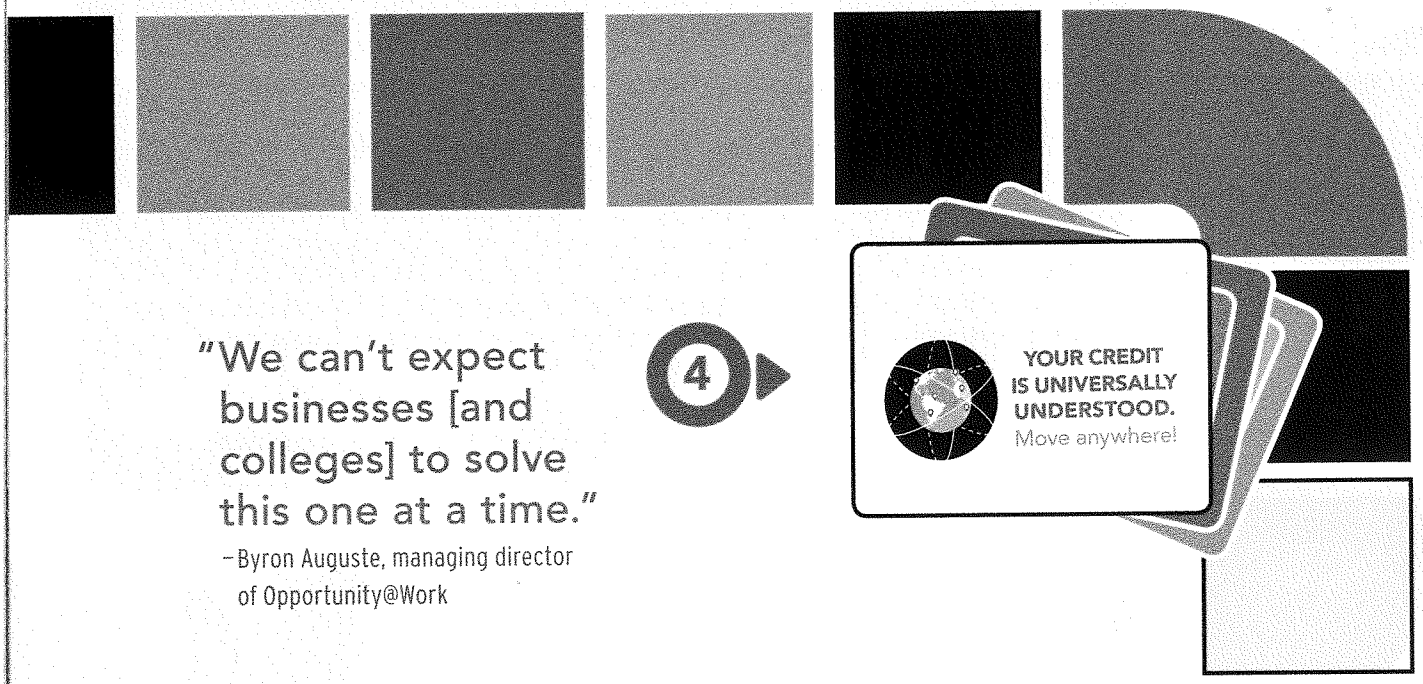
ENSURING PORTABILITY

In creating these well-defined career pathways, a key challenge is making sure they are relevant across all institutions and employers.

"As employees' lives change and they move around the country, they should be able to have a credential that is portable and that they can take anywhere," says Linda Head, associate vice chancellor of workforce development for the Lone Star College System in Texas.

Head and other Lone Star officials worked closely with the International Association of Drilling Contractors (IADC), a global trade organization, to create a new industry certification for oil and gas exploration that would be applicable anywhere in the world. Over the course of nine months, they met several times to define the competencies that would be required for oil and gas drilling roustabouts—and they came up with 340 technical and behavioral skills that employers would want universally.

"There were multiple companies involved in the process, along with the IADC and their staff," Head says. Once the necessary skills had been defined, Lone Star then created the first accredited program to teach those skills. "We embedded all 340 of those competencies into the curriculum we designed," she says.



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–Byron Auguste, managing director of Opportunity@Work

The entire process, from defining the competencies to creating a program to teach them, took more than a year and a half—but Head says it was well worth the time invested.

"We want to make sure that employers stay here because they have a trained workforce," she says. "We work with a company, National Oilwell Varco, that employs 50,000 people. They have about 80 locations just in Houston. We want to help keep companies like that viable, so the citizens served by community colleges have great jobs."

Students and employers aren't being served well "if oil and gas drilling at my college is different than at another," she adds. "We have an excellent reputation in the area, but Boeing in Seattle might not know who Lone Star College is. Yet Boeing will know what the maintenance credential is from the IADC, or what the welding credential is from the American Welding Society. They'll know those credentials."

SCALING SUCCESS

While these achievements at the individual college level are encouraging, participants in the Connecting Credentials Summit discussed the need to scale successful programs like this across the nation.

"We can't expect businesses [and colleges] to solve this one at a time," says Byron Auguste, managing director of Opportunity@Work, which aims to rewire the U.S. labor market to enable more Americans to achieve upward mobility. "I think the partnerships at community colleges are fantastic. They're all steps in the right direction. But if we just kept doing that [individually], in about 150 years we'd solve the problem we have today. It's just not big enough, fast enough, broad enough, or scalable enough."

To help scale these kinds of initiatives, AACC plans to identify and study leading-edge credentialing programs at a diverse range of community colleges, Worth says.

"We're going to investigate multiple sites around the country that are varied in their makeup, the sectors they're trying to address, and the kinds of partnerships they have," she says. "How are they organizing around credentialing or badging? Where has there been the most traction and the most forward motion? And if there are thematic trends, we will share those with our entire membership of over 1,100 community colleges, so they can equally participate and gain from that understanding."

Sharing ideas is important, but colleges and employers also must be willing to share entire programs so there is no need to reinvent the wheel, summit participants said.

Auguste cited an example that was mentioned earlier in the opening session, a cyber security program the University of Maryland created in partnership with Northrop Grumman.

"If that program is good enough for Northrop Grumman, which knows a thing or two about cyber security, it should be good enough for lots and lots of companies," he says. "And if that curriculum is good enough for the University of Maryland, why should you restart it from scratch at 20 different places?"

Solving these challenges will require more robust collaboration across multiple sectors, Bustamante agrees. "We're making progress, but we have miles more to go." ■

Dennis Pierce is an education writer based in Boston.