

Chapter 3

Policy Challenges and Opportunities for Postsecondary Alternative Credentials

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ABSTRACT

There are certain policy barriers that are preventing alternative credentials from fully maturing in the national discourse in the way that academic degrees have. This chapter will review three primary areas of policy concern: quality assurance and accountability, financial policy, and standards of documentation and interoperability. This chapter calls for the establishment of universal quality and accountability policy and mechanisms, opening more financing opportunities so that workers may have increased access to lifelong skills development, developing a unified way to document learning experiences across institutions, and forging a common currency that allows for interoperability of learners' credentials. Policy improvements for alternative credentials will help serve to further legitimize them in the public eye, improve their educational outcomes, and perhaps most importantly, enable a more coherent vision for alternative credentials as a central pillar of a national educational attainment strategy.

National educational strategies focused on postsecondary *degree* attainment alone—though laudable—are insufficient to meet the demands of the modern economy. Employers, policymakers, and higher education leaders are beginning to converge on the realization that a more coordinated, comprehensive lifelong educational experience focused on *both* degree attainment *and* skills gained outside academic degrees is also a crucial component of a robust and evolving economy. Non-degree forms of postsecondary educational credentials are a key tool in the continual upskilling and reskilling of workers that the modern economy requires; however, compared to academic degrees, the policy ecosystem as it relates to non-degree education and training is notably laggard.

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Though there are a range of possible descriptors for this non-degree academic marketplace, the term these skills-based training programs most commonly take, and the term this chapter will use, is ‘alternative credentials’ (Fong, 2016). The last decade has seen an explosion of postsecondary educational programming beyond the bounds of the traditional academic degree (Fong 2016; Maxwell & Gallagher, 2020). These programs are in response to the mounting demands of the marketplace for lifelong skills training and are offered by traditional institutions of higher education (IHE) as well as private industry. Credential Engine’s (2021) analysis found that there are nearly one million unique educational credentials (both for credit and non-credit) in the United States, over half of which (549,712) are provided by non-academic entities. The scope of this marketplace impacts tens of millions of learners annually. Credential Engine’s (2021) analysis was just within the United States: when one considers the possible range of credentials globally, it quickly becomes overwhelming to consider the scale of the education credential industry that exists beyond academic degrees. Fain (2020) notes that non-degree programming is projected by Moody’s to be the fastest growing higher education industry market segment. Furthermore, Fain (2020) also highlights a survey from the Strada Education Network which found that 62% of Americans considering enrolling in a postsecondary program in the next six months would choose a non-degree option.

This chapter, though, is not meant to simply describe the alternative credential marketplace and how those offerings are providing meaningful opportunities for learners to upskill and reskill. Other authors have done this well (e.g., Fong, 2016), and this chapter posits that readers are already aware of the changing economy and need for lifelong skills training—it seems every week even casual readers of the news are met with a new barrage of headlines about skills gaps, new credentials, lifelong learning, workforce changes, and calls for educational reform. For years, thought leaders in higher education have called for IHE’s to evaluate and reconsider their own role in the future of postsecondary education and meeting the lifelong learning needs of our citizenry (see Weise, 2020 as but one recent example).

What this chapter will focus on, instead, is how certain policy barriers are preventing alternative credentials from fully maturing in the national discourse in the way that academic degrees have. The current alternative credential marketplace is, at best, chaotic. There are varying levels of quality, no coherent policy framework or objectives, and essentially no seamless interoperability (i.e., mixing and matching) of products. To move the alternative credential marketplace forward, government actors, IHEs, non-academic postsecondary education providers, and employers need to establish quality and accountability standards, financing strategies, and a common documentation and interoperability framework for alternative credentials. Federal and state policy can provide the framework for these actors to work together to establish quality, interoperability, and fair trade standards. Policy improvements for alternative credentials will also help further legitimize them in the public eye, and perhaps most importantly, enable a more coherent vision for alternative credentials as a central pillar of the United States’ national educational attainment strategy.

BACKGROUND

Definitions

Before delving too far into a discussion on how to better organize alternative credentials as a policy strategy, I want to first establish a few grounding definitions. The nature of innovative and emergent work means that consensus has not yet been achieved on the guiding principles of alternative credentials. Even

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