Non-Degree Credentials—What is Quality and How to Assess it?

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The Rise of Non-Degree Credentials

Rapidly changing labor market

Increased need for lifelong learning, just in time training

Proliferation of different types of NDCs
Many Adults Hold NDCs

In 2016, a total of 27 percent of adults reported having a nondegree credential—a postsecondary certificate, a certification, or a license. (NCES 2017)
## Types and Definitions of Non-Degree Credentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub baccalaureate credit certificates</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded by an educational institution for completion of a subbaccalaureate credit educational program, usually less than one year in length (short-term and long-term credit)</td>
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<td><strong>Non-credit certificates</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded by an institution (educational or workplace) for completion of a noncredit educational program</td>
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<td><strong>Apprenticeship</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded after completion of structured educational and workplace program based on industry and occupational standards.</td>
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<td><strong>Industry certification</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded by an industry body or governmental agency for demonstration of skills typically via examination based on industry or occupational standards.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational or professional licensure</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded by a governmental agency for demonstration of skills in a specific occupation and sometimes also completion of an educational program; often required to work in an occupation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Badges, microcredentials</strong></td>
<td>Credential awarded for completion of a short program of study or demonstration of a targeted set of skills; these are newly emerging and are still being developed.</td>
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What Do We Know About NDCs?

- Awarded by a wide range of organizations
  - Colleges, industry groups, unions, government, etc.

- Awarded based on a variety of criteria
  - Course completion, work experience, examination, etc.

- Learning occurs in many locales
  - At school, at work, informally

- Data is located in many sources
  - State data systems, industry data, national surveys
“The Wild West”

- Understanding quality of NDCs is incredibly difficult.
- There is no single system, set of standards or mechanism to help workers, employers, policymakers, and educational institutions define quality or measure it.
- Understanding which NDCs are quality varies by:
  - Geography
  - Industry
  - Consumer
What is a “Quality” NDC?

- Equity is essential to quality

- Quality from who’s perspective
  - Credential holder vs. employer vs. educational institution vs. policymaker
  - Potential tension in goals

- Potential variation based on context, e.g. industry, occupation, labor market, organization

- Conceptual framework as a guide and a diagnostic tool
Key Elements of Non-Degree Credential Quality

• *Credential design.* This element includes numerous features, usually decided on by the credential grantor, that define what a credential represents in terms of the competencies it marks and how it seeks to do so.

• *Competencies.* These are the skills and knowledge that the credential aims to represent.

• *Market Processes.* This term refers to the ways that a credential comes to be recognized and have currency in the world.

• *Outcomes.* The accumulation of competencies represented by credentials are expected to generate outcomes of value, typically in terms of the educational, employment, and social advancement of individuals, employers, and society.
Conceptual Model of Non-Degree Credential Quality

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Non-Degree Credential Quality**

**Credential Design**
- Content relevance
- Instructional process
- Assessment process
- Stackability and portability
- Transparency
- Accessibility and affordability

**Competencies**
- Demonstrated competencies including general knowledge, specialized skills, personal skills and social skills

**Market Processes**
- Transparency initiatives
- Awareness of credential and/or credential granter
- Endorsements and validations
- State regulations
- Employer hiring policies and practices
- Educational institutions’ recognition of learning

**Individual**
- Employment
  - Job attainment
  - Promotion
  - Wage gain
  - Retention
- Educational
  - Stacking of additional credentials
  - Completion of academic degree(s)
- Social
  - Improved health and well-being
  - Greater civic involvement
  - Intergenerational benefits

**Societal**
- Employer
  - Employee pipeline
  - Better retention
  - Higher skills and productivity
  - Increased diversity
- Society
  - Better public safety
  - Increased efficiency
  - Reduced inequality
  - More civic engagement
Credential Design

- Competency relevance
- Instructional process
- Assessment process – initial and ongoing
- Stackability and portability
- Transparency
- Accessibility and affordability
Competencies

• Demonstrated competencies
  – Including general knowledge, specialized skills, personal skills, and social skills
Market Processes

- Transparency initiatives
- Awareness of the credential and/or the credential grantor
- Endorsements or validations
- State regulation
- Employer hiring practice and politics
- Educational institutions recognition of learning
Outcomes

• Individual economic outcomes
• Individual educational outcomes
• Individual social outcomes
• Employer outcomes
• Societal outcomes
Implications for Policy and Practice

• Need to….
  – Create awareness of non-degree credential quality and how to measure it.
  – Collect better information on non-degree credential quality and outcomes.
  – Develop and promote systems to assess non-degree credential quality.
  – Promote and understand the use of data on non-degree credential quality.

• States are currently developing quality measures that draw from elements of this framework
Create awareness of non-degree credential quality and how to measure it

• Promote integration of NDCs into educational programs

• Engage conversations about NDCs with employers

• Promote competency-based hiring linked with NDCs

• Facilitate conversations among stakeholders about NDC quality
Collect better information on non-degree credential quality and outcomes

• Integrate into data systems across institutions

• Prompt industry to collect and report on industry certification

• Create incentives to add to tracking systems
Develop and promote systems to assess non-degree credential quality

• State reporting and rating systems

• Eligible Training Provider List

• Consumer report cards

• Credential Registry

• Assessments by educational institutions
Promote and understand the use of data on non-degree credential quality

- Examine data to guide improvements at educational institutions to value NDCs where appropriate

- Promote employer understanding and use of relevant NDCs in hiring and promotion

- Guide policy discussions to ensure NDCs are effectively used to promote economic and educational success
Existing Systems for Assessing NDC Quality

• Educational Institutions
  – Prior learning assessment
  – Competency-based learning
  – Beta Credential Framework
  – Quality Assurance Commons for Higher and Postsecondary Education

• States
  – Quality standards
  – Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL)
  – Sector Strategies
  – State-Wide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS)

• National efforts
  – Credential Engine
  – ANSI standards for certificate programs, continuing education

• Accreditation
Lumina Quality Credential Task Force framework

• Outcomes for individuals and society

• Intentional design

• Student centered institutions, policies and practices

Unlocking the Nation’s Potential: A Model to Advance Quality and Equity in Education Beyond High School

https://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/unlocking-the-nations-potential
Conceptual Model of Credential Quality

- Societal Outcomes of Quality System
- Individual Outcomes of Earning Quality Credentials
- Intentional Program Design
- Student-Centered Policies & Practices

Quality Assurance System
- Federal Policies
- State Policies
- Accreditation
- Institutional Policies
Key Indicators of New Quality Assurance System

OUTCOMES INDICATORS
- Program-level employment outcomes
- Licensure pass rates
- Attendees’ economic mobility rates
- Graduates’ economic mobility rates
- Graduates’ civic engagement rates
- State and regional workforce
- Program-level debt repayment relative to average wages and/or default rates
- State or regional economic development results
- Student progression, time to degree, and graduation rates
- Learning outcome assessment

DESIGN INDICATORS
- Clear and accessible program and institutional learning outcomes
- Third-party validation of competency achievements
- Equitable opportunities for both applied and theoretical learning
- Competency-assessment results disaggregated and used for improvement

POLICY AND PRACTICE INDICATORS
- Institutional financial health and stability
- Sound governance policies and practices
- Responsible marketing and recruitment
- Equity-minded hiring practices
- Equity-minded, evidence-based strategies for advising and student success
- Clear and effective policies for recognizing prior learning
- Educator professional development aligned with evidence-based and culturally competent teaching and learning
- Equitable participation rates in high-impact educational practices
For More Information, Contact Us.

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Download the report: smlr.rutgers.edu/NDCQuality

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