Making the Future of Alabama Brighter and More Equitable through Credential Transparency

The content in this blog is an excerpt from an underline article in *Forbes*, "*Can Connections Between Data Systems Propel Economic Recovery: Three States Say Yes,*" by Alison Griffin.

This blog is the second in a three-part series exploring how Alabama, Connecticut, and Florida are involved in credential transparency.

Listen to the article here.

Nick Moore shares his thoughts on why credential transparency is important for Alabama's future and the benefits for learners and workers, specifically when it comes to equity.

There are almost 1 million credentials and occupational credentials in the U.S., with each one representing an opportunity to earn valuable skills, advance on a pathway, and enter the workforce. State policymakers and agencies play vital roles in ensuring their residents, employers, and credential providers have the information they need to make informed decisions to boost the economy. Efficient data practices that revolve around increasing transparency about available credentials, their related competencies, and the jobs they lead to are essential to many of the key decisions states must make. But the data used to inform policies and practices are often insufficient and siloed, leading to duplication and frustration.

With Credential Engine's infrastructure — including the Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL) and open-source Credential Registry — states can provide short-term solutions to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing economy and contribute to long-term structural change and innovation. Through credential transparency, state policymakers can take the inefficiencies out of the labor marketplace and provide more efficient and equitable access to actionable information.

Twenty-seven states and regions and two regional consortia of states are working with Credential Engine to create a more transparent credential landscape.

Nicholas Moore, director of the Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Transformation at the Office of the Governor for the State of Alabama, sat down with Alison Griffin, senior vice president at Whiteboard Advisors, to discuss Alabama's work toward credential transparency, and the expected benefits for stakeholders.

What prompted the governor to champion credential transparency in Alabama?

In Alabama, credential transparency can't be separated from credential quality. This work began through Gov. (Kay) Ivey's commitment to increase postsecondary attainment and the labor force participation rate by adding 500,000 credentialed workers by 2025. As with other southeastern states, Alabama's labor force has suffered somewhat since the mid-1990s due to structural changes in the economy. But now that our economy is growing and we're looking to industries like advanced manufacturing, we've got the opportunity to set and reach these big goals.

Relatedly, our goals are also important from an equity imperative. It isn't enough just to set these big goals. We've also had to break it down by region and set goals for each of our special populations. We're working with 16 discrete special populations with the theory that if we serve all of them, then we're going to exceed the attainment and labor force goals.

> *So why credential quality and transparency? Because for a long time, we've been saying that we're going to connect education and the economy, and now we're doing it. We first had to lay a foundation to meet the needs of a demand-, skill-, and competency-based learning and talent-development ecosystem. Now we can start identifying in-demand jobs and connecting people with the credential opportunities they need to get those jobs and ways to keep advancing down that trajectory.*

We created the [Alabama Committee on Credentialing and Career Pathways](#) (ACCCP), which was codified legislatively, with a three-part mission that begins with identifying our regional and statewide in-demand jobs. We've got a five-star rubric that looks beyond the raw demand for jobs. We evaluate whether the job requires a credential or has a wage premium with credentials over a high school diploma. This involves looking at our alumni each year to effectively evaluate.

Then we came up with a competency framework that's the DNA of that job. Because every entity has a different system of classifying competencies and credentials, we came up with the [Alabama Occupational Ontology](#). We're working with Credential Engine, Lumina Foundation, and others to scale and nationalize it so it can be a part of the next iteration of the Higher Education Act and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This allows us to know the DNA of an in-demand job stemming from all of its individual competencies — whether it requires soft skills/employability skills common to every job across the country, industry-specific skills, management skills, and specific required credentials.

The third mission of the ACCCP is developing dynamic career pathways through this new system of coding competencies and credentials. We don't look at these pathways in a linear way; we look at the transferability of skills. This helps identify entry-level, middle skill, etc. to create a career lattice that can help inform someone who wants to transfer their skills from a pathway in community health to medical coding or the insurance industry. It's really about the skill shape and how they relate than it is about just linear progression.

Then the next step was coming up with a way to validate the quality of a credential so we have a 10-step non-degree credential quality framework. Anytime a credential is registered to the Alabama Credential Registry, the technical advisory committee — 16 manufacturing and industry representatives appointed by the governor — conducts a quality review and adds it to the state's compendium of valuable credentials so it may be eligible for WIOA and other education related funding. Alabama was the first state to adopt National Skills Coalition's definition for a non-degree credential, which helped to inform this work.

In terms of transparency, the Alabama Credential Registry allows us to tag a non-degree credential to the career cluster it represents; the relevant pathways; whether it articulates to post-secondary credit; if it is complementary and offers hiring preference against an equally qualified candidate; if it's regional vs statewide; and all of its related competencies. We can also look at the numerous competencies associated with each credential and the frequency that it's listed on job requirements to better understand the overall labor market demand for that competency.

Another part of our transparency process is to set up the Alabama Talent Triad. It has three solutions, beginning with our credential registry, where the state is on track to have 50% of Alabama's credential registered by the end of next year. Next year we want to launch Alabama's skills-based job description generator, which gives employers the ability to use the competencies in the registry to customize and align job requirements and post it on the Alabama Works site.

The third solution involves learning and employment records, digital transcripts, and verified resumes that will allow us to geo-fence and better match talent opportunities. This also gives us the ability to rethink and redesign academic programs. We can unbundle and modularize two- and four-year programs, and create stackable sequences that connect non-degree experiences to traditional degrees.

This work goes along with what Dr. Anthony Carnevale at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce says that people aren't turning their backs on post-secondary education. They're just looking at new modalities of learning. What we're doing is democratizing access to new modalities of learning. We did a good job of turning on the spigot to financial aid in the Higher Education Act, and now we're making sure diverse learners in Alabama — everybody from nontraditional students to adults and people coming back into the workforce from

COVID-19 — have access to the mode of learning that meets their needs. That includes short-term programs, work based learning, or a two-year degree they're doing asynchronously at night.

> *We want to just make sure all learning counts, and credential transparency is the beginning of that. We can't sell wooden nickels to the people. African Americans, minorities in general, and women are overrepresented in Alabama in non-degree attainment — similarly to just about every other state with a significant population of African-Americans residents. It's important that we make sure any non-degree credential earned is of quality, aligned to an in-demand job, leads to self-sufficiency, and also has a pathway to future post-secondary opportunities.*

*D*oing the work of laying down the foundation for prudential quality and transparency is important. It is not sufficient, but it's a necessary first step toward setting up a talent pipeline.

What connection does this work have to Alabama's higher education commission or governing board? How are you holding providers accountable when their credential programs aren't meeting your benchmarks?

We work very closely with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association and the [Alabama Commission on Higher Education](#), which are key partners along with Alabama's Office of Education Workforce Transformation. We also have an institutional representatives group that's meeting to rethink the academic core for the general studies curriculum.

We've got a micro-credential grant program that the institutions are participating in, and ACHE has built in a lot of quality assurance criteria into its future Institutional review. Many of our two-year programs are on our eligible training provider list, and Gov. Ivey has used her authority to ensure that the provider list for WIOA has all our quality assurance criteria.

We're also starting a credit articulation committee, along with a committee on non-degree credential quality assurance and transparency that will work with the ACCCP to vet credentials and develop a credit articulation value for every type of learning experience.

From the consumer standpoint, how do the policies that you've described around credential transparency translate into practice for everyday Alabamians? What does this mean for them when they either try to access a web portal, are working with a career advisor, or are looking through their options?

Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation, said we must ensure that people own and access their learning in the same way they can find a flight —

by giving people ownership of their data and the experience of navigating options. People should be able to bring together all of their various learning experiences over their life and not risk losing them.

In Alabama, 43% of our population is not in the labor force right now. We know that some of them are retired or have disabilities that prevent them from working. But many are facing a situation where their short-term interests are at odds with their long-term interests because they're facing a benefits cliff or some uncertainty about what a pathway would look like.

What this will do is show people how work will pay off over time and lead to self-sufficiency. It will give people a little more grit and persistence because they'll see that they're not just going to be stuck idling away in a $10 an hour job forever. If people can see the pathway from the entry-level job to the middle-skill job all the way to the top, then they'll be more likely to be active. We think of it as an interstate system where our job is to keep the lanes clear and the traffic moving. The individual chooses what exit ramp to take. We're personalizing learning and making sure that the education and training providers have a human-centered design when they're thinking about how to structure programs.

From the employers' perspective, this is about saving time and money. We are getting rid of the analog trial-and-error human resources process. We're not tagging for employers people who don't have the skills needed for the job. Employers also don't have to check references and resumes since they're verified. This saves employers time and money while also creating less turnover. We're creating a more nimble workforce.

What's the work ahead for policymakers in Alabama to ensure that both learners have the information they need and employers are clear about the connection between post-secondary education and industry needs? Also, how are practitioners and leaders in post-secondary education institutions and other providers bought in to support the path Alabama is heading towards?

We need to do four things:

1. Get all of our credentials registered and that we reach a tipping point. That's important for transparency. We need to have our prior learning articulation index fleshed out, as well.
2. Fully implement our talent triad; get our learning and employment records up, and launch the skills-based job description generator by 2022.
3. Make sure employers understand and embrace skills-based hiring practices. We also need to ensure that education and training providers adopt competency-based learning practices. We can't scale one without the other, and they need to be leveled up at scale together.

4. Ensure that this doesn't unfold like the banking system in 1790, where every state and every town has a different legal tender. We need Colorado, Alabama, Indiana, Connecticut, and New Jersey to adopt these standards and bring it to places like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's T3 Initiative, to the Lumina Foundation, the National Skills Coalition and others. We need to show that these are the non-degree quality assurance and transparency standards we'd like to see in WIOA and the Higher Education Act — and actually align the performance standards in the act's reauthorization. Short-term Pell Grant funding is also important if we're going to make this work nationally. Credential transparency — and quality — are really answers to that.

We can't ignore the stackability piece. We can't have people earning some one-off credential in lieu of all other forms of post-secondary learning. This isn't mutually exclusive. This is about stacking it together and just making all learning count. If we can do those four things then great things will happen. But if you take away any of them, then we limit the impact.

To learn more about Credential Engine's state initiatives and how you can get involved, please email Emilie Rafal, Director of Programs for Credential Engine, at erafal@credentialengine.org.