

Chapter 1

Certification–Degree Pathways: Aligning Undergraduate Curriculum to Industry Credentials and Professions

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ABSTRACT

Degrees from colleges and universities have historically been prerequisites for many good paying jobs. While the value of college degrees has recently been questioned by the American public, legislators, and employers, college is still viewed as an important component to the growth and socialization of learners destined to become future employees. Because they offer industry-recognized credentials, certification bodies already have a foothold in the siloed worlds of work and education and may provide an avenue to address the known gaps between employers and educational institutions. By leveraging their ability to identify the needs of employers as well as assessing knowledge and skills, certification bodies may play an important role in developing new opportunities for learners. Therefore, a pathway offering learners the ability to earn a certification while earning their degree provides individuals the ability to showcase a broad base of knowledge as well as work-relevant skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Equipping students with the information and experiences needed to navigate the labor market and avoid underemployment remains a challenge (Vedder, Denhart, & Robe, 2013), especially in the wake of the 2020-2021 global COVID-19 pandemic. One way to address this need is to provide opportunities for students to graduate college with clearly articulated credentials that signal the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) they possess. Certifications can complement the opaque evidence of learning provided by post-secondary institutions in the form of transcripts and diplomas (Cutler, 2021). In addition, through collaboration and combining different types of credentials, learners can provide employers with a more comprehensive view of their employability.

Post-secondary institutions are not necessarily known for accepting or offering non-degree credentials like certifications within pathways towards degrees, yet integrated and more comprehensive pathways would offer students more opportunities to obtain specific, proven competencies sought by employers. Beyond articulating the skills mastered by learners, such pathways would support lifelong learning and create opportunities for learners to stack credentials in new ways and meet their career goals. Further, by having their skills assessed by a third party in the certification process, student learning would be validated, which might address the concerns of those who question the value of a post-secondary degree (Pettit, 2018). Further, by participating in certification-degree pathways, learners obtain both the broad-based skills acquired in a baccalaureate program with the technical skills demonstrated by obtaining a certification. This chapter will highlight the challenges and opportunities of embedding certifications in degree programs.

Expectations vs. Reality

In 2013, Gallup surveyed 623 U.S. business leaders on behalf of Lumina Foundation and discovered that only 11 percent strongly agree that post-secondary institutions prepared students with the skills and competencies for their business needs. Yet less than 30 percent of the respondents collaborated with higher education institutions on curriculum (Gallup, 2014). Conversely, Inside Higher Ed's *Survey of College and University Chief Academic Officers* conducted around the same timeframe yielded dramatically different results. Overwhelmingly, provosts (96 percent) felt their institution was doing a good job preparing students for the world of work (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). While this disconnect could be attributed to the absence of a working relationship between business leaders and institutions, this problem seems to have an easy solution – create opportunities for leaders from industry and higher education to collaborate on educational programs and pathways that benefit learners. This seems like a simple and easily achievable solution. But if the solution is that easy, why has it not happened yet, and why does the divide persist? One answer may be that higher education and industry are too siloed, lacking a common language and a failure to understand the other's respective domains.

Exploring the Divide Between Post-secondary Education and Industry

Throughout 2018-2020, Workcred (an affiliate of the American National Standards Institute), the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), and the University Professional Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) engaged in a Lumina Foundation-funded partnership to discover the disconnect between higher education and industry, specifi-

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