



Facilitating Economic Development in Florida through Credential Transparency

The content in this blog is an excerpt from an [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 [Alabama](#), [Connecticut](#), and [Florida's](#) involvement in credential transparency.



Listen to the article [here](#).

Henry Mack explains why credential transparency is a necessary and valuable educational and workforce strategy for the state of Florida.

With nearly [1 million credentials](#) in the U.S. alone — and with each credential representing an opportunity to earn valuable skills, advance on a pathway, and enter the workforce — state leaders play a vital role in ensuring their residents, employers, and credential providers have the information they need to make informed decisions. But the data used to inform policies and practices are often insufficient and siloed, leading to duplication and frustration.

[Credential transparency](#) is a valuable initiative for states to undertake as they work to boost their economies. As states make key decisions, it's important that they have efficient data practices that increase transparency about available credentials, their competencies, and the jobs they lead to.

Recently, Henry Mack, chancellor for the Division of Workforce Education at the Florida Department of Education, sat down with Alison Griffin, senior vice president at Whiteboard Advisors, to discuss Florida's work toward credential transparency and the many benefits it has for stakeholders.

What prompted the state of Florida to explore credential transparency as a way to address issues or challenges at the intersection of education and employment?

We realized there was a mismatch between supply and demand — or the extent to which the education side is producing the number and kind of individuals needed to

meet both the demands of Florida employers and the anticipated demand as we aim to become No. 1 in workforce education by 2030. To meet that goal, we need accurate data to understand the gap between supply and demand. We also need to have confidence that public K-12 schools and public post-secondary and state universities are meeting employer demand.

Employers and industry leaders helped us see that we needed to better capture these data and visualize them in user-friendly formats. COVID-19 accelerated the need for insights into the number and kind of credentialing programs, and graduates of those programs, to help maintain economic stability and growth throughout the pandemic. Aside from economic gains, we also needed to ensure that Floridians had access to quality training programs so they could enter or change their occupations because of the pandemic. We knew we needed a better data infrastructure to do that.

While our data system was great on many levels, it couldn't accurately or publicly disclose the number and kind of credentials available, and the graduates associated with them. This prompted us to think about credential transparency as a necessary education and workforce strategy.

How does credential transparency support Florida's overall completion agenda? How are those efforts connected?

From the perspective of the individual, whether it is a student or a Florida resident, we want to ensure they make informed choices, that when they enter the education system — especially at the post-secondary level — they're making informed decisions. And that assumes you know the associated skills and competencies of the program you want to enter. What's the likelihood of that program accelerating you to economic self-sufficiency? If the individual knows that, then they're more likely to complete and succeed, which advances our goal to become No. 1 in workforce education by 2030.

This requires the ability of all Floridians to make informed decisions. If credential transparency means that the essential information about credentials — including skills and competencies — are publicly and easily accessible, then the student can make that informed decision. That's tremendously valuable for the state. If Florida is going to continue to invest in public post-secondary education, then taxpayers want to know that we're doing everything we can to ensure their success.

This allows for credentials to be better understood, pursued, and more easily transferred to educational institutions or employers in a verifiable, interoperable format. It helps people complete their programs and meets employer demand. Together, this helps accelerate the well-being of Floridians and speeds their time to economic self-sufficiency, which is what this work is all about.

It has always been a priority of Gov. (Ron) DeSantis to understand and ensure that the education system is doing right by residents and is creating pathways to economic prosperity. It has been both an economic development strategy and an education strategy for the well-being of the individual. We can't think that entry level wages or entry-level credentialing programs are sufficient. We want to encourage higher level credentials, and to do that, credential transparency is very important.

How does the work surrounding credential transparency and interoperable data systems translate to practice for Floridians?

Building a cloud-based interoperable data system allows us to register the credentialing programs offered within the state so people can understand what those programs do. A person can have immediate access to their credential upon earning it and can transmit it to employers. It is revolutionary.

The idea that credentials aren't accessible to the people who own them or that they require a fee to access them is outdated. Imagine you're a student and your credentials are held up because you owe parking tickets at your university and you're now unable — during a pandemic — to get access to your credential so you can get a job in another state.

The fact that credentials are typically restricted and not open-access, that they're not interoperable and the system doesn't allow for the easy transmission of credentials in a verified secured way, is a disservice to the individual and to their ability to become economically self-sufficient or prosperous. It's also a disservice to employers. It's a disservice to the state. It's a disservice to all of us if we're not able to ensure success for that pipeline of talent.

While the notion of interoperability and transparency is complicated, it's also important for the state's systems to be able to talk and to communicate with each other rapidly and securely. It enables access to either a credentialing program or credential that's necessary for employment. I think that's the practical effect — giving individuals ownership. Empowering the individual to own their credentials in that way is a public good, and the state is invested in making it happen.

We're still developing a user-facing tool so people can use the data. We've realized that we have to get our data systems in order first before we can present a public-facing technology solution. There are considerations and there are plans to build tools that give people access, but we have not gotten that far down the journey yet.

The right data quality and the integrity of the data infrastructure didn't exist before we began this initiative. It has been a process of learning about breaking down silos between agencies, between the workforce agencies and the Department of Economic Opportunity and Education.

Who is leading the credential transparency effort in Florida? Where does this work originate?

It began with the governor's [Executive Order 19-31](#) when he was inaugurated in 2019. It established the north star that inspired conversations about how to achieve the state's goals and resulted in an audit of our workforce programs that led to a major piece of legislation — [Florida House Bill 1507](#), which established new aims around workforce and educational data integration.

Thankfully, the legislative mandate accelerated the work, so I would principally credit Gov. DeSantis and the legislature. In terms of who operationalizes it, it's the [Florida Department of Education](#) and me.

What is the work ahead for policymakers to ensure that Floridians have information about education and career pathways?

First, would be developing the public-facing solution to informed choice, and to do so in a meaningful and engaging way. We want to help individuals assess their own knowledge, skills, abilities, values, passions, and understand how they align with potential job opportunities. Then we need to connect those opportunities to real-time training programs in an engaging and user-friendly way starting as early as the fifth- or sixth-grade in career exploration. Policies would be able to help address and accelerate this, both from a funding perspective and by connecting this effort to other incentives and ideas.

The next thing would be to support those programs that have a high return on investment for taxpayers. We need to look at training programs that help accelerate individuals along their path to economic self-sufficiency and a family-sustaining wage. Then we need to figure out how to further incentivize their growth and their potential. The good news is that as a result of this work, we will be able to do just that.

The last policy innovation, perhaps already occurring, is something that I previously mentioned: the interagency collaboration. It has huge potential for economic development and for the well-being of residents. If state agencies are more tightly connected, then we can avoid redundancies and instead create greater efficiencies to ensure that residents have access to everything they need.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me that I didn't ask?

Something that has been so important to the effort is how we align programs to occupations. Typically, states rely on the federal standard occupation codes, as well as the classification of instructional program (CIP) codes. Uniquely, here in Florida

we're developing our own crosswalk to ensure that the skills that programs teach are actually aligned to the occupations that they purport to be training for. This ensures that those programs are offering those skills and also that the in-demand skills of the region are covered.

We've developed a 10-digit CIP so we could look at programs more granularly. Ordinarily, states use six-digit CIPs for a broader classification. We went a little bit more granular. Through this refinement, we're mapping programs to associated occupations. As far as I know, it's unique to Florida because we want precision and accuracy in terms of the linkages we're making.

This is immensely consequential both for the individuals and also for the programs themselves since they'll start to be assessed on their ability to graduate individuals and get them into jobs related to those programs. That kind of matching seems obvious, but it's complicated and a unique aspect of the work we've undertaken.

I also want to highlight the social mobility aspect of this initiative. Economic development here means prosperity for those that don't have access to a pathway. We have about 800,000 children living in poverty. The majority of the heads of household for those children don't have any post-secondary credential. This is important, because you can draw a direct correlation between intergenerational poverty and social immobility to low educational attainment.

We've been faced with this reality for years and it's not getting any better. It has compelled the governor and the legislature to do something about it. Those efforts are connected to why we want to ensure greater access to programs that are transformative for individuals, especially those who have been underserved and the economically disadvantaged. While the public-facing component hasn't yet been developed, we've been funneling millions into recruitment with our Perkins V and WIOA Title II dollars.

The idea is to not wait to do what needs to be done, but to do it all in parallel. This effort around data interoperability and credential transparency has already informed our recruitment efforts as we try to engage these populations in higher education.



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