Rosetta Stone for Credentials: Why We Need Credential Transparency (and How to Get It)

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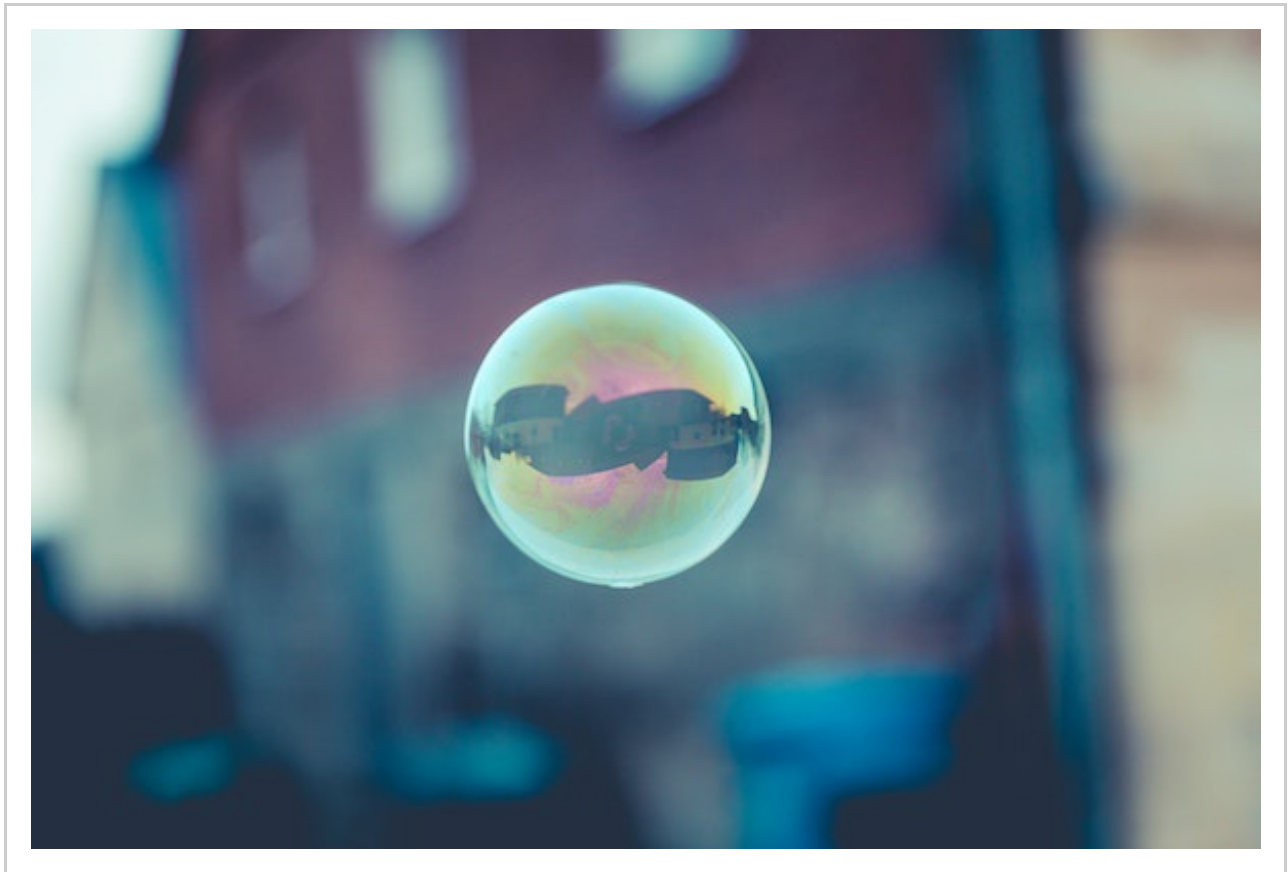
Transparency across the diverse credentialing ecosystem is essential to ensuring students, employers, postsecondary institutions and policymakers have the same understanding of what's on the market and what an individual can truly do.

Degrees are no longer the sole credential of value. With other offerings on the market—from professional certifications to badges and microcredentials—individuals are leveraging a wide array of alternative credentials to communicate their knowledge, skills and abilities. Unfortunately, with so little connection between offerings, it's difficult for anyone to know what these credentials truly mean.

In this interview, Scott Cheney reflects on the issues with the current credentialing ecosystem and shares his thoughts on why we need an infrastructure to help clarify, categorize and illuminate this "Wild West"

The EvoLLLution (Evo): As it stands now, what are some of the core challenges with the credential ecosystem?

Scott Cheney (SC): The most significant challenge facing the current credential landscape is the lack of transparency. There is no consistent, comparable information about credentials, which results in a confusing and highly inefficient marketplace. The process of not only identifying the right credential for a given career path, but also understanding its real cost and value is intimidating for consumers. There are literally hundreds of thousands of credentials available in the U.S., including traditional diplomas and degrees but also non-degree badges, certificates, certifications, and licenses of all types and levels. These credentials are awarded by a diverse set of training providers ranging from traditional institutions to employers.

This lack of credential transparency also leads to a lack of credential literacy:

- Students cannot make informed decisions about the most cost-effective pathways to reach their objectives;
- Employers cannot easily differentiate between credentials for hiring and upskilling employees;
- Educators cannot determine what programs will lead to the best outcomes; and
- Policymakers cannot determine whether the education and training system is meeting the future of work.

The number of credentials continues to grow and diversify as providers work to keep pace with evolving labor market demand, differentiate their programs, and stand out in the crowd to attract students. The constant need for talent and new skills adds to an already confusing environment and only heightens the need for much greater transparency around the cost and value of credentials.

Evo: Why is it so important to create a consistent and transparent taxonomy of today's credentials?

SC: America spends approximately $2 trillion a year on workforce education and training. Currently, the infrastructure available to articulate a credential's value to students, job-seekers or employers is, for the most part, inadequate, outdated or disconnected. There is no transparent marketplace for any of these groups to assess credential value in a standardized way.

We hear all too often that simply using APIs for data sharing and transfer will solve the problem, but that's only part of the solution. Using a common taxonomy, or schema, allows for translation and normalization of data from disparate providers, types of credentials and

even countries—a type of Rosetta Stone, if you like. Without this terminology, every credential is described in its own esoteric language, with no way to compare it to other credentials.

Credential Engine's mission is to create the tools and infrastructures to map and collect credential information. Our Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL) is like a dictionary that offers a common way for people and systems to describe and compare the characteristics of credentials. Once adopted at scale, CTDL will enable consumers to easily understand the specific skills and competencies that they can expect to gain as well as learn more about the organizations that issue each credential. This shared language will also include information about assessments required to earn a credential, whether and how it fits into a pathway for a specific occupation, and the expected wage and earning potential for graduates with that credential.

The Credential Registry is a cloud-based "library" that houses information shared by providers—colleges and universities, licensing entities, certification bodies, employers and many others—about the various terms maintained in the CTDL dictionary.

Together, the Registry and CTDL make credentials and their data searchable by custom applications—built by parties other than Credential Engine—and publicly available to anyone with Internet access.

Our Credential Finder is an example of a prototype application that partners can use to share crucial information about the value of the credentials they issue. Our goal is that other public and private applications will follow the Finder.

Evo: What are the roadblocks preventing the creation of such an ecosystem?

SC: One of the primary roadblocks is simply a lack of awareness about the need for a common schema and centralized repository for public data about credentials and competencies. Credential Engine launched our tools and services (free, by the way) to publish to the Credential Registry and the open web in December 2017, so we are still introducing ourselves—and the issue of credential transparency—to a very large audience in the United States and around the world.

It's going to take leadership from institutional providers as well as new policy solutions at the federal, state and system level to make full and open transparency a reality. The private sector will need to play a major role as well by enabling the creation and exchange of tools, services, applications and resources that meet the needs of students, workers, veterans, employers and educators.

Evo: How can institutional leaders work to bridge those gaps?

SC: Institutional leaders can remove obstacles by encouraging their governing bodies to share their data with Credential Engine so their institutions, and their constituents, can gain a fuller understanding of their institutions' offerings and how they compare to what is available elsewhere.

System and state leaders like Ken Sauer at the Indiana Commission on Higher Education, Blake Flanders at the Kansas Board of Regents, and Michael Thomas at the New England Board of Higher Education are leading large-scale efforts around credential transparency in their states. Led by registrar Rodney Parks, Elon University was the first institution to publish every credential it offers to the registry, and Parks uses the resulting data for analytics, planning and operations. Colorado State University-Global's dedication to serving veterans led Provost Karen Ferguson to make all of its credentials transparent so service members, veterans, spouses and employers could more easily understand CSU-Global's offerings, quality and comparative value.

It's free and easy to publish data about credentials and allow them to be searchable and comparable. Institutional leadership, in addition to political and market leadership, is essential to realizing the goal of full credential transparency for the benefit of individuals, regions, and the economy as a whole.

Evo: What role can external stakeholders—non-profits and government agencies among others—play in creating a consistent and transparency credential ecosystem?

SC: A growing number of states are partnering with Credential Engine to take important steps toward making essential data about all credentials in their state open and transparent. Eleven states—Indiana, New Jersey, Kansas, Michigan, Ohio, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Colorado, and Washington—have already taken this step and others will join soon. The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce is leading on this issue in Southern California. The number of states and regions formally engaging in this work will likely reach 20 by the end of 2019.

In addition to working on publishing credentials, states and a handful of federal agencies are increasingly looking at what can be done through policy to make credentials more transparent.

Credential Engine also recently established a partner program with technology companies including Credly, Ellucian, Dxtera and Brighthive to assist with publishing data. More partners will join soon, and even more are welcome.

A range of vendors, non-profits and associations are working to create and deploy web-based applications that use credential data to serve customers, including EMSI, NOCTI and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Accomplishing the goal of credential

transparency will require the work of a wide range of stakeholders because a wide range of stakeholders stand to benefit. Please join us in this effort.