

# High Value Credentials for New England

Candace Williams, *Director of Policy Research & Strategic Initiatives*

January 2020

## Defining, Identifying and Supporting High Value Credentials

### Introduction

In the spring of 2017, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) launched the Commission on Higher Education & Employability, chaired by Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo, to advance strategies that boost the career-readiness of the region's postsecondary graduates. The Commission addressed, among many topics, the growing proliferation of various types and providers of credentials—and the resulting complexity for individuals, higher education institutions, policymakers and employers.

Credential Engine, a national nonprofit working to bring transparency to the credential ecosystem, estimates that there are over 700,000 unique credentials in the U.S. alone. The growth in the number of types and providers of credentials has much to do with new conceptions of “currency” in higher education. Students and employers are placing more value on the skills, competencies and knowledge a learner obtains, rather than on credit hours, seat-time or degrees. Alternative credentials and credential providers are adapting to this trend in order to capture new students, be the provider-of-choice to employers, advance lifelong learning and keep pace with quickly changing industries and skill requirements.

A growing credentials marketplace may mean greater access to flexible, stackable and affordable programs, but it also has implications for the quality of learning and the employment outcomes of students. Employers report that they neither recognize nor trust the quality of many credentials. For example, while the U.S. boasts more than 4,000 personnel certification bodies, fewer than 10% are accredited or reviewed by a third party (Workcred, 2018).

For individuals, the ability to interpret differences between types of credentials, education providers and professional benefits that come with credential attainment can have life-altering consequences. Prospective students need better tools to compare credentials within their region and industries-of-choice by salary, ability to pay and time constraints. Credential transparency means streamlining programmatic information to improve matches between students and programs to ultimately increase the likelihood of earning credentials that have value in the labor market.

In May 2018, NEBHE, in partnership with Credential Engine, began bringing to life the Commission's recommendations on emerging credentials and credentialing systems. Lumina Foundation awarded NEBHE a grant to launch High Value Credentials for New England (HVCNE), which supports states, systems and institutions to publish higher education credentials to Credential Engine's Registry and, ultimately, provide individuals, institutions, state policy leaders and employers with the tools to:

- Utilize a common language to describe credential programs
- Interpret the value of credentials in the workforce
- Identify critical education and employment pipelines
- Understand the skills and competencies obtained by earning a credential.

This brief is designed to share insights, gleaned through the implementation of HVCNE and its advisory committee, on defining, identifying and supporting high value credentials.

## What are Credentials?

HVCNE uses Lumina Foundation's *Connecting Credentials: A Beta Credentials Framework* definition of a credential:

*“A documented award by a responsible and authorized body that has determined that an individual has achieved specific learning outcomes relative to a given standard.”*

NEBHE recognizes “credential” as an umbrella term that includes apprenticeships, badges, micro-credentials, certificates, certifications, degrees, diplomas and licenses. Credentials may be awarded by secondary or postsecondary institutions, professional education and training providers, industry associations and employers. All manner of credentials and providers will ultimately be collected and catalogued in the Registry through HVCNE.



Source: Credential Engine

## Defining “High Value” ... Is It Possible?

There is widespread agreement that a credential's value lies not only in a credential holder's ability to signal their job preparedness to employers, but also in their ability to obtain a well-paying job. Whether a credential program is aligned with the labor market can be determined by the skills, competencies and experiences that graduates gain through their studies. In fact, many programs are developed or adapted based on perceived needs, labor market analyses or qualitative interactions with employers. Colleges and universities commonly measure labor market value based on their program placement rates and surveys of graduates' employment outcomes.

However, numerous studies predict that the nature of work will quickly change in the coming decades, and it will demand a hybridization of skills and upskilling of competencies and knowledge. The Commission found that a credential of value should prepare graduates not only to perform well in their next job but also to make successful workforce transitions throughout their careers. The HVCNE advisory committee posited additional nuances of the regional labor market, which affect the value of credentials. For example:

- A tight labor market, brought on by low unemployment, increases the demand for skills, competencies and credentials over traditional degrees.
- The changing nature of work prioritizes human foundational competencies over certain technical skills that can be learned on the job.
- The ways employers articulate in-demand skills, competencies and experiences and filter job candidates reflect a language barrier between education and training providers and employers.

Furthermore, labor market alignment may not be the only marker of value. The HVCNE advisory committee found that, in New England, a high value credential may be one that:

- Represents an individual's first step along a pathway that leads to a satisfying career with family-sustaining wages (i.e., a Certified Nursing Assistant license may pave the way to a career as a Licensed Practical Nurse or a Registered Nurse)
- Fills a community need (i.e., teachers, healthcare professionals, police officers, etc.)
- Is portable across state lines
- Is affordable due to the availability of institutional, employer, state or federal financial support
- Offers valuable types of learning opportunities, including work- or competency-based education.

Distilling these varied attributes into a single statement of value is nearly impossible, as is making useful comparisons of credentials. HVCNE seeks to make progress on these fronts by collecting standard information about credentials through a minimum data policy. For example, credentials published to the Registry detail key information such as program duration, location, requirements and cost, as well as competencies, learning opportunities and associated occupations and industries. With this information presented in a clear and uniform manner, credential seekers can make better comparisons and connections between options. Doing so today is challenging due to uneven publicly available information.

## Snapshot of Credentials Published in New England

**B.S. in Financial Economics**  
University of Maine (Orono)  
The B.S. in Financial Economics provides a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for careers in quantitative financial economics. The program provides exposure to economic theory at the advanced undergraduate level and to economics and finance

Bachelor's Degree  
1 Audience Level 15 Occupations 4 Industries  
1 Learning Delivery Type 11 Subjects Time Estimate  
Last Updated 10/8/2019

---

**Graduate Certificate in Digital Curation**  
University of Maine (Orono)  
There is a growing need in many areas of the public and private sector for better understanding of and training in the selection, preservation, maintenance, and archiving of digital resources. The University of Maine's Digital Curation certificate

Certificate  
1 Audience Level 3 Occupations 1 Learning Delivery Type  
5 Subjects Time Estimate  
Last Updated 10/8/2019

---

**M.P.S. in Biochemistry**  
University of Maine (Orono)  
Graduate studies in Biochemistry can lead to an MPS or MS degree. Students may choose from biomedical research areas such as cell regulatory systems, protein biochemistry, molecular immunology, cellular and molecular toxicology, microbiology.

Master's Degree  
1 Audience Level 9 Occupations 1 Learning Delivery Type

Source: credentialfinder.org

The aforementioned fields represent elements of Credential Engine's Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL), a common schema to describe and compare credentials by humans and machines alike. The CTDL, in practice, is an infrastructure that supports:

- An open applications marketplace that allows stakeholders to develop tools and data integrations that harness information about credentials in New England
- An organized state- and regional-level clearinghouse of education and training programs that can be used by career counselors, policymakers and institution leaders to inform individuals' decision making, workforce-development initiatives and program development
- Collaboration between institutions and employers to use a shared language to describe learning outcomes and job requirements, develop critical partnerships and improve talent pipelines.

The Registry, CTDL and capacity that these resources bring to the region represent an opportunity to better align postsecondary education and workforce development in New England to ensure that the region's residents have access to high quality education, training and employment options.

## State & Institutional Policies

Identifying and promoting high value credentials is increasingly integral to workforce-development policy across New England. For some states and higher education systems, developing pathways to and through completion of high value credentials is a key facet of efforts to address postsecondary attainment and reported skills gaps.

Examples of policies and proposals to integrate high value credentials into higher education and workforce-development initiatives in New England include:

*Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont's Executive Order No. 4*

In October 2019, Gov. Lamont signed [an executive order](#) to establish a Workforce Council that will focus on reforming and realigning the higher education and workforce development systems to produce talent that meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. The aim is to improve Connecticut's ability to retain and attract business and tackle systemic inequity in opportunity. The Council is tasked with a number of charges, including to:

- Bring transparency to the credentials conferred by public higher education institutions by translating credentials wherever possible to the skills and competencies developed to attain those credentials
- Support businesses in shifting from degree-based hiring requirements to a skills-based focus because skill-based hiring can address inequities and improve job matching
- Increase the speed of developing new courses and programs at state universities and colleges and other related educational institutions or workforce training providers in order to meet the needs of employers and improve the labor market outcomes of graduates.

*Massachusetts Proposal to Expand High School Student Access to Earn Industry Recognized Credentials*

In January 2019, Rep. Jeffrey Roy introduced [H567](#), a bill that, if enacted, would give traditional high school students the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials (IRC) that are directly aligned with Massachusetts workforce needs. The bill has the support of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education. Students enrolled in vocational technical schools already participate in these programs and attest to their application to future jobs and educational pursuits. The bill would require the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development to:

- Provide a list to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of high-need occupations in Massachusetts on an annual basis
- Issue funding for teacher training, assessment and equipment so all districts may implement IRC programs
- Offer districts financial awards for each IRC earner to offset the cost of the program.

*University of Maine System (UMS) Board of Trustees Declaration of Strategic Priorities to Address Critical State Needs*

In December 2018, the UMS Board of Trustees announced [four strategic goals](#), which include: advancing workforce-readiness and economic development and increasing Maine's educational attainment. Within these goals are a number of actions that overlap with the potential uses for the Registry developed by HVCNE's Maine partners. These include:

- Prioritizing programs and associated industries that maximize workforce impact, with recommendations on program alignment mechanisms and pathways for experiential learning opportunities
- Developing coordinated workforce micro-credentials for priority populations, including veterans, rural populations and new Mainers
- Targeting program delivery modalities and credential development to provide adult learners with affordable, flexible and stackable credential- and degree-based programming
- Innovating pedagogies to prepare students for the growth of Maine's digital economy.

*Vermont's Act Relating to Workforce Development (H. 919)*

In May 2018, Gov. Phil Scott approved [H. 919](#), An Act Relating to Workforce Development, which directs the state Workforce Development Board to collaborate across the state's various agencies to align workforce-development strategies.

The bill requires the Workforce Development Board to:

- Develop career pathways and identify education opportunities, including approval of high value credentials aligned with the determined career pathways
- Create and review a public resource that lists industry- and state-recognized credentials, the requirements to obtain these credentials and their cost
- Use such a resource to evaluate the workforce service delivery system.

#### *Community College System of New Hampshire's WorkReadyNH Program*

Created in 2011, [WorkReadyNH](#) helps New Hampshire workers who seek to earn a credential to enhance their professional status. Students engage in Soft Skills Course—a 60-hour program that takes place over a one-month period and covers subjects like communication skills, team-building and workplace safety. Upon completion of the course, students receive a National Career Readiness Certificate and a WorkReadyNH Certificate. WorkReadyNH represents a partnership among the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH), the NH Department of Business and Economic Affairs and the NH Job Training Fund. WorkReadyNH benefits the larger New Hampshire workforce by:

- Providing students with tuition-free programming (through a partnership with NH Job Training Fund)
- Producing well-trained workers equipped with foundational professional skills that are transferrable across industries and occupations
- Offering flexible pathways through the credential program (i.e., courses are offered at all CCSNH campuses; students may maintain full- or part-time work).

HVCNE supports these initiatives by serving as a platform to make high value credentials transparent and comparable by individuals and employers, and harnessing state- and region-wide buy-in toward education and workforce-development goals. Currently, credentials offered by public institutions in Maine and New Hampshire are accessible on the Registry. A Massachusetts community college pilot and Connecticut state project will launch in early 2020, along with participation by Rhode Island's public institutions.

## **Conclusion**

Students and employers are increasingly sending signals to higher education that the demand for credentials will continue to grow. According to the 2017 University of California Los Angeles freshmen survey, approximately 85% of students responded that getting a better job was very important in deciding to go to college. Despite this fact, research from Northeastern University's Center for the Future of Higher Education shows that employers are deemphasizing the value of degrees to prioritize skill development and they're increasingly likely to consider applicants who've earned credentials through competency-based or online-programs.

Throughout the Commission, members envisaged a future in which individuals, educators, policymakers and employers:

- Share a language for describing skills and competencies associated with credentials and jobs
- Have access to a platform wherein credentials may be compared and pathways are clearly depicted
- Understand real-time demand and long-term economic prospects associated with industries and occupations.



To advance toward this future, the credential ecosystem must fire on all cylinders:

1. Postsecondary institutions and education and training providers must make credential programs and pathways more transparent.
2. Employers must work to classify jobs in terms that are understandable to postsecondary education practitioners and graduates.
3. Policymakers must ensure that individuals have access to information on the quality of credentials and that in-demand credentials are affordable to obtain through aligned secondary and postsecondary education and workforce-development investments.

To date, nearly 900 unique credentials offered in New England have been published to the Registry. As HVCNE expands, new insights and trends will emerge and be investigated. Among them, NEBHE expects to see a groundswell of micro-credentials and badges and new credentials developed through employer-higher education collaboration and an improved articulation of the competencies that compose credentials. The Registry and its applications in New England will provide opportunities to catalogue and raise the visibility of high value credentials, coalesce on a shared language to describe them and further collaborate to bring down the silos between postsecondary education, workforce development and employers.