



# TRANSFORMING U.S. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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# **Transforming U.S. Workforce Development Policies for the 21st Century**

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## **Part 2**

# **Redesigning Workforce Development Strategies**

# 16

## Connecting Workers to Credentials

### The Promise and Pitfalls of Awarding Academic Credit for Prior Learning

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#### THE RECESSION, THE WEB, AND THE WORKFORCE

The practice of awarding academic credit for learning gained outside the classroom is not new. For decades, postsecondary institutions have established credit equivalency for skills or experience students have gained elsewhere. Add to this the longstanding practice of awarding academic credit via the Defense Activities Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES) system, or the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), and it becomes clear that postsecondary institutions, to various degrees, have long been attempting to avoid penalizing students by requiring them to sit through courses that they may have already mastered.

What is new for postsecondary institutions, however, is the rapid growth of this practice. One indication has been the evolution in the terminology used to refer to the practice, reflecting the debates around competency-based assessment that have expanded commensurate with the growth in its use: *prior-learning assessment*, most frequently associated with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's Learning-Counts.org initiative, gave way to *competency-based education* as the term du jour among proponents. More recently still, *direct assessment* more closely reflects the current discussions, as well as the direction in which the practice appears to be heading.

Moreover, as the terminology has evolved, the focus of the practice has shifted more recently from nontraditional students (e.g., adults)

looking for academic credit for workforce experience to any and all students able to demonstrate competency in a given postsecondary education subject. There is a difference in the distinction between assessment for the purposes of awarding traditional academic degrees and assessment related primarily to shorter-term educational certificates designed for nearer-term employment. This difference, I would suggest, is at the heart of tension between proponents and opponents of using assessment of competency to award credentials. I will return to this at the end of the chapter.

Growth in competency-based assessment is driven in large part by the confluence of four relatively contemporaneous forces: 1) the dramatic expansion of online learning, 2) the shift in the labor market to a demand for higher skills, 3) the most protracted economic downturn and slowest recovery in generations, and 4) a shift in responsibility for skills upgrading from one shared with their employers to one that workers are now largely expected to carry on their own. Each of these factors has led increasing numbers of students, many of whom are non-traditional students, back to postsecondary institutions. Increasingly required, as they are, to compete on the “spot-market” for labor, many of these nontraditional students are returning not for a traditional academic degree but for educational certificates that can be quickly translated into employment.

Much of the recent attention given to assessment can be traced back to the efforts of advocates in the mid-2000s to address the apparent need to improve the skill levels of the growing percentage of the labor force who found themselves beyond the typical college-going age, without a postsecondary credential, and with skills that were rapidly becoming obsolete as automation and globalization took the toll that many had predicted. For proponents, assessment was viewed as a way to both address the shortage in higher skills and provide workers with more employment security by way of marketable skills and a postsecondary credential.

The U.S. Census Bureau’s Economics and Statistics Administration reports that just over 75 percent of the adult working population lack any sort of “alternative credential,” defined as either a certification, a license, or an educational certificate (Ewert and Kominski 2014). Notably, the report finds that 86.5 percent of those not in the labor force, and 84.2 percent of the unemployed lack an alternative credential, com-

pared to 68.8 percent of the employed. The authors report that, “[o]verall, people working full-time with alternative credentials earned more than those without any alternative credentials, and people working with professional certificates and licenses earned the most” (p. 7). And, in his State of the Union address in 2009, President Obama called for a commitment from every American to “at least one year or more of higher education,” among a list of prescriptions for pulling the economy out of decline, shoring up the middle class, and providing upward mobility for all (Obama 2009). This request, along with the goal to see the United States first in the world in college graduates by 2020, formed the core of the president’s “completion agenda.” The perceived need for some sort of postsecondary credential to succeed in the labor market, coupled with the brake on economic growth presumed to result from the high percentage of working adults without any sort of postsecondary credential, has added momentum to the rapid expansion in recent years in competency-based credentials, as well as to calls for the creation of a framework to help define the approach.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section briefly reviews the terminology and gives an overview of the shortcomings of the current noncredit system, as perceived by advocates for a competency-based approach, in meeting the education and skill needs of the workforce. The section following illustrates how three states and three organizations assess skills for credit using a competency-based approach, bridging the gap between noncredit and for-credit postsecondary education. The next section outlines how the arguments used in favor of a competency-based framework for awarding occupational credentials have been adopted by advocates for direct assessment of competency for academic degrees, and the implications of this for competency-based assessment of occupational credentials. A brief note on the evidence of effectiveness of this approach follows, which is then followed by suggestions for disentangling the competency-based framework for awarding occupational credentials from the broader movement toward direct assessment for academic degrees.

## TERMINOLOGY

Regional accrediting bodies have begun to develop policies in response to new competency-based education approaches that potentially permit greater flexibility for students to learn at their own pace. This process has led to useful clarifications in terminology, such as that provided by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools/Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the regional accrediting body for the 11 southern U.S. states. In 2013, SACSCOC adopted a policy statement on direct assessment and competency-based educational programs, becoming among the first of the regional accrediting bodies to do so. According to SACSCOC (2013), the policy is designed to provide guidance to institutions and evaluation committees on “the Commission’s expectations regarding the establishment and review of direct assessment competency-based programs and its [*sic*] hybrids,” in both career-technical and degree programs (p. 1).

SACSCOC identifies several defining characteristics (shown in Table 16.1) of direct assessment competency-based educational programs.

- Programs are distinct from conventional notions of the clock hour, seat time, term length, or the credit hour; rather, programs rely on the student’s ability to demonstrate clearly defined and measurable competencies in a designated program.
- Programs are designed and delivered within the framework of the program’s defined knowledge, skills, and competencies as demonstrated by students, rather than in terms of prescribed courses.
- A student may acquire the requisite competencies from multiple sources and at various times other than, or in addition to, the learning experiences provided by the institution. As such, the length of time it takes to demonstrate learning may be different for each student.
- Programs often allow for alternative approaches to teaching and learning.
- Programs may rely almost exclusively on students using direct assessment testing models to demonstrate their mastery of program and degree content.

**Table 16.1 SACSCOC Definition of Terms**

Terms	Definitions
Competency	A competency is a clearly defined and measurable statement of the knowledge, skill, and ability a student has acquired in a designated program.
Competency-based educational programs	A competency-based educational program is outcome-based and assesses a student's attainment of competencies as the sole means of determining whether the student earns a degree or a credential. Such programs may be organized around traditional course-based units (credit or clock hours) that students must earn to complete their educational program, or may depart from course-based units (credit or clock hours) to rely solely on the attainment of defined competencies.
Direct assessment	A competency-based educational program as an instructional program that, <i>in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning</i> , uses direct assessment of student learning <i>relying solely on the attainment of defined competencies</i> , or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others (emphases added). The assessment must be consistent with the accreditation of the institution or program using the results of the assessment.
Hybrid competency-based educational programs	A hybrid competency-based educational program combines course-based competencies (clock and credit hours awarded) with non-course-based competencies (no clock or credit hours awarded).

Elements of SACSCOC's definition of direct assessment programs appear in many of the efforts undertaken by postsecondary institutions, and in a growing number of states, to award academic credit for education and skills earned outside a traditional postsecondary setting. In theory, this approach potentially benefits unemployed and underemployed workers who are faced with few options for advancing in the labor market other than earning a postsecondary credential that signals a marketable skill. These state and institutional efforts are taking hold, moreover, as a result of the current disconnection between the noncredit and credit-bearing sides of postsecondary education.

## NONCREDIT VS. CREDIT-BEARING PROGRAMS

The perceived need for a competency-based approach for awarding academic credit is influenced, at least in part, by the significant percentage of the working population that typically enrolls in a wide variety of noncredit postsecondary courses, often for skills training directly tied to employment, and often outside higher education institutions. Advocates for a competency-based approach see this population as a source of potential candidates for credential-conferring programs if equivalence between noncredit and credit offerings can be determined. Academic credit for prior learning could, so the argument goes, be awarded as an enticement to matriculate into credit-bearing courses, and participants who may typically be reluctant to return to higher education (or enter for the first time) would then do so with the understanding that they would earn a certificate or credential at an accelerated rate. When this approach succeeds, as it appears to have in Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and a few other states, it has the potential to address both the worker's need for higher-level skills and the "completion agenda" meant to benefit the broader economy.

However, this relatively straightforward rubric—identify credit-bearing equivalencies for noncredit prior learning, award credit to workers, enroll them in credit-bearing programs, and award them an industry-recognized credential with value in the labor market—is not without significant hurdles, as discussed below.

This rubric has evolved, fairly rapidly, into an approach far afield from its origins, with policy and pedagogical implications that threaten to undermine what has the potential to significantly increase the education and skill levels of the workforce. As it has morphed into an approach to higher education in general, competency-based assessment as a workforce development strategy has suffered from the backlash that has come primarily in response to the perception of direct assessment of competency as a threat to traditional notions of how higher education is best delivered (i.e., seat time).

## **Identifying the Need for a Competency-Based Framework**

Advocates for a competency-based credentialing system cite several shortcomings in the current noncredit system that prevent it from meeting the demands of the labor market. Inadequate data reporting on noncredit programs, poor quality-assurance mechanisms, and a lack of transparency regarding the value of noncredit occupational credentials are just a few of the more significant barriers cited.

### **Data reporting**

The vast bulk of noncredit postsecondary education operates outside the traditional discussions of postsecondary policy, and most federal and state data collection systems exclude these programs. The federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), for example, collects data only on students enrolled in credit-bearing programs, and it even excludes students enrolled in for-credit but nondegree programs. State and institutional data systems use different metrics for counting credit and noncredit programs, and there is variation within states in the metrics used for counting noncredit education (e.g., hours of training, unduplicated enrollment, type of programs, outcomes). Neither the federal government nor the states collect data on certificates and certifications offered outside higher education (Bird, Ganzglass, and Prince 2011). In the absence of reliable data on enrollment and completion, the labor market impacts of noncredit postsecondary education are difficult, at best, to determine.

### **Quality assurance**

Advocates for a competency-based approach also point to the absence of consistent measures or processes for assessing program effectiveness. Noncredit education is rarely subject to academic or faculty protocols associated with securing approval to offer courses for credit. Moreover, noncredit programs offered by community colleges, the primary source for these programs, use diverse measures of quality, reflecting their diverse purposes and customers. For example, the accountability measures for training low-income adults and dislocated workers funded through the Workforce Investment Act focus on students' employment and earnings outcomes, while the effectiveness of

training customized to employers' specifications may be measured in terms of improved worker performance. Other training may be measured in terms of students' success in passing industry certifications or earning professional licenses (Bird, Ganzglass, and Prince 2011).

Further, there is a wide array of private sector certifying and accrediting bodies, each with its own protocols and quality-assurance mechanisms. And, while some employer-financed education leads to postsecondary credentials or degrees—for example, through tuition reimbursement programs—most employer-sponsored and employer-funded technical training is noncredit and is offered by either the employer directly, educational institutions, or private vendors (Bird, Ganzglass, and Prince 2011).

### **Transparency of credential value**

For advocates of a competency-based approach, perhaps the highest hurdle between the current noncredit system and a system that can, with a high degree of fidelity, produce a workforce with the education and skills required by the labor market is the perception that the current credential landscape is “crowded, chaotic, and confusing” to individuals, institutions, and employers (Bird, Ganzglass, and Prince 2011, p. 9). Each of these stakeholders report difficulty in navigating the education and training system and making choices that will give them access to the appropriate programs and credentials. Credentials include credit and noncredit certificates, educational degrees (e.g., diploma, associate's degree, bachelor's degree), registered apprenticeship certificates, and other credit and noncredit certifications of skills attainment. In some cases, students receive industry-approved certifications based on standardized tests; in other cases, they earn industry-approved licenses; in many cases, individual institutions offer certificates for completion of courses or programs with or without third-party validation. Some certificates target general learning outcomes; others reflect specific occupational competencies. Furthermore, critics of the current state of affairs in the United States also note that credentials are not always transferable across programs and geographies.

The lack of common definitions and standards underlying the myriad noncredit occupational credentials is said to contribute to confusion about which ones represent value and how they relate to academic

credentials. Moreover, the lack of industry-recognized credentials for lower-skilled jobs complicates efforts to build on-ramps to good jobs for low-skilled workers (Bird, Ganzglass, and Prince 2011).

Each of these factors has contributed to calls for a framework, based on an assessment of competency, for awarding industry certifications and postsecondary credentials. While early advocates for this sort of framework may have had in mind nontraditional postsecondary students who required a postsecondary credential to advance in the labor market, the use of assessment of competency as the primary metric for awarding academic credit toward a credential has expanded to include more advanced degrees and a wider cast of key players. As described below, Wisconsin provides one of the clearer examples of how a practice originally focused on relatively short-term occupation-oriented credentials has evolved, in short order, into an approach to higher education more generally.

## **THE REFORMATION: BRINGING COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION OUT OF THE SHADOWS**

### **State-Level Innovations**

A competency-based framework would necessarily build on successful experiments in a handful of states over the past several years. Driven by local and regional economic development needs, as well as the need to increase the education and skills of the workforce, these states have effectively addressed the shortcomings of the noncredit system noted above, and have created noncredit-to-credit systems within their higher education institutions.

Much of this state- and institution-level innovation in matching noncredit learning to credit-bearing courses in the two systems falls into three broad categories:

- 1) Evaluation of prior learning through assessments of life and work experiences to document learning that is equivalent to college-level courses or competencies

- 2) Preapproval of courses through an articulation process or agreement that permits crosswalks or the determination of equivalencies between credits and industry certifications and other noncollegiate learning
- 3) Integrating noncredit learning into credit-bearing courses of study

Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin are among the leading states in operationalizing a competency-based approach for awarding postsecondary credit for education and skills acquired in a variety of nonpostsecondary settings.

### **Ohio**

The Career Technical Credit Transfer (CT<sup>2</sup>) initiative, which began in 2005, evolved from the Ohio Board of Regents' efforts to increase completion rates and improve the ability of students to transfer across the state's postsecondary institutions. (CT<sup>2</sup>) is a collaborative effort among the Ohio Board of Regents, the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Career-Technical Education, public secondary/adult career-technical education institutions, and state-supported colleges. The goal is to help ensure that workers can earn educational credit for technical instruction.

More recently, and with Governor Kasich's support, what began as an effort to ensure that postsecondary credits can transfer has led to a process for awarding academic credit for occupational and technical instruction provided through the state's Adult Career Centers (state-supported providers of career and technical education). (CT<sup>2</sup>) establishes criteria, policies, and procedures whereby students receive college credit for agreed-upon technical knowledge and skills in equivalent courses or programs that are based on industry-recognized standards.

Critical to the early success of Ohio (CT<sup>2</sup>)—16 different certifications awarded in 11 different occupations—is the process by which faculty and other stakeholders determine which types of occupational and technical instruction merit educational credit. The process involves several steps:

- Defining learning outcomes based on industry-recognized credentials

- Coming to agreement among members of faculty from Ohio public institutions of higher education and career-technical education institutions and content expert panels on these learning outcomes
- Matching course and learning materials based on the learning outcomes using the state's Course Equivalency Management System
- Submitting course and learning materials for approval
- Continuously reviewing course and learning materials for equivalency

Representatives from the state's Department of Education and post-secondary faculty collaborate on joint faculty/industry advisory panels that meet annually to align curricula with industry needs. And, while (CT<sup>2</sup>) may have been originally motivated primarily by a desire to improve the education and skill levels of Ohio's workforce, the state's recently adopted performance-based funding for all of its public higher education institutions has been a key driver of the state's continuing focus on assessment.

### **Indiana**

In addition to a portfolio review process to assess prior learning, as well as direct assessment through DANTES and the CLEP exams, Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College system uses a "certification crosswalk" to award academic credit for a wide range of industry certifications, including apprenticeships, provided through third-party certification organizations.

The certification crosswalk permits students seeking credit for prior learning to avoid the often lengthy portfolio review process, as well as the fees associated with it. Institutions potentially save time and money because they do not have to review each student's prior learning. The consistency achieved through the crosswalk also facilitates the transfer of credit across institutions. Ivy Tech's 23 campuses are in alignment on the approach as to how students and faculty develop and document their portfolio assessment for determining the awarding of credit for prior learning. In addition, each of the campuses agree on consistent cut scores for standardized tests that measure prior learning, such as the DANTES and CLEP exams.

**Evolving role of faculty.** A faculty-driven process in 2005 developed the crosswalk, and faculty continue to be involved in expanding and keeping it up to date as certifications and licenses change; each curricula committee meets at least once annually, and crosswalks are standing items on committee agenda. New academic advisors are trained in prior learning assessment (PLA) and in advising new students on how to take advantage of it.

This level of faculty support is a marked improvement from the early days of the crosswalk process, when the attitudes of all but a few of the more devoted faculty and advisors ranged from ambivalent to reluctant. Concerns among faculty centered on three main issues: 1) reputation of the institution, 2) the integrity of the degrees, and 3) standards regarding the institution's 15 credit hour residency policy. As the process has evolved, so have faculty concerns, with relatively few expressing dissatisfaction with the approach. As with traditional transfer, some faculty expressed a sentiment similar to, "If they didn't learn from me, they didn't learn it." Additionally, it is up to the receiving institutions whether credits earned via assessment are acceptable. However, articulation agreements between Ivy Tech and other Indiana higher education institutions have largely minimized this particular issue.

**Employer engagement.** Generally speaking, employers have played a smaller role in the certification crosswalk process than originally anticipated. However, administrators note that, for the most part, hiring employers are unaware of Ivy Tech's reliance on PLA, the certification crosswalk, or direct assessment, and seem to be largely unconcerned whether credits are earned through traditional seat time or via some type of competency-based assessment strategy.

### **Wisconsin**

Wisconsin's technical colleges consider apprenticeship-related instruction as approved academic programming with full program status. Students can earn 39 credits through an apprenticeship program, which can be applied toward the 60-credit Journeyworker Applied Associate in Science degree. While initially focused on the construction trades, Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development and the Wisconsin Technical College System have taken steps to expand this

practice to include health care apprenticeships and skilled apprenticeship programs in green construction and energy-related occupations.

In addition, and with strong encouragement from the governor's office, the University of Wisconsin (UW) System has recently implemented its "UW Flexible Option" program, which, possibly more than any public university system to date, establishes a competency-based approach as the cornerstone to multiple degree and certificate programs. The UW System's approach provides self-paced, assessment-driven, competency-based certificates, as well as AA, BA, and BS degrees in a wide range of disciplines. The approach is promoted with television ads and online videos, and is targeted to nontraditional and adult learners as a way to earn a credential while working, maintaining a household, or being unemployed. All of the program offerings are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and, with a nod to what is understood to be their target population's motivation, are touted to be valued by employers just as highly as those earned through traditional routes.

A few other states, including Kentucky and Oregon, have attempted to create similar competency-based postsecondary programs with varying degrees of success. Each, however, has as a common denominator the perceived need to shift from an input-based metric ("seat time") to an output-based metric (demonstration of competency) as the primary metric for determining postsecondary education and training effectiveness.

### **THIRD-PARTY ASSESSMENT**

Assessment of experiential or prior learning includes a variety of approaches, including portfolio assessments, standardized exams, and credit recommendations based on institutional or third-party evaluators of credit using nationally recognized criteria to recommend credit equivalencies for noncredit learning, and other types of learning that take place outside the traditional for-credit, postsecondary settings. The three examples below illustrate these approaches.

## **LearningCounts.org**

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has built a business around establishing and disseminating standards for awarding credit through PLA. The CAEL promotes a range of PLA options—including standardized exams, challenge exams, and formal evaluation of noncredit instruction—but it places special emphasis on the portfolio method of assessment.

CAEL's focus on PLA is motivated, in part, by the findings from its study, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* (CAEL 2010). In it, CAEL examines data on 62,475 adult students at 48 colleges and universities across the country and finds that students with PLA credit completed degrees at much higher rates than students without it. PLA students also had higher persistence rates and a faster time to completion. According to the study, student advisors believe that earning PLA credit can motivate students to persist in their studies and complete their degrees. It is also assumed once students understand that they have already learned “college-level” material, they may be more motivated to enroll.

While the portfolio option is available to many students, faculty evaluators must be trained to do the assessments according to nationally accepted standards, like CAEL's. As a result, CAEL reports that institutions often find it difficult to offer the portfolio option to many students or across a range of disciplines.

The CAEL study also finds that PLA had limited use in community colleges and served few students. When asked about these low usage rates, respondents reported to CAEL that PLA offerings were often inconsistent across colleges and departments, not promoted or advocated by advisors or faculty, or too narrow in scope or availability to meet students' needs.

## **The American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT)**

ACE's CREDIT program, serving adults, educational institutions, and organizations, connects workplace learning with colleges by helping adults gain academic credit for formal courses and examinations taken outside traditional degree programs. CREDIT evaluates and validates

credit recommendations from organizations providing noncollegiate-sponsored instruction, including job training, apprenticeship, and work-force-readiness programs provided by employers, unions, CBOs, and business or professional associations.

Since 1945, ACE's Military Evaluations Program has used subject-matter experts and academic faculty to review courses and conduct site visits to analyze course and program content, and it has relied on evaluator consensus in determining the learning outcomes and appropriate educational credit recommendations. CREDIT provides guidance to service members, civilians, military education centers, and colleges interpreting military transcripts and documents.

### **National College Credit Recommendation Service**

Since 1973, the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York has operated the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). Similar to ACE's CREDIT program, the NCCRS reviews formal courses and educational programs in a wide variety of subjects sponsored by noncollegiate organizations, makes college-level credit recommendations for the courses and programs evaluated, and promotes academic recognition of these learning experiences to the nation's colleges. Over 1,500 institutions have said they are willing to consider awarding credit for learning experiences evaluated by the NCCRS, and additional institutions use these credit recommendations in conjunction with individualized portfolio assessments for adult learners.

## **FEDERAL SUPPORT**

Seen by advocates as a federal-level endorsement of a competency-based approach to credentials, the U.S. Department of Education (2013) issued a "Dear Colleague" letter, in which it reiterated the leeway granted to postsecondary institutions for providing federal student aid for competency-based programs in the final rule for the Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005. The department also acknowledged the expansion of competency-based programs over the past several

years and endorsed them for their potential for “assuring the quality and extent of learning, shortening the time to degree/certificate completion, developing stackable credentials that ease student transitions between school and work, and reducing the overall cost of education for both career-technical and degree programs.” While the department recognized that the guidance may not fully address the need for Title IV support, particularly regarding financial aid for fees associated with assessments of prior learning, the letter served as a clear indication that the department would be unlikely to slow the trend toward assessment in competency-based programs over traditional seat-time programs.

## **THE LUMINA FOUNDATION’S TUNING USA PROJECT**

As long as it remained limited to occupational skills and experience earned outside of higher education setting, the competency-based approach to awarding academic credit remained relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, in states like Indiana, faculty and higher education administrators have been integral in the approach’s expansion within institutions. A turning point in this attitude, however, may be dated to approximately the time when a competency-based approach began to be applied to traditional academic degrees. The Lumina Foundation’s Tuning USA project may mark the beginning of this shift.

The Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile, a product of the foundation’s Tuning USA initiative, builds on the work of similar and ongoing processes in the European Union to identify specific learning outcomes for associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degrees. Tuning USA is the most comprehensive effort to date to create a national, competency-based qualifications framework for postsecondary education.

Since 2009, the Lumina Foundation has administered the Tuning USA pilot, with the aim to

- award comparable degrees based upon defined, criterion-referenced learning outcomes;
- promote college access and student mobility; and
- embrace the need for increased degree attainment (McKiernan and Birtwistle 2010).

In January 2011, the foundation issued *Degree Qualifications Profile for Associate's, Bachelor's and Master's Degrees* (the *Degree Profile*) (Adelman et al. 2011). The *Degree Profile*

highlights specific student learning outcomes that should define associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees in terms of what students should know, understand and be able to do upon earning these degrees. *As the Degree Profile defines competencies in ways meant to emphasize both the cumulative integration of learning from many sources and the application of learning in a variety of practical settings, it seeks to offer benchmarks for high quality learning. . . .* It is meant also to provide a common vocabulary to encourage the sharing of good practice, to offer a foundation for better public understanding, and to establish reference points for accountability far stronger than those now in use (emphasis added). (Adelman et al. 2011)

The *Degree Profile* begins to define the overarching student outcomes, rather than subject-specific learning outcomes and competencies, that a student must demonstrate in order to be awarded a degree at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's levels in the United States. For each degree level, the profile identifies core competencies that collectively define the requirements for a specific degree. These cores grow progressively larger as students build on their knowledge, and the growth in learning is expected to be predictable and transparent to all involved.

The *Degree Profile* describes student performance appropriate for each degree level through clear reference points that indicate the incremental and cumulative nature of learning. *Focusing on conceptual knowledge and essential competencies and their applications, the Degree Profile illustrates how students should be expected to perform at progressively more challenging levels.* Students' demonstrated achievement in performing at these ascending levels creates the grounds on which degrees are awarded (emphasis added). (Adelman et al. 2011)

As the competency-based approach has moved beyond identifying overarching student outcomes and competencies and, in fact, adopts *subject-specific* outcomes and competencies, it has begun to court controversy. Moreover, as it evolves from a workforce development strategy into a strategy that has implications for all of postsecondary edu-

cation, the approach runs the risk of being undermined altogether by staunch supporters of more traditional higher education methods.

## **EVALUATIONS OF COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACHES TO AWARDING CREDENTIALS**

Despite the proliferation of institutions employing the practice, a review of the evaluation literature finds that there have been no recent, rigorous evaluations of competency-based assessment outside the medical field. Left unaddressed are critical questions regarding the practice, not least of which is whether acceleration of awarding of credentials undermines learning. The vast bulk of the material produced on the practice is descriptive and normative, with some solid analysis of the political dynamics produced by postsecondary education industry journalists (e.g., see Fain [2012, 2013]).

Even anecdotal evidence, beyond the promotional spots in online and television advertisements, in favor of or opposed to competency-based assessment is difficult to come by. Its intuitive appeal—the potential to increase enrollment, speed up time to completion, minimize duplication of a student’s effort, and more rapidly equip the national workforce with higher-order skills—rather than evidence has been the practice’s primary selling point. However, the practice has been in place, in multiple variations, long enough that it would appear that this is a topic ripe for an impact evaluation.

A bill introduced in the 113th Congress, H.R. 3136, would create the “Advancing Competency-Based Education Demonstration Project Act of 2013,” and would require that the demonstration be evaluated in terms of student progress toward retention and completion of recognized degree programs. The introduction of this bill follows the guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Education (described above), which outlines how institutions can have competency-based programs approved under current regulations relating to direct assessment programs. If passed, H.R. 3136 would potentially provide federal support for substantive evaluations of the practice.

## **THE COUNTER-REFORMATION: BACKLASH AGAINST COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT**

While the Lumina Foundation's Degree Profile is focused primarily on competency assessment within general education degree programs rather than on programs oriented more toward occupational education and training, its emphasis on defining competency, assessing competency, and basing advancement on demonstration of competency clearly parallels similar efforts by postsecondary institutions with regard to shorter-term, occupationally oriented offerings. And while competency-based assessment may be able to credit its recent popularity to the completion agenda and that agenda's desire to equip the workforce with college credentials, concerns over the approach have grown as it has moved onto more traditional postsecondary turf.

As it has shifted from a means to improve the occupational skills of the workforce (i.e., a workforce development strategy) to a shortcut to a traditional academic degree (i.e., a postsecondary education strategy), assessment has engendered a backlash among academics who argue that earning an occupational certificate in a postsecondary institution is all well and good, but granting academic credit for work experience in order to speed students through college undermines the purpose of higher education. Worse still for critics is direct assessment, which requires even less interaction with professors, students, and all else that postsecondary education has to offer. Competency as the sole means for determining academic credit is, for critics, a minimalist concept, and the entire movement from PLA to competency-based education to direct assessment represents a "creeping minimalism" that will likely lead to a devaluing of postsecondary credentials in general. The entire approach threatens the creation of multiple "universities without intellectuals," as noted critic of competency-based assessment Johann N. Neem refers to Western Governors University and similar institutions (Neem 2012, p. 70).

Perhaps the clearest signs of the emerging backlash can be found in the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) 2014 conference, the vast majority of which was devoted to competency-based education and direct assessment. Framing the issue in terms of educational quality over technologically acquired efficiencies,

and in terms of equipping postsecondary students with an education that can help them tackle the big questions and real-world challenges rather than simply provide them with skills required for their first job, AAC&U asks, “But in our fascination with the promise of technology, are we paying sufficient attention to the connection between innovation and educational quality . . . (and) can we instead judge the value of innovations by how well they create long-term opportunity, strengthen students’ capacities, and reverse the most inequitable features of U.S. higher education?” (AAC&U 2014).

Descriptions of panel presentations at the conference alluded to the tension suggested by the conference title. Panels included those addressing how institutes of higher education might best continue to develop civic-minded students in an atmosphere characterized by an increasing focus on workforce development, or those that defend the long overdue technological revolution that can give employers assurances of student competencies in workforce skills. Other panels, which included for-profit and nonprofit participants, spoke to the issue of quality in direct assessment competency-based programs. Still other sessions asked whether the road to competency-based education leads to an educational utopia or dystopia. A common denominator among each of these discussions appeared to be the recognition that postsecondary credentials are increasingly required for success in the labor market, and that the increasing cost of postsecondary education was driving toward innovation in terms of delivery.

The online journal *Inside Higher Ed* has documented the rapid evolution of assessment from helpful tool for nontraditional students looking for postsecondary credit for prior learning to at least a “disruptive” force, or at worst part of the “creative destruction” of postsecondary education as we know it (*Economist* 2014). *Inside Higher Ed*’s coverage from approximately May 2012 forward has couched the growth of assessment of competency in terms of career advancement, and as an approach with particular appeal to workers looking to convert technical trade certificates and skills into credit for academic credentials. *Inside Higher Ed* also foreshadows the potential for online learning and massive open online courses (MOOCs) to drive demand for competency-based assessment in ways that are difficult to predict. Fain (2012) writes, “One reason many colleges are skittish about granting credits for prior learning is because to do so is to acknowledge that the acad-

emy doesn't have a lock on college-level learning. Some faculty members also view the process warily, arguing that it can be an academically suspect money grab and a weak substitute for college. Prior learning could also threaten professors' jobs."

By early 2013, *Inside Higher Ed* had documented the push for "alternative credit pathways" coming from "the college completion agenda, workforce development, and money worries (buffeting) colleges." In addition, the journal reported on ACE's endorsement of extending credit recommendations to courses delivered via MOOCs and other nonaccredited online providers. Despite ACE's endorsement, as well as deep-pocketed support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, IHE reported that the acceptance of ACE's credit recommendations for courses delivered by nonaccredited providers was perhaps most popular with open access institutions and least popular with more selective colleges (Fain 2013).

Perhaps the most illuminating component of IHE's coverage, at least for the purposes of this chapter, is its chronicling of the evolution of the competency-based approach from one focused primarily on sub-baccalaureate workforce credentials to one that has become so intertwined with online instruction and the "creative destruction" of higher education that critics and advocates alike have difficulty teasing the two ideas apart. This is detrimental to PLA as a potentially transformative workforce development strategy.

As long as the labor market requires credentials to signal skill attainment, there will be a need for occupational training by a credential-granting institution. However, this brings into question the need for postsecondary education to validate skill attainment. Early advocates for community and technical colleges in this role believed that these institutions were better equipped to provide education and training services because, crucially, they have the potential to provide participants with career pathways and a mix of academic education and occupational skills (see Grubb [2000]).

However, an alternative rationale may have to do with the shift from a paradigm in which skills training was provided through apprenticeships or training on the job, where proof of skill attainment was demonstrated on the job and observed by supervisors. As this paradigm has shifted away from training done at the job site, with sharp reductions in the amount of training invested in lower-level workers, employers

are no less concerned about the skill levels of those they hire, only now the “proof” of skill attainment must come from elsewhere. Two-year postsecondary institutions have moved to fill this gap. If this alternative explanation better reflects reality, then the move by postsecondary institutions to conduct training has less to do with the type, rigor, or robustness of the training received, as suggested by early advocates, and more to do with the absence of traditional forms of skill validation, that is, demonstration of skill attainment on the job.

Occupational skills training programs are increasingly enrolling an older student population, often with significant work experience, who primarily want to earn a credential in order to advance in the labor market. For this population (as well as for the institutions), there is a premium placed on short-term, highly focused training. For employers, globalization has meant a push to reduce production costs, which results in investments in skills training, as well as pressure to hold wages down. This shifts the burden for the provision of needed skills to postsecondary institutions and, ultimately, to the workers themselves in the form of tuition and fees. In this environment, the evolving model—competency-based education, online instruction, direct assessment of skills, and learning for credit—makes some sense for occupational skills training, although it is probably not an ideal type.

This motivation does not apply to traditional postsecondary academic programs, in which students are believed to benefit from longer-term exposure to a wide range of subjects, unlike the short-term, highly focused instruction provided through programs that are primarily occupational-skills oriented. The exploratory aspect associated with academically oriented higher education is potentially undermined by directly assessing skills and knowledge in order to fast-track a student from enrollment to credential attainment. Yet, what might be seen as two distinct functions of postsecondary education—one driven primarily by the need to equip individuals with occupational skills, and one driven by an academic mission—becomes conflated beneath the push toward granting any type of credential based on a demonstration of competency. The backlash against competency-based credentials and direct assessment will then inevitably include occupational skills credentials.

## **PRIVATE SECTOR INTEREST**

Proprietary institutions have moved quickly into the space opened up by the confluence of online learning, the demand for higher skills to advance in the labor market, and the need for a more highly educated (credentialed) and skilled workforce. However, concerns have begun to surface about the potential for for-profit schools to lower standards for determining competency (a more recent version of long-held suspicions that the practice was simply a cover for unscrupulous diploma mills), as well as the fact that the expansion of the practice has significantly outpaced the research on its effectiveness.

Nonetheless, private, for-profit schools are among the mix of schools, along with private nonprofits, public, and online schools recently invited to participate in the Lumina Foundation’s “Competency-Based Education Network.” Per the press release issued from the Competency-Based Network (C-BEN) in 2014, the network will address “shared challenges to designing and developing competency-based degree programs and related business models” (C-BEN 2014). C-BEN roots its *raison d’être* in both social and economic necessity: “The movement toward competency-based academic delivery comes as the United States, to meet social and economic demands for more college graduates, must provide more education options for more students. Advocates believe academic programs that clearly define what students must know and be able to do to earn degrees in specific disciplines create significant potential to affordably help students from all backgrounds prepare for further education and employment.”

## **UNHITCHING THE COMPETENCY-BASED WORKFORCE CREDENTIAL FROM THE DIRECT ASSESSMENT DEGREE WAGON**

Recent work by advocates for competency-based credentials, especially the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), may help to disentangle the practice of awarding “competency-based workforce credentials” from the more controversial “direct assessment” trend en

vogue in higher education more generally. For CSW and allies, including the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), the American National Standards Institute and the National Skills Coalition, a distinction can be, and needs to be, made between these two by emphasizing several key strategies in the implementation of competency-based workforce credentials, including

- ensuring quality through the use of external accreditors who are attuned to the current needs of industry;
- expanding the use of competency-based workforce credentials by employers, including demonstrating a return on the investment of their time engaging in the credentialing effort;
- expanding the use of competency-based assessment among workers and students;
- expanding the take-up rate of competency-based workforce credentials among postsecondary institutions; and
- creating an infrastructure that can promote a market for competency-based workforce credentials, including quality assurance mechanisms, federal, state, and institutional policy support, and better coordination across the various competency-based credentialing efforts (CSW 2013).

These strategies, it is assumed, will contribute to a competency-based framework in which individuals can readily earn competency-based credentials and apply them to the labor market, providing the quality assurance that CSW and allies find missing in today's market for subdegree certificates, licenses, and credentials.

However, even this corrective action taken on by CSW runs the risk of being undermined by efforts led by its allies to create a "competency-based credentialing ecosystem" (CLASP 2014), as long as that particular effort fails to clarify the distinction between a market for "subdegree" credentials and a market for competency-based credentials in general, in addition to its implied support for "deinstitutionalizing education" (see CLASP [2014]).

## STRAW MAN OR WICKER MAN?

Critics of competency-based assessment typically question the motive behind the movement, and its shift into the higher ends of higher education has opened the practice up to questioning in a way that, while under the radar as a means to a relatively short-term occupational credential, it had not been. Now, the pedagogy appears to critics as market-driven, rather than education-driven, with metrics that include cost savings at the expense of instruction. However, some would argue that this is an inevitable outcome of the decades-old trend toward conflating vocational education with postsecondary education, or at least the liberal arts-oriented sort of postsecondary education that is designed to expand an individual's capabilities to choose multiple paths, rather than simply equip him with a skill that will enable him to better compete for work.

This trend is part and parcel of the broader tendency to shift to the individual the burden that was once more broadly shared with employers and society. Personal responsibility, instead of collective responsibility, has been a driving force in public policy in recent decades, so it follows that it falls to the individual to upgrade skills and maintain personal competitiveness. This shift toward personal responsibility for labor market success has opened the door to the current debate about how, rather than whether or to what extent, postsecondary education should meet the demand for skills required by employers. With the weakening of the labor movement has come the near-disappearance of apprenticeship programs and union contracts that performed many of the functions now expected of higher education.

The initial push that started the current assessment ball rolling was justified by claims that the existing credential landscape is too confusing to serve either employers or workers well, and that a simpler, more transparent method (i.e., awarding credentials based on an assessment of competency) is required if workers, employers, and the economy as a whole are to regain their competitive edge. However, while it is logical to assume that an undereducated workforce serves no one well, it is a leap to then assert that awarding postsecondary credentials based on a demonstration of competency will solve this problem. Given the absence of research pointing to the confusing credential landscape as

the, or even a, culprit behind our dulled competitive edge, arguments pinning the blame on the status quo seem a bit too much like a straw man for advocates for the “creative destruction” of the postsecondary system.

Instead, the infrastructure being built up around the push for competency-based assessment can seem at times more like a wicker man, in which traditional higher education is meant to be offered up in the name of the “free market” and its demands for better, faster, cheaper.

A helpful exercise for advocates would be to return to the rubric outlined near the beginning of the chapter—identify credit-bearing equivalencies for noncredit, prior-learning; award credit to workers; enroll them in credit-bearing programs; and award them an industry-recognized, competency-based workforce credential with value in the labor market—and to keep the focus on this approach as a workforce development approach, rather than a means to “disrupt” postsecondary education in general. Advocates would benefit, too, from revisiting successful approaches to identifying credit equivalencies for noncredit learning, as is currently practiced in Ohio and Indiana, and building scalable approaches based on the years of experience put into these practices. The benefits of remaining tightly focused on meeting the demand for competency-based workforce credentials would likely outweigh the costs of wading about in the mire that is the debate around self-paced, online, direct assessment of competencies in pursuit of a postsecondary degree.

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