Creating an American Credentials Framework:
Communicating About and Connecting Diverse Credentials

Concept Overview – October 2014

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Executive Summary

The American Credentials Framework is being designed to serve as a voluntary communications tool intended to make the thousands of diverse credentials used in the United States easier to understand, compare and connect in order to increase the career and economic mobility of workers. The Framework provides a unifying way to understand the knowledge, skills and abilities underlying degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, badges, and other credentials. The Framework supports the belief that all learning matters, wherever and however it is obtained, and that what is now considered non-credit and informal learning should become countable towards credentials of value in pursuing employment and further education. The Framework also supports the proposition that varied credentials should become more "stackable" within existing and new career pathways.

The Framework provides competency-based reference points that can be used to describe the levels of learning outcomes associated with any credential. The Framework can help increase credential transparency, comparability, portability, economic impact, and quality. Industry and education leaders who mapped credentials against the Framework during initial development identified a number of ways it could be valuable:

- **Reducing costs for both individuals and companies** by enabling better informed decision-making about education and employment choices;

- **Increasing credential attainment** by supporting improved career and educational planning by learners;

- **Integrating academic and employer language and perspectives** – The Framework can help make clearer the potential connectivity between industry and academic requirements and credentials;

- **Increasing the use of common terminology** – By using language intended to span academic and industry approaches, the Framework can help improve communication;

- **Making it easier to cross-walk competencies** among multiple credentials;

- **Encouraging clear articulation of learning outcomes/competencies** associated with courses and programs of study;

- **Putting personal and social abilities into a common picture with knowledge and skills; and**

- **Further expanding stacking credentials and career pathways** through the valuing of all types of credentials including non-degree credentials**.**

The Credentials Framework is organized around *learning outcomes* and *competencies*. It is structured into eight *levels* of competency-oriented learning outcomes that indicate the relative complexity, and/or depth of achievement and/or the autonomy of the learner in demonstrating the

achievement. Each level is explained in terms of competencies broken into the knowledge, skills, and abilities that all learners attaining a specific credential should possess.

For the Credentials Framework to become a widely used tool and achieve its objectives, it must be adopted on a voluntary basis by the many stakeholders in credentialing in the United States, including those bodies that provide detailed competencies and curriculum as well as the assessment, instruction, quality assurance and accreditation communities. Substantial work lies ahead. Next steps in development of the Framework include inviting substantially further testing of the Framework, identifying clear value propositions for various types of users, and exploring its fit with other related policy and practice initiatives in concurrent development.

Why Do We Need a Credentials Framework?

Credentials in the U.S. take many forms: degrees, certifications, certificates, licenses, apprenticeships, badges and more. Thousands of different credentials exist, and more are being added each year. Some of these credentials have high labor market value while others do not. Some are backed by strong quality assurance mechanisms while others are not. While the diversity in educational options and credentials creates many opportunities and serves many purposes, the current credentialing system fails many learners seeking to gain and demonstrate they possess the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to get a good job, keep a job or advance to a better job. The current system has too many dead ends, which make it difficult for learners with different levels of abilities and needs to understand career pathway options and the most direct routes to learning in order to meet their goals, adding time and expense to their journey. Creating a less confusing, high quality credentialing system is a matter of equity for low-skill individuals seeking to climb the economic ladder and of economic competitiveness for the nation seeking to increase the skills of the workforce.

The U.S. needs a dynamic credentials system in which:

- All learning is valued regardless of where and how it is obtained.
- Credentials increasingly are of more consistent high quality and based on learning outcomes and competencies attained.
- The learning outcomes associated with diverse credentials are easy to understand, whether the credential is issued by educators, industry groups or third party organizations.
- Learners can "stack" or "lattice" credentials to incorporate a variety of formal and informal education and training experiences efficiently to open multiple, flexible career pathways.
- Credentials issued by industry are high quality, widely valued and can be interconnected with academic credentials.
- All people can obtain credit and credentials for the skills and knowledge they have obtained through work experience and training and appropriate credit is awarded for learning that is obtained through new delivery systems.
- High-quality credentials provide clear pathways to further education and employment.

Achieving those goals requires looking at all credentials in a unified way that moves beyond isolated silos of institutions, industries and occupations and instead focuses on the learning outcomes and competencies involved.

As employers continually recalibrate their talent development requirements and occupations change, the U.S. needs a credentialing system that combines rigor and agility to produce credentials valued by employers, government, educators, students and job seekers. Such a high quality credentialing system must at the same time embrace the agility of decentralization and meet the needs of the many stakeholders involved in various aspects of credentialing, be grounded in a consistent definition of competency, and incorporate common elements of a competency statement (e.g., knowledge, skills, abilities) that can be used across all types of credentials.

One essential tool for a next generation approach to credentials in the U.S. is to create an **American Credentials Framework.**

What Is the Credentials Framework?

The Credentials Framework is a voluntary communications tool intended to make the thousands of diverse credentials used in the United States easier to understand, compare and connect in order to increase the career and economic mobility of workers. The Framework provides a unifying way to understand the knowledge, skills and abilities underlying degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, badges, and other credentials. The Framework supports the belief that all learning matters, wherever and however it is obtained, and that what is now non-credit and informal learning should become countable towards credentials of value. The Framework also supports the proposition that varied credentials should become more "stackable" within existing and new career pathways.

The Framework provides competency-based reference points that can be used to describe the levels of learning outcomes associated with any credential. The Framework can help increase:

- **Transparency --** The Framework aims to increase the understanding of the underlying outcomes of all credentials and the connectivity between credentials. The equivalences and differences between credentials are made clearer by providing a way to describe all credentials in terms of their relative levels of associated competencies and learning outcomes. The Framework can make it easier for holders of credentials to articulate what they know and can do, helping them when considering further learning, applying for a job, or starting a business. The Framework offers educators and employers a guide to help understand and articulate the levels of knowledge, skills and abilities required to perform successfully in a particular education program or job, as well as the range of credentials that align with those specific requirements.
- **Comparability –**The Framework can help learners make informed decisions about learning and credentialing choices by being able to compare the learning outcomes and competencies associated with various credentials. The Framework can help educators and employers understand the knowledge, skills and abilities a person possessing a given credential offers.

- **Portability –** The Framework provides important support for increasing the translation of learning across various settings by the use of common competency domains and descriptors. It provides underpinnings for development of diverse career pathways, for non-traditional stacking of credentials, and for increased use of credit for prior learning.
- **Economic Impact of Credentials –** The Framework aims to support improved quality and efficiency of informed career and educational decision-making by learners/workers and to help companies increase their ability to use diverse credentials effectively and efficiently within their talent acquisition and development.
- **Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement –** The Framework promotes quality assurance and continuous improvement of credentials by centering focus on learning outcomes and competencies. As credential requirements change in response to shifting education and labor market needs, the level profile for that credential can easily be updated.

The Credentials Framework aims to interconnect academic and industry credentials. To do so, the Framework incorporates the core underpinnings of Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile, which focuses on the expected learning outcomes associated with the associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees. Like the DQP, the Framework's design centers on learning domains and outcomes but the Framework uses language designed to make interconnections with other quality credentials easier. The Framework incorporates applied academics and employability skills defined by employers, including those identified through current work by the National Network of Business and Industry Associations.

The beta version of the Credentials Framework was developed by a team led by Corporation for a Skilled Workforce and CLASP, with input from dozens of experts from colleges, industry, certification/accreditation agencies, and policy organizations. The overall consensus of that input strongly supported continuing development of the Framework, and many of the participants articulated potential value propositions for its use.

Development of the Credentials Framework is part of an international movement to use outcome-based measures as a catalytic tool for increasing the connectivity between academic and occupational credentials. The Framework's design was informed by examination of comparable frameworks being used in other countries, most of which are based on the European Qualifications Framework.

The Credentials Framework is organized around *learning outcomes* and *competencies*. It is structured into eight *levels* of competency-oriented learning outcomes that indicate the relative complexity, and/or depth of achievement and/or the autonomy of the learner in demonstrating the achievement. Each level is explained in terms of competencies broken into the knowledge, skills, and abilities that all learners attaining a specific credential should possess. The Credentials Framework emphasizes the learner's ability to apply knowledge and skills in multiple contexts, including globally diverse environments, and to be engaged in civil, political, social, environmental and economic challenges at local, national and global levels as well as in their employment field.

Next Steps

For the Credentials Framework to become a widely used tool and achieve its objectives, it must be adopted on a voluntary basis by the many stakeholders in credentialing in the United States, including those bodies that provide detailed competencies and curriculum as well as the assessment, instruction, quality assurance and accreditation communities. Substantial work lies ahead. Next steps in development of the Framework include inviting substantially further testing of the Framework, identifying clear value propositions for various types of users, and exploring its fit with other related policy and practice initiatives in concurrent development.

Testing the Framework

Issuance of the forthcoming beta version is being done to invite interested experts and practitioners to examine the Framework in the context of diverse, specific credentials. That input will inform adjustments within the Framework and increase understanding about how different credentials fit within the Framework's levels. Some of the questions to consider include:

- Are the level differentiations of learning outcomes and competencies clear?

- Are the learning domains clear? Are they comprehensive enough?

- What is the value of an aggregate score for a credential, as well as for a profile of the credential's score across the learning domains?

- Are there correlations across the learning domains?

Identifying Value Propositions/Use Cases for the Credentials Framework

During the beta testing phase, Framework developers will be engaging diverse stakeholders in exploring the potential uses and value for an American Credentials Framework. Those who tested credentials and participated in industry panels during the initial development identified a number of significant value propositions they could see from bringing a Credentials Framework to full-scale use in the United States. Some examples from their input include:

- **Reducing costs for both individuals and companies** by enabling better informed decision-making about education and employment choices;

- **Increasing credential attainment** by supporting improved career and educational planning by learners;

- **Integrating academic and employer language and perspectives** – The Commons can help make clearer the potential connectivity between industry and academic requirements and credentials;

- **Increasing the use of common terminology** – By using language intended to span academic and industry approaches, the Commons can help improve communication;

- **Making it easier to cross-walk competencies** among multiple credentials;

- **Encouraging clear articulation of learning outcomes/competencies** associated with courses and programs of study;

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Sample Framework Pages

The following three pages offer a visual example of what is planned to be contained within the beta American Credentials Framework. The first page shows the organizational structure and core definitions of the competency domains (knowledge, skills and personal and social abilities) and on how the level descriptors are framed. The final two pages are examples of those descriptors at two of the eight levels within the Framework.

	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	ABILITIES	
Domain definitions	**Knowledge** describes what an individual knows, understands and can demonstrate in terms of the body of facts, principals, theories and practices related to fields of application (study and work).	**Skills** describe what an individual can do in applying knowledge, completing tasks, and solving problems (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking). Skills can be described in terms of types and complexity and include cognitive, technical, communication, interpersonal and practical skills (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).	**Abilities** describe what an individual can do in applying knowledge and skills in completing tasks and solving problems in a personally and socially responsible manner within specific contexts and environments. The Abilities domain is subdivided into Personal and Social Abilities. • **Personal Abilities** describe the competency required to act in an independent and responsible manner in various situations, to exercise judgment and demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving. Demonstrates the ability to reflect on one's own actions and on the actions of others and to continue to develop his or her own competencies. • **Social Abilities** describe the individual's ability to demonstrate awareness of the behavior of others and differing viewpoints, to communicate with others effectively, and to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds and points of view.	
	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	PERSONAL ABILITIES	SOCIAL ABILITIES
The level requirements and competencies in study and work are described in terms of the degree of: • Adaptability • Complexity • Range • Selectivity	The requirements and competencies are described in terms of: • Depth • Breadth • Dimension	The requirements and competencies are described in terms of: • Critical Thinking and Judgment • Integrative Application • Systems Thinking	The requirements and competencies are described in terms of: • Autonomy • Responsibility • Self-Awareness and Reflectiveness	The requirements and competencies are described in terms of: • Communication • Involvement • Teamwork and Leadership

	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	PERSONAL ABILITIES	SOCIAL ABILITIES
Level 4 Demonstrates competencies for the processing of specialized and complex tasks within a comprehensive field of study or an occupational environment that is subject to change. This requires theoretical knowledge and practical skills to select appropriate principles and procedures and may involve overall supervision.	Demonstrates a comprehensive theoretical and technical knowledge within a field of study or an occupational field to determine solutions to unfamiliar patterns.	Demonstrates the use of a broad range of cognitive and practical skills which facilitate problem solving and the completion of complex tasks. Plans and designs appropriate approaches and processes, evaluates work and learning results. Demonstrates ability to select alternative actions or practices based on observations of reciprocal effects on other functional areas or tasks.	Demonstrates initiative in planning and designing technical, management, or learning functions. Sets own learning and work objectives. Reflects, assesses such objectives and takes responsibility for them. Demonstrates persistence and flexibility in attaining objectives.	Demonstrates advanced interpersonal abilities required in learning and in the workplace, in particular communication abilities to select and transmit effectively methods, technologies and solutions to complex problems to others when subject matter may be moderately sensitive, controversial, or likely to be questioned or challenged. Assists in shaping the work in a group based on the environment and the learning or work situation of such a group while offering ongoing support.

	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	PERSONAL ABILITIES	SOCIAL ABILITIES
Level 5 Demonstrates advanced competencies for the processing of comprehensive tasks assigned within a complex and specialized field of study or occupational activity subject to change. This requires the ability to select and apply appropriate theoretical knowledge and practical skills to perform technical tasks in a broad range of contexts.	Demonstrates integrated and specialized professional knowledge within a field of study or occupational activity. This includes deeper theoretical and professional knowledge, the awareness of the scope, the core theories and practices and the limitations of the field of study or field of occupational activity.	Demonstrates an extended broad range of specialized cognitive and practical skills. Identifies and frames complex problems in selected areas of study and work and distinguishes among ideas, concepts, theories or practical approaches to solve the problem. Plans work processes across learning and work areas. Evaluates such processes, comprehensively considering alternatives and their potential impacts.	Takes responsibility for overall actions and results as well as exercises autonomy within broader parameters. Reflects understanding of different perspectives or approaches within an area of study and work. Undertakes self-directed pursuit of objectives and takes responsibility for such objectives. Reflects and assesses own and externally set learning objectives.	Plans and structures work processes in a collaborative manner, including within heterogeneous groups. Acts in an anticipatory manner while considering the interests and requirements of others. Evaluates the potential consequences for work processes within teams, instructs others and provides well-founded learning guidance. Demonstrates appropriate communication abilities to present complex facts and circumstances and to provide comprehensive transfers of methods and solutions across professional areas in a targeted manner to the recipients.