Chapter 13

Communicating Credential Value:
Approaches to Reporting Outcomes that Matter

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ABSTRACT

Learners are increasingly turning to "alternative" education channels to up- and re-skill over the course of their lifetimes. In turn, the credentialing market is expanding quickly to supplement or replace training available through traditional pathways. Yet, the relationship between emerging credentials and learners' career outcomes is underexplored. To allow credentials to pave more inclusive pathways to professions, organizations that issue credentials need to gather data about career outcomes, leverage those data to enhance their program, and promote the outcomes transparently. This chapter explores three approaches to reporting outcomes and provides actionable recommendations to implement transparent reporting strategies. If implemented, the suggested approaches could ultimately help enhance understanding of, trust in, and economic support for alternative credentials.

INTRODUCTION

The typical patterns of learning are diversifying. Learners are pursuing different types of learning and certification opportunities, offered by a widening variety of organizations, to accomplish a broader array of goals. Alongside formal training providers, such as universities, bootcamps, and apprenticeship programs, organizations whose primary function is not education are stepping into the realm of developing and validating knowledge, skills, and abilities. Product and technology companies offer technical

certifications; employers across all sectors develop employee learning pathways; associations recognize and assess key industry skill sets.

These programs often recognize achievements with credentials that, in theory, function as "currency" for the credential holder, which can be applied across the learning and employment ecosystem in exchange for further learning or career opportunities. In essence, one way to define the value of credentials would be in terms of the benefits they bring learners over the course of their careers.

This chapter will explore current gaps in capturing and reporting career value experienced by learners after earning a credential, discuss three approaches to closing those gaps in practice, and provide actionable considerations for implementation. The hope of the authors is that nuanced career outcomes reporting would lay the foundation for a credential market where learners are aware of the costs and benefits of their credential options, can seek an option that will most likely be a worthwhile investment according to their goals, and can trust that employers will recognize their credentials and allow them the opportunity to put their skills into practice.

BACKGROUND

While learning trends and learner goals are changing, nuanced career value experienced by learners is underexplored and largely unregulated. This gap is particularly prevalent in the case of shorter-term credential programs designed to help learners quickly build skills needed to grow within their current career path or enter a high-growth career path. The short-term credential market is sizeable; only 4% of all digital credential templates on Credly's digital credentialing platform indicate a time commitment of "years," while 22% recognize achievements that require a time commitment of "months," and another 22% can be earned in days or weeks (Credly, 2021).

One reason for the under-exploration of career value experienced by learners who complete these shorter-term programs is that such programs often fall outside the jurisdiction of gainful employment regulations, and there is no other widely recognized system of accountability to which they can turn for a more nuanced definition of career value. In turn, learners can typically not apply grant funding, such as Pell, to those programs, as the projected return on that investment is less clearly defined. Debates around whether shorter-term programs should be made eligible for Pell Grant funding have centered on the lack of data about career payout. As a memo published by Third Way summarizes, the concern is that "sending more federal aid dollars to new programs without strict guardrails for quality could risk students using up their grant eligibility with little to show for it" (Whistle & Erickson, 2019, para. 10).

Existing research concludes that concerns about program quality could be alleviated through transparent reporting of credential purpose and value. In a report of certificate program career outcomes by Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce, the authors write, "The main lesson from the available data on certificates is this: They are diverse. While it is important to look at the value of certificates in the aggregate, their diversity in purpose and value means that transparency is absolutely essential" (Carnevale et al., 2012, p. 35). The assumption that follows is that with more consistent and transparent data, it may be possible to pinpoint which credentials promise the best payout for particular career goals, allowing funding to be applied only through programs where there is data to support the promise that invested funding will result in economic value (i.e., through the learner applying skills in the workforce).

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