

Takeaways and Outcomes Summary

Integrating Industry Certifications into Four-Year Degree Programs Liberal Arts Convening

October 10-11, 2019

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND CONVENING OBJECTIVES

Workcred, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) have joined forces under a Lumina Foundation grant to explore how students can earn certifications as part of their four-year degree program. The project team is hosting a series of convenings between certification bodies and universities with the goal of enabling closer coordination to identify and scale practical opportunities, and identifying the barriers that would impede such partnerships and developing ways to overcome them. Each two-day convening addresses a different industry sector or topic, and incorporates opportunities to embed certifications that align closely with specific academic disciplines or certifications that bring together two or more different disciplines. The ultimate output of the convenings will be a framework laying the groundwork for potential pilot programs to test different strategies and practices to better align certifications and degrees. This document summarizes the takeaways and outcomes from the third of these convenings, focused on liberal arts. Final findings and learnings will be shared upon completion of the project.

KEY OUTCOMES

Based on the input during the convenings, the project team will develop and share the following:

- A matrix with information about certification bodies and relevant certifications.
- A guidance document that will help universities better understand how to determine a quality certification.
- A university point of contact list for certification bodies to use to build partnership opportunities.

TABLE DISCUSSIONS – BARRIERS ALIGNING CERTIFICATIONS AND DEGREES

Perceived Internal Barriers

Shared Governance

- Faculty / management resistance
- Who owns the content?
- Who should close the gap between degree and readiness for a job?
- Communication is lacking between universities and certification bodies
- Who do we talk to / work with within universities and certification bodies?
- Lack of adaptability / nimbleness

Matching Certifications to Degree Programs

- Can common competencies be identified?

- Increasing course / curriculum offerings
- Certifications seem to be too technical
- Many academic programs do not provide experience needed
- Education verses practical knowledge
- Some key skills from liberal arts degrees are difficult to “certify”
- No specific pathways from liberal arts to jobs

Data to Support This Type of Initiative

- Need validated data
- Certification databases are not universal
- Lack of understanding of the value of certifications

Other

- Fear of outside groups dictating curriculum
- Credit hour limitations
- Decline in resources (money, time, etc.)

Perceived External Barriers

Industry

- Disconnect from industry
- Is the credential too hard to obtain based on industry standards?
- Mixed, inconsistent messages from industry
- Less recognition / valuation of liberal arts degrees
- Very quick job redefinitions

State / Regulation

- What Title IV funds will pay for
- State required core classes cannot be changed
- Performance requirements
- Accreditation requirements

Other

- Quality job analyses
- Credentials are created, but do not have the “value” to be sustained
- Differences in the demographics between higher education and certification bodies

Possible Solutions

- Build internship program to encompass experience
- Develop better relationships with all stakeholders
- Increase communication / ask the right questions
- Increase availability / understandability of data

DEGREE-CERTIFICATION PATHWAY MODEL EXERCISE

Participants used a model canvas worksheet to guide brainstorming and action planning around two critical areas of focus for building degree-certification pathways. The first focus was around the value proposition of embedding certifications into degree programs. The second focus was around identifying which particular student populations are best positioned to reap the most value from earning a certification with their degree. Following the model canvas activity, it became apparent that there were questions that warranted further exploration with respect to these foci. The project team facilitated a plenary discussion with the participants around other aspects of the model canvas, with value proposition and student populations serving as the connecting theme.

Value Proposition Takeaways

- Without clear outcomes data for even the most well-known certifications, it is difficult for universities to clearly identify the value proposition of certifications, other than anecdotal guidance from local employers.
- Certifications themselves vary in quality; how can universities select which certification body to partner with?
- Part of the value proposition depends on how much time and money a university (and students) will incur to create and participate in degree-certification pathways.
- Can certification bodies and universities raise funds to help low-income, first generation students afford the certification fee? This would increase the perceived value for students
- Faculty may question the validity of the job task analyses used to develop certification exams.
- Some certifications involve many stakeholders in the development of its exam (e.g., certified persons, trainers, employers) – those certifications with a deeper level of validation from employers are likely to have the highest value proposition in the eyes of employers.
- Quality certifications could contribute to performance-based funding for universities.
- Universities are wary of an overemphasis on doing what “employers need” versus what “students need.” This rhetoric may create challenges in communicating the value proposition of certifications.

Student Populations Takeaways

- The attendees felt that first generation students and adult learners stand to benefit the most from degree-certification pathways.
- The liberal arts may be too broad for generalizations (e.g., a student in philosophy has different career and professional opportunities than a student in biology or English).
- It would be ideal to create pathways for the student populations that struggle the most in terms of employment outcomes and earning a competitive starting salary after graduating college.
- An expanded use for the Federal Pell Grant may allow more students to include certifications as part of their degree program costs.
- Students who stop college for any reason could leave with a certification rather than not earning any type of credential.

Other Next Steps and Lessons Learned

- For many universities, continuing education is often siloed off from the rest of the academic enterprise; in order to truly understand the value proposition of degree-certification pathways and the student populations that stand to benefit from these pathways, provosts and deans of continuing education need to work with one another and other university staff more closely.
- There is a need for there to be an “owner” of certification pathways within a university to streamline operations, ensure quality, communication, and the appropriate incentives – a “front door” for certification bodies needs to be created in universities and vice-versa (e.g., an assistant vice president for micro-credentials and badging like at the University of Maine).
- Predictive analytics and data-focused tools, such as the ones used by Georgia State University, can help identify base competencies in degree programs and map them to competencies assessed in the certification exam.
- The nature of certifications allows for updates quickly and frequently; it can be challenging for universities to respond to these changes in a timely fashion.
- There is a need for academic and student affairs leaders to meet with leaders from certification bodies on a regular basis to identify the appropriate student populations and value propositions – can APLU and/or UPCEA and Workcred be an ongoing convener of these constituencies?
- In order to understand the value proposition of certifications, faculty themselves may need to become certified. Can certification bodies and universities provide incentives for faculty-level certifications?
- Certification bodies, especially those connected to industry or professional membership associations, can incentivize universities to create pathways by recognizing them through a designation or public acknowledgement.
- The value proposition of pathways need to be communicated through senior leaders and through the grassroots by faculty and students.
- Accreditors may be unfairly portrayed as resisting degree-certification pathways, when in fact, many accreditors may be open minded about this. There are also differences among regional accreditors (e.g., Higher Learning Commission) and industry-specific accreditors (e.g., the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET)).

TAKEAWAYS, LESSONS LEARNED, QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION, AND ACTIONABLE STEPS

At the end of each day, participants were asked to complete an online survey where they provided takeaways, lessons learned, further questions for consideration, and actionable steps that can be taken to advance the outcomes of the discussions:

Takeaways and Lessons Learned

Perceived Barriers

- Buy-in may be hard to obtain among liberal arts faculty members.
- Big obstacle in connecting credentials to degree programs is mostly one of mutual understanding of how each works and what each party brings to the table.

- University involvement and respect in certification process will be an uphill battle.
- Vastness of the project / how incredibly complicated this space is.
- Speaking different languages / differing priorities.
- How much confusion there still is in the academic world regarding the difference between certification and certificates; and the reverse with the academic accreditation and curriculum development processes.
- The time it takes to make a curriculum change.
- There seems to be a disconnect between what employers want and what colleges offer.

How Can We Overcome These Barriers?

- Partnering with academia to develop opportunities to achieve co-curricular credential options for non-traditional student that recognizes knowledge and skills at each year of completion.
- Liberal arts degree students can most definitely benefit from imbedded certifications but there needs to be level setting in universities about what they are.
- Certifications and proficiencies build employability, but they have to be complimentary and not an alternative to degrees.
- Having the right certification bodies / universities involved provides real opportunities.
- More awareness of what credentialing bodies do and what they can offer students.

What Is Needed To Take This To The Next Level?

- Gaining a better insight into how partnerships between universities and credentialing bodies can be developed.
- How employers use / want credentials.
- More real life examples of other partnerships / learning about some of the early efforts underway at both employers and universities.
- More dialogue, a framework, and more clarity of credentialing in higher education.
- Need for clearer understanding of the spectrum of certifications; which might be most appropriate under which circumstances?
- Consideration of micro-credentialing.
- New foundational skills for the digital economy.

Other Takeaways And Lessons Learned

- It is possible to work together to create career pathways.
- Huge educational revolution; we need to play or we won't remain solvent.

Questions Raised by Participants for Further Consideration

How Can This Type of Integration Work?

- How can we facilitate opportunities to forge better connections between the credentialing world and higher education?
- What does partnering and outreach look like?

- How do you find the right people at the certification bodies / universities to work with? The right programs / certifications to align? How would this work logistically?
- What is the best way to bridge the gap presented by certifications that require work experience as a prerequisite, since that is a common phenomenon?
- If certifications require prior employment experience, how can they be relevant to undergraduate degrees?
- How to balance career readiness with credentialing?
- How do we get buy-in on both sides? How can we help students see the relevance and worth of credentialing pathways?

What Would Industry / Other Stakeholder Involvement Look Like?

- How can we track results of individuals across the industry?
- How could we get universities to recognize workforce shortages and perhaps start programs?
- How might state bureaucracies be better used to lead change?

Are There Other Options?

- How do we think about the intermediary steps between the college degree and the certification? Often, both have invested a lot in their credentials and there is not a perfect match. Are there ways to think about scaffolds between them?
- How can credentials be options for degree non completers?
- Are there credentials / certification bodies for the outcomes of a liberal arts degree that we discussed, i.e., analytics, problem solving, team leadership, effective communication?

How Do We Move This Forward / What Are Next Steps?

- How do you start the discussion of credentialing on campuses?
- Would Lumina consider funding a few pilot projects to create degree-to-certification pathways?
- How can we pilot this somewhere with universities / certification bodies where it makes sense? By getting well-respected organizations into the pilot, it will typically gain momentum – you just need those pioneers.
- How can we consider future programs that are relevant in rapid changing markets?
- Are there specific examples that could be shared in terms of how credentialing has been implemented within liberal arts programs?
- What is the specific problem to be solved? We had some debate about the reality of a skills gap, overcoming what might just be perception, helping more students graduate, giving students who graduate an even bigger leg up in the labor market, etc. These all have different implications for implementation and next steps.

Other Questions

- How can we know that badges aren't just the next gimmick?
- How can we all leverage [Credential Engine's] Credential Registry?
- You should do a poll of certifying bodies and universities as to who is issuing digital badges, digital micro-credentials, comprehensive learner records, or other digital manifestation of credentialing.

- It would be great to talk more about education for education sake, especially for this particular group of people, liberal arts folks; this part of the conversation needs to be addressed so there is common understanding.
- In the opening session, there was a discussion about the differences between certificates, certifications, degree, and licensing. But, it seems like there are many more different things that should be on the spectrum – badges, portfolios – where do they fit in? Do they fit in?

Action Items

Develop Relationships With Convening Participants

- Make connection with at least one university with programs relevant to our certification body's content area.
- Follow up with a few of the university contacts that we met for follow up discussions.
- Will follow up with fellow participants on projects identified during the discussions.
- Connect one of the certification body attendees with university administrators to explore a partnership.

Share Information With Internal Staff

- Tap into departmental colleagues' knowledge of academic accreditation and curriculum development processes; if there are gaps in their knowledge, undertake an effort to further educate.
- Connect my colleagues to one of the universities to see if there is a possible collaboration and initiate discussion about how to move this forward.
- Schedule conversations to talk through potential options for my campus.
- Check with departments to see if any currently offers or is considering offering a professional certification; also will survey fellow deans about certification offerings in their colleges.
- Share the fact that this is possible and that many are working on it / sharing information with campus stakeholders to gain further interest / buy-in.
- Present information to senior leadership team and seek their assistance on prioritizing this work – in particular, developing boot camps in the summer to provide additional skills for liberal arts majors.

Share Information With External Stakeholders

- Inform universities of certification processes more.
- Develop clearer articulations of the values of a university degree – specifically a liberal arts degree.
- Include recommendations regarding certifications in my in-progress book on credentials.

Align Programs / Develop a Pilot

- We plan to meet with the Lilly School of Philanthropy about a pilot program.
- Review existing bachelor and master programs to see if potential certifications might align to their curricula.
- We have started to map our general education courses to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies; we should be doing the same for our degree programs.