

## **CREDENTIAL TRANSPARENCY**

### **Working to illuminate the credential marketplace and increase access to economic success**

Washington has been on a path to increase access to and attainment of postsecondary credentials for all its residents, and to strengthen the connection between industry and education to improve economic outcomes for its students and the competitive stature of its businesses. The state has been recognized nationally for the tremendous gains it has made, especially over the past decade. Successful advancements have been achieved in articulating and accelerating pathways from high school to postsecondary credentials, including registered apprenticeships and 2- and 4-year degrees.

Student navigation and support services have been implemented at every level, and have proven to increase retention and completion rates, especially for marginalized populations and first-generation college-goers. The integration of academic and occupational education, the braiding of classroom and work-based learning, and cross-crediting for registered apprenticeships—Washington being a lead pioneer of these models—have expanded multiple pathways to accommodate many different learning styles and interests. At the pinnacle of this 10-year transformation is the enactment of the Washington College Grant and Opportunity Scholarship programs, together providing the most generous financial aid support to the widest range of students of any U.S. state.

Still, Washington and the nation have enormous hills to climb to ensure educational and economic mobility is available for everyone, including and especially people of color, and that our talent development infrastructure can keep up with rapid industry and occupational changes. State and federal education and workforce policy has not been able to keep up with the pace of change or with the types and level of need among individuals, families, and employers. Market gaps are being filled by numerous new entrants to the field, many of them private national and international on-line providers of short-term learning options. These options seem attractive for their low cost, and the ability to learn in one's own time and at one's own pace. For learners with negative classroom experiences, the ability to learn individually and anonymously can also be attractive.

However, there is very little oversight of these new learning options, no common curriculum or learning standards, or any validated performance data by which to evaluate a potential return on investment. And these learning options are proliferating at a rapid pace. At last count, Credential Engine, creator of the national credential registry and the most widely used taxonomy for credential transparency, found almost 1 million unique credentials in the marketplace today. How might students, families, workers, educators, and employers navigate these new, complex credential waters to maximum benefit?

The Credential Transparency Advisory Committee—representing Washington's public and private higher education institutions, registered apprenticeship, K-12 education, the workforce development system, and policy makers—was convened to explore the role that credentialing plays in the educational and economic mobility of Washingtonians, and talent development for the state's businesses. The Committee determined that reliable, meaningful information about credentials can have significant impact in a consumer's decision-making process, including how they might invest in credential attainment, and in how far they might travel along an educational or career pathway. The Committee also saw the value in adopting a credential taxonomy, based on knowledge, skills and abilities attained, to facilitate ongoing communication channels with industry.

Early on, the Committee chose to view their exploration using an equity lens, building awareness of how current credentialing practices might impact the career decisions of marginalized populations, and how or whether they choose to access education and training in preparation for and to progress within

desired careers. The Committee reviewed data, literature and survey research, and promising practices to develop recommendations to advance Washington’s efforts toward a credential transparency framework that:

- Is learner-centered, and can meet a learner’s needs throughout working life.
- Accommodates, and views as assets, all cultures, lived experiences, and learning styles of credential-seekers.
- Deconstructs student learning by commonly defined knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Provides momentum, mobility, and permeability along educational and career pathways.
- Can be reliably evaluated.

The Committee also determined that new practices should build on and enhance progress that has already been made across the state, and that those who have been actively engaged in changing education and economic outcomes for WA’s marginalized communities should lead continuing transformation efforts.

**This Report:** This is the final report and recommendations of the Credential Transparency Advisory Committee, a group convened by the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board through a grant from Credential Engine (with funds from the Lumina Foundation). Credential Engine is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit working to promote credential transparency through a suite of web-based services and collaborative efforts with state and education and workforce development organizations. Credential Engine is considered a national leader in this area and has established a wide range of state partners, along with support from large foundations and leading tech organizations, including Google and Microsoft.

The Credential Engine grant enabled the translation of 6,500 Washington-based postsecondary education and training programs into the Credential Transparency Description Language. This common language, CTDL, helps to describe the skills, competencies and experiences contained in each credential—whether an associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral degree, a registered apprenticeship, a micro-credential, or a badge. While there is broad agreement on what is included in a degree, there is less consensus about what less traditional credentials contain. Creating common definitions across these many credential categories is something the Advisory Committee can continue to work on, along with creating a common language.

By deconstructing credentials into knowledge, skills, and abilities, there will be greater agreement about what is contained in each credential, and about a credential’s value to the learner. With credential transparency, each credential—whether it’s a PhD or a short-term certificate—will verify and validate that certain skills and competencies have been achieved, and are meaningful and high value.

A common language will also help automate updates and make those changes available to potential students and hiring employers in real time. Establishing a common taxonomy and dictionary of terms to uniformly describe, compare, and evaluate credentials is a significant goal of the Advisory Committee. It’s also a necessary move toward an enhanced credentialing system that is accessible, trusted, and values all learning.

### ***What is meant by credential transparency?***

Simply put, credential transparency allows anyone to know what is behind a credential. Like a list of ingredients, credential transparency provides details on the specific skills, competencies, and levels of mastery required to earn that credential. It also allows people to compare a credential with any other

credential to see, for example, if one credential is more likely to result in a preferred career, or higher wages. Credential transparency also reveals how that credential aligns with other credentials—leading to larger, stackable pieces that build to higher-level credentials and increased market value for those who earn them. But to understand our large (and growing) credential universe, unpack the skills and competencies contained inside each credential, better evaluate their labor market value, and understand their connectivity and stack-ability with other credentials, it requires a common language or taxonomy, and a common dictionary of terms.

## Executive Summary

The Workforce Board received a grant from Lumina Foundation via [Credential Engine](#) to publish a minimum of 3,800 Washington credentials from the agency’s nationally recognized Career Bridge website to Credential Engine, helping populate a national credential registry. This grant made Washington the 10th state to publish information about its education and training programs to the Credential Registry, a cloud-based library that makes information on the value of credentials more transparent and accessible to students, consumers and employers. Washington’s project team more than met its goal by publishing nearly twice as many credentials as required by the grant. In addition, project funds supported the creation and convening of a state Credential Transparency Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives from all sectors of higher education, registered apprenticeship, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Office of the Governor, and legislature. The committee has helped shape a vision for increasing credential transparency and navigability among Washington’s secondary and postsecondary systems.

Washington has made significant headway over many years to make postsecondary credentials more accessible to a wider range of students, and to create credential pathways that enhance mobility along career and economic pathways. The state’s higher education institutions offer a wide array of professional-technical certificates and career-sustaining college degrees. To meet the changing needs of the economy, Washington’s higher education institutions make pivots to their portfolios on a regular basis, creating new credentials as needs emerge, while retiring programs that no longer have value in the marketplace. Washington’s higher education institutions also recognize and value prior learning, helping students more quickly leverage their past experiences into marketable credentials.

Even so, these efforts have not always kept pace with the rapid-fire, largely technology-induced changes to workplaces and occupations. The private market has created thousands of alternate credentials, often requiring fewer classroom hours, recognizing and valuing multiple forms of prior learning, and designed for specific jobs or job functions in high demand in the economy. Programs that teach to these shorter-term credentials, whether offered by public institutions or private providers, are often delivered asynchronously to meet the needs of adult workers. Even so, these shorter-term training program can have relatively short shelf lives as work functions become quickly dated. So access to credentials is just one piece of this puzzle, with quality, and long-term value, being another.

The Credential Transparency Advisory Committee worked to develop recommendations to build on and take to scale promising practices from Washington and elsewhere that will support the educational, career, and economic momentum of all Washingtonians. Committee members considered success indicators such as eradicating the educational and economic disparities of marginalized populations and communities, and eliminating the skills gap experienced by employers across almost all sectors.

Helping all Washingtonians navigate career paths, learn new skills, and find satisfying, well-paid work requires a system that is transparent, accessible, and equitable. The Credential Transparency Advisory Committee focused on:

- Common language – Create a common language to help ensure all opportunities are understandable, discoverable, and comparable for Washington residents and employers.
- Interoperability – Ensure the credential ecosystem is transparent and, where applicable, aligns with industry-recognized skills and competencies.
- Builds on previous work – Leverage foundational work Washington has already done on transfer, dual credit, and guided pathways.
- Inclusive and equitable – Tackle structural barriers to education and credentialing that disproportionately impact underrepresented populations.
- Minimize terminal degrees – Work to develop and review credentials to identify skills and competencies, to build to higher-level credentials and employment opportunities.

### ***Why credential transparency and why now?***

Since 2017, Credential Engine has commissioned the George Washington University Institute for Public Policy and the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness to determine the number of credentials that could be found reasonably easily in the marketplace today. In the latest report (upcoming publication date Feb 2021) they found nearly 1 million credentials, which represent traditional degrees, apprenticeships, on-the job training options and internships, short-term credit and non-credit certifications, certificates, diplomas, badges, and other micro-credentials. The numbers are expected to continue to grow, especially via online formats.

Once the realm of public and private higher education and skill training institutions, which have largely operated under significant government and accreditation oversight, the credential marketplace now includes a much wider range of private entities, individual employers, industry associations and others. With no viable public means to police much of what is offered on-line or how those programs and credentials are described and marketed, seekers of information, whether students, workers, or employers are left to fend for themselves.

### ***Credentials and economic disparity:***

Millions of workers have and will be displaced by the pandemic. Pandemic-related dislocations and re-employment scenarios provide useful lessons in understanding the role that credentialing policies have played in the pervasive economic disparity, especially racial disparity, that exists across the country.

The majority of workers who were displaced in the early days of the pandemic were low-wage workers from the hospitality, travel, service, entertainment, and retail sectors. These sectors have traditionally provided low-barrier access to the labor market, with many jobs requiring little preparation or credentials, or even a high school diploma or equivalency. These sectors, together with agriculture, also employed the

largest numbers of immigrants and refugees with limited or no English-speaking ability. People of color are also disproportionately represented in these affected sectors.

The U.S. Department of Labor reported in April 2020 that more than half of Black adults (51.2 percent) were unemployed, for the first time in 40 years. The Pew Research Center survey also found that 73 percent of Black and 70 percent of Latinx adults do not have the emergency savings to cover three months of expenses, while 47 percent of White adult counterparts reported the same; additionally Black (48 percent) and Latinx adults (44 percent) were more likely than White adults (29 percent) to say they “cannot pay some bills or can make only partial payments on some of them this month.”

Throughout the long course of the pandemic, at least some businesses and workers in every industry sector took an economic hit. The unemployment rolls saw workers at every level and in every sector applying for benefits. However, many displaced workers were able to find new employment opportunities, or were called back as their industry was allowed out of quarantine. Workers with IT skills and trade-related skills, and those with college degrees made the quickest transition to re-employment. Many were able to work from home even as their offices shuttered. Those who turned to “gig” jobs, such as grocery delivery, also had new opportunities to earn additional dollars, although no promise of a living wage.

These disparities in economic security and resiliency have become a rallying cry for national and state policy reform. Federal and state policies have undermined the ability of certain individuals, particularly people of color, from standard forms of asset development, including owning homes and businesses, and shares in businesses. Over multiple generations, these assets among whites have grown in value, while the net worth of Blacks has declined. The Federal Reserve’s Survey of Consumer Finances has tracked net worth over 50 years, and reports current median net worth of a Black household as \$17,150—one-tenth the median net worth of a white family, \$171,000.

These assets often serve as collateral for further investments in growing individual or family earnings, such as pursuing a postsecondary credential. Such assets also support people through economic downturns and allow them the flexibility to re-engineer components of their life to respond to life’s challenges. A great example is the transition to remote work and learning made by so many during the pandemic. We now know that nationally about 30 percent of economically disadvantaged and rural school children have not been able to engage meaningfully in their schooling because they did not have access to computers or the internet, and couldn’t afford to remedy the situation.

These economic disadvantages extend to the broader population of Washingtonians including middle-income families. Faced with the increasing cost of groceries, utilities, childcare, healthcare, and other everyday essentials, debt and the burden of shouldering a greater proportion of college as a result of declines in state investments, these families are also struggling to afford education and training to move their own careers forward, or help their children embark on postsecondary pathways.

Programs that serve this broad swath of Washingtonians, such as dual credit, have become increasingly popular as families at a variety of income levels, and ethnic and racial backgrounds, grapple with how to get ahead in an increasingly costly environment.

Federal higher education and workforce development policies and investments have also played a role in curtailing opportunity for the increasing number of students who need to work to afford college. Federal financial aid does not fully meet the financial needs of students. A 2018 report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University found that 70 percent of full-time college students

are working. And low-income working students are more likely to work longer hours than higher-income students. They are also more likely to be Black or Latinx, older and female, according to the report. Even so, one bright spot is the newly created Washington College Grant, which makes education and training beyond high school more affordable, covers more programs and types of credentials, and allows more Washington families to qualify for financial assistance.

Programs that support disadvantaged individuals to access and succeed in credential and degree attainment have been cut back in some cases or defunded entirely. Over the past 30 years, federal and many state laws that dictate the parameters of public assistance, inmate rehabilitation and return, subsidized housing, child care, educational financial assistance--both grants and loans, and the workforce development system have all been modified to limit participation in programs that lead to a credential. Washington state has fought this trend through expansion of Basic Food Employment and Training, WorkFirst policy changes that allow for more training time, and a pilot focused on helping students experiencing homelessness, among others.

***Washington's headway towards closing educational disparity gaps:***

Washington's postsecondary education system has for many years been at the vanguard nationally with evidence-based innovations to make higher education more accessible, to recognize and value multiple learning styles and modalities, and to accelerate credential acquisition, especially for marginalized populations. Washington has been widely recognized for programs that integrate academic education and occupational skills training, for a rich catalog of registered apprenticeship programs, career connected learning opportunities, and college degrees, as well as for a variety of student support services, dual credit, transfer of credit, and credit for prior learning, and many career pathway programs at all credential and degree levels.

In 2019, the Washington state legislature passed a bill creating the most generous state financial aid program in the country—the Washington College Grant Program (WCG). Many more students who do not yet have a baccalaureate degree are now eligible for aid. There is no age requirement, and a student can be enrolled full or part-time in any type of authorized postsecondary education program, including registered apprenticeships. Also significant, the WCG is an entitlement based on income, and can be coupled with other types of financial aid to help cover the full cost of participation--tuition, fees and books, tools and uniforms, and even living expenses.

The progress Washington has made, especially the recent enactment of the WCG program, creates a firm foundation for moving forward with an enhanced, transparent credentialing system. The WCG provides much firmer financial footing and affords greater flexibility than ever before for students to take the most meaningful educational pathway, including registered apprenticeships. In some cases, students are provided guidance in choosing reliable career pathways, from community-based organizations, college advisors, college admissions and financial aid officers, and others. However, some students aren't able to access this valuable guidance and without reliable and useful information about potential pathways, they are left in the dark when making educational choices.

Washington leapt ahead of most other states last year in using new data to determine the true market value of credentials. The legislature passed a bill to require employers to report the occupational titles of their employees. This additional data field will help policymakers and communities understand who is working, what they're doing, and where—filling in labor market gaps and focusing training programs to meet regional needs. The granularity of that data also enables credential information seekers to know if

an education program results in a job for which participants trained. As an example, under current conditions, where an employer only reports the industry sector of the firm, not the job title, a graduate of a computer science degree program may get a job at Safeway. There would be no way to know if that job involved working with computers or working as a store manager.

### ***Building on Washington's success:***

Establishing an effective credentialing system is a work in progress and is perhaps one of the toughest challenges. The committee discussed this issue in broad terms but looks forward to further discussions on how to structure credential transparency in Washington, including working more closely with business and labor to buy in to a new structure. What's needed, in some form, is a sound data collection and reporting system. Some of that initial architecture exists today and can be built on as stakeholders forge a common language and taxonomy. Creating this uniform language helps consumers make evaluative comparisons between and among credentials. In some cases, a highly regarded credential is no longer aligned with the modern economy, but through evaluation can be quickly updated to fit current and evolving needs.

### ***Meaningful metrics:***

In an enhanced, transparent state credentialing system, skills, competencies, and mastery levels will become the coin of the realm for both individuals and employers to navigate credentialing and occupational pathways. Right now, there can be a disconnect between the way credentials are described by education and training institutions and the language employers use in seeking skilled candidates.

As credential transparency advances, job listings and descriptions will better align and be made visible in real-time with the common credential language, CTDL. It will be immediately evident when additional learning is required. By using the same description language, courses will be easier to find, as will other details including cost, likely skill gains, and whether courses are offered online or in person.

Career exploration, education planning, and personal investment are all enhanced by the availability of reliable data about the performance of credentials in the economy. Do people with the credential get jobs in a position for which they trained? How much do they earn when hired? How do they earn more—additional credentials, time on the job, etc.? Which employers value the credential in terms of hiring and promotional preference and pay?

Disaggregating performance data by population groups, geographic regions, occupational sectors, and other elements, provides even more clarity for users. For example, do older, mid-career changers do as well economically as younger students? A user might ask, "Do people who look like me and share my lived experience benefit from this program?" or "Do completers find jobs in my area or do they have to move?"

Disaggregated data will also help policymakers understand who is being left behind economically. They can and should establish goals on economic equity, and charter a system of checkpoints with benchmarks that lead to those goals. A data dashboard can and should be public facing.

### **Policy Recommendations of Credential Transparency Committee**

Transforming the state's education and training credentialing system is a complex undertaking. The Committee has developed a set of policy recommendations that break down transformation into manageable units and build on system successes or work already under way.

## Recommendation 1: Continue to Connect and Collaborate

Establish a Credential Transparency Committee. The Committee should be charged with identifying recommendations to increase postsecondary credential transparency in Washington with the intent of alignment rather than competition to increase postsecondary education and workforce credentials in Washington.

1. Develop a shared definition of credential in Washington.
2. Develop common credential terminology.
3. Identify fields of information across credentials such as credential type, time to degree, initial and potential lifetime earnings, employer demand location, modality, credential provider, potential job and career paths.
4. Review existing credential platforms and projects at the state level in Washington and how to utilize to increase credential transparency statewide.
5. Identify best practices through current mastery-based learning initiatives in K-12, including the current initiative at the State Board of Education, along with existing programs at Washington institutions of higher education.
6. Recommend a communication plan to increase awareness.
7. Establish a K-12 Credential Subcommittee to develop credential recommendations to advance the multiple pathways framework enacted in 2018, and to recognize learning that occurs through paid work and career connected learning opportunities.

The Committee would be staffed by the Workforce Board, with resources appropriated for this work. The Committee should convene in 2021 and sunset December 31, 2022. Co-chairs of the committee will be chosen by the membership of the committee. Membership on the committee should include, but not be limited to public and private two- and four-year higher education institutions, higher education cross-sector policy groups with a focus on transfer and prior learning, higher education and education sector agencies and organizations, K-12 schools, labor, and employers.

## Recommendation 2: Technology Resources

As part of Washington’s project effort, some 6,500 of the state’s credentials have been published from Career Bridge to the national registry in the common credential (CTDL) language. This is just the beginning. To stay at the forefront of credential transparency, Washington’s nationally recognized Career Bridge platform requires additional resources to move from an older architecture into a more modern system that includes the common credential language, CTDL, allowing updates in real-time, and more fields to display key information. Washington also needs to commit the necessary resources to explore how Career Bridge and the Washington Student Achievement Council’s College and Career Compass initiative might be connected to leverage the strengths of each in a way that makes it convenient and streamlined for credential providers such as colleges and universities to voluntarily participate.

## Conclusion

Although Washington continues to take big steps toward credential transparency, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need to be even more intentional about mapping the state’s credential landscape as we rebuild our economy. Washington’s workers, students, and employers require reliable, real-time information about the education and training routes that deliver results across a broad range of career pathways. By pressing ahead on credential transparency and bringing together, through a permanent committee, representatives from all sectors of higher education, registered apprenticeship, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Office of the Governor, and legislature, this important work will continue. This committee, and the ongoing effort to create a common credential taxonomy using CTDL, will ensure that timely, trusted information about credentials opens eyes to the full range of opportunities available for learning, advancement, and meaningful careers.

The following workforce and higher education professionals participated on the Credential Transparency Advisory Committee. However, the recommendations contained in this report, were not formally endorsed by all those listed below.

### Credential Transparency Advisory Committee participants 2020

Becky Wood	State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	Workforce Education Program Administrator
Julie Garver	Council of Presidents	Director of Policy and Academic Affairs
Heather Hudson	Washington Student Achievement Council	Director of Policy and Planning
Becky Wallace	Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction	Career and Technical Education (CTE) Executive Director
Jody Robbins	Department of Labor and Industries	Apprenticeship Program Manager
Maddy Thompson	Governor’s Office	Senior Policy Advisor, Education and College Access
Anna Nikolaeva	Employment Security Department	Career Connect Washington manager
Terri Standish-Kuon	Independent Colleges of	President and CEO

	Washington	
Maryann Braithwaite	Northwest Career Colleges Federation	Executive Director
Craig Parks	Washington State University (Pullman)	Vice Provost
Geoffrey Foy	Pacific Lutheran University	Associate Provost
Sen. Lisa Wellman	Chair of Early Learning & K-12 Education Comm.	41 <sup>st</sup> District-Mercer Island
Lori Klatt	The Evergreen State College	Associate Registrar
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