

Competency as a Currency:
An Update on The Right Signals Initiative
January 2017



PURPOSE:

The Right Signals (TRS) Initiative demonstrates a new credentialing model that recognizes multiple quality credentials to send “the right signals” to employers, students, and colleges about the meaning of these credentials. The initiative targets key credentials including degrees, certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeships, and emerging credentials such as badges. This work is being supported by a grant from Lumina Foundation as part of its commitment to creating a student-centered, learning-based credentialing system in the U.S. that is characterized by key attributes such as common language, transparency, portability, and trust in credentials. To facilitate the work, participating colleges are using a new tool called the beta Credential Framework (bCF). The Framework uses competencies – what the learner knows and is able to do – as common reference points to help understand and compare levels of knowledge, skills and abilities that underlie degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, badges and other credentials. The Framework is intended to connect the dots among diverse credentials by helping to clarify the learning behind credentials, making them easier to compare, and making it possible to translate the learning gained from one credential toward securing another.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is pleased to provide this interim set of findings from The Right Signals initiative. As the work on this project has progressed, AACC has conducted monthly calls with each of the colleges to track their work and address issues as they arise. In addition, AACC, together with colleagues from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), has conducted a series of site visits which are framed around the use of the beta Credentials Framework, both in the technicalities of its application as well as the broader utility of the tool. We note that the work of The Right Signals is tied to a larger constellation of work under the “Connecting Credentials” umbrella and tied in turn to a still larger body of work supporting Lumina Foundation’s strategic goal of “increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025.”

THE SITES INVOLVED ARE:

- College of Lake County (Illinois)
- Columbus State Community College (Ohio)
- Community College of Baltimore County (Maryland)
- Eastern Iowa Community College
- Gateway Community and Technical College (Kentucky)
- Gateway Technical College (Wisconsin)
- Kirkwood Community College (Iowa)
- LaGuardia Community College (New York)
- Lone Star College (Texas)
- Madison Area Technical College (Wisconsin)
- Metropolitan Community College (Missouri)
- Miami Dade College (Florida)
- Mid Michigan Community College
- Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College
- North Central State College (Ohio)
- Polk State College (Florida)
- Rio Salado College (Arizona)
- Snead State Community College (Alabama)
- South Seattle College (Washington)
- South Central College (Minnesota)



BETA CREDENTIAL FRAMEWORK USE:

The 20 colleges selected to be part of the Right Signals Initiative were given a basic charge – connect at least one nontraditional credential with traditional degrees and certificates – and wide latitude of how to proceed. Colleges made diverse choices about what credentials, subject matter, industry, and approach to connections would be meaningful in their context. This approach reflected an understanding that participating schools were already doing work with new credentials and had activity in progress to build upon. A key lesson from that diversity is that colleges are ending up finding ways the beta Credentials Framework is helpful in analyzing and solving many different challenges.

The work of connecting credentials requires bringing stakeholders of the credentials – both academic and business – to be aligned into a dialogue. Those rich discussions are proving to create a “safety zone” in which the process of comparing the assumptions and linkages among the credentials prompts stakeholders to consider learning as it is occurring in many contexts and reflected as competency statements they can reference in the beta Credentials Framework. Thus, they can make comparisons about similar competencies or distinct competencies associated with each credential and align curriculum as needed.

On campuses, conversations about theory, strategy and technical application of the beta Credentials Framework either opened a number of systems changes on campuses. One facet of the tool, therefore, is the impact it seems to have for spawning larger, and often unexpected, discussions that impact the entire institution or system of institutions. On many of the campuses visited, discussions at a system level were related to the review and validation of existing programs and curriculum, as well as the process through which new programs and curriculum are built. This is not to say that conversation about curriculum and program review and development were not already occurring; rather, the beta Credentials Framework served as a tool with which to improve previous college efforts. For example, Lone Star College has adopted the beta Credentials Framework as a mandatory tool in the program development process. Mississippi Gulf Coast College has committed to using the beta Credentials Framework to map all of their General Education courses. Snead State Community College and Polk State College are already driving their work up to the statewide level through working with state education officials in the former case, and in collaboration with other colleges in the latter case.

Critical to using the tool is the competency statement itself. That statement or group of statements under-pins all the work that follows. As a result, colleges have undertaken the fundamental work of developing clarity in using the framework to signal what students know and can do, but are also seeking conciseness and measurability in the underlying competency statements. Colleges are most successful in this enterprise when they cast a broad net in assembling the workgroups, including faculty, staff, curriculum developers, and administrators.

FINDINGS TO-DATE AND COMMON THEMES:

Based on the survey responses, the major finding is that the colleges view competency as a learning currency that can overcome credit hour limitations. Because of this, institutions were able to expand or resolve issues they had not previously been able to resolve. Examples are below.

- The framework helps expand Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and spread knowledge and expertise regarding Prior Learning Assessment (PLA).
- The framework provides a common language. The ability to have cross industry conversations is enhanced as the Framework is applicable to multiple industries (i.e. not just manufacturing or healthcare).
- The work has helped strengthen existing industry relations with the campuses and create new relationships. It has been well received by industry partners who are eager to understand competencies.

In addition, the colleges were invited to submit and tools or resources developed as part of their work. Perhaps most significantly, we are encouraged to see that these institutions recognize competencies as a legitimate learning currency. This is the paradigm we must establish to link learning systems, credentials and employment. Using the beta Credentials Framework to better understand how academic programs are constructed has created a safe space for reexamining assumptions about learning in general, to the benefit of the transparent learning system we envision.

FUTURE WORK:

- There is a desire to create a simplified beta Credential Framework option to share information at a higher level.
- There is a strong need for more stackable credentials and implementation of “soft skills” and critical thinking into curriculum.
- There are many suggestions to alter the framework to customize to campuses by reordering levels, renaming sections to better coincide with campuses diction, and reduce/combine the levels. This may include making different versions for different audiences (i.e. campus vs. industry) and crosswalk them.

In order to ensure close connections to other, ongoing work in the credentialing space, both AACC and CSW participated in the recent Beyond the Transcript convening in Indianapolis (<https://www.luminafoundation.org/csr2025>). While this latter initiative is predominately working with 4-year schools, LaGuardia Community College is involved in both The Right Signals and the transcript project. We noted the following at the convening:

- Only one college is aggregating academic and nonacademic (curricular and co-curricular) into a single transcript. No college is “transcripting” third party validated credentials, badges, licenses, etc. earned.
- In response, there is a clear interest in a single vessel/record/tool as a lifetime record going forward. There is growing interest in who houses it and collects it for evidence. Further, how does it go beyond what is functionally provided within the academic environment?
- The transcript project showed clear leadership involvement and we have built that into the TRS activities. Utilizing the presidents and having their influence and perspective embedded within the group is critically important.

The work with The Right Signals has started conversations on how to leverage the beta Credentials Framework efforts more effectively with other parallel credentialing initiatives like these new learner records (see LaGuardia Community College).

CALL TO ACTION:

For all colleges, regardless of their involvement in The Right signals, AACC, Lumina Foundation and the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce are confident in making the following suggestions:

- 1) Create project teams to draft and even implement credential transparency initiatives using competency frameworks that engage staff, faculty, and students collectively.
- 2) Study the beta Credentials Framework and associated guidebook to develop a campus-specific action plan.
- 3) Review tools from the 12 sites to receive visits and consider how to leverage those as stimuli for accelerating local efforts.

ABOUT AACC

As the voice of the nation's community colleges, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) delivers educational and economic opportunity for more than 12 million diverse students in search of the American Dream. Uniquely dedicated to access and success for all students, AACC's member colleges provide an on-ramp to degree attainment, skilled careers and family-supporting wages. Located in Washington, D.C., AACC advocates for these not-for-profit, public-serving institutions to ensure they have the resources and support they need to deliver on the mission of increasing economic mobility for all. www.aacc.nche.edu

ABOUT LUMINA FOUNDATION

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Our goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy. www.luminafoundation.org

ABOUT THE CORPORATION FOR A SKILLED WORKFORCE

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) is a national nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to connect workers with good jobs, increase the competitiveness of companies, and build sustainable communities. For more than 24 years, we have been an effective catalyst for change. We identify opportunities for innovation in work and learning and provoke transformative change in policy and practice. We have worked with dozens of workforce investment boards, state and local workforce agencies, community-based organizations, foundations, federal agencies, and colleges to create lasting impact through their collaborative action. www.skilledwork.org

WORK PLAN EXAMPLE:

Columbus State Community College will:

- place two full programs - Early Childhood Education & Medical Laboratory - through the credential mapping process
- ascertain differences in clinical versus program delivery professions in their credentialing processes by working with one Human Services and one Medical STEM program at the degree, certificate and course level
- have the trained faculty provide a “train the trainer” function for other Academic Divisions (Business/Engineering & Arts and Sciences) on curricular mapping using the Lumina model leading to analysis of current credentialing offered by unit (e.g., badge, cert, degree)
- provide faculty based training, direction and recommendations of credentialing based in college based grant generated data, and results from other participating institutions through the results provided by The Right Signals

PHASES OF WORK EXAMPLE:

<p>Polk State College - FL</p>	<p>April - June 2016 <i>Phase I</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RFP to identify faculty leads for the relevant courses • Begin profile of the Engineering Technology OEEE program • Solicit CSW for guidance specific to our project • Break down math and science courses to competencies and course alignment <p>July - September / October 2016 <i>Phase II</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profile math and science Gen Ed courses using the Beta Credentials Framework and adapt the courses to the OEEE modules • Complete profile of the Engineering Technology OEEE program • Develop the OEEE modules for Gen Ed courses to comply with Quality Matters standards and submit to QM for review • Profile the MSSC CPT industry certification using Beta Credentials Framework 	<p>October - December 2016 <i>Phase III</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate math and science modules into the appropriate sequence within the Engineering Technology OEEE program (using the Profiling Applications 3 and 4) 	<p>January - May 2017 <i>Phase IV</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Math and Science implementation of courses as pilot courses in the Spring 2017 term • Submit proposals for modularized math and sciences course to curriculum review committee for Fall 2017 implementation 	<p>June - September 2017 <i>Phase V</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the success of the course objectives in the re-designed Gen Ed courses and its alignment with Engineering Technology OEEE program. • Full implementation of modularized Gen Ed courses aligned with Engineering Technology OEEE program
---------------------------------------	---	---	---	--