Higher Ed Policy in the COVID Era

Accelerating Quality Credential Pathways

Key Takeaways

Responding to the COVID-19 health crisis and pandemic-induced economic recession provides a fresh opportunity to build an approach to short-term credentials that is truly centered on quality and equity. To ensure these programs reduce inequities rather than perpetuate or intensify them, four aspects must be assured:

Quality must be at the forefront. Any program's benefits—to students and employers—must be clearly defined, and employers must validate programs' value and effectiveness.

Programs must be made accessible. Funding for programs should be readily available, and thoughtful outreach campaigns should be used to market them.

Programs—and the credentials they offer— should be stackable and provide long-term employment opportunities.

Outcomes data should be collected, disaggregated, shared publicly, and used to inform program decisions.

State Policy Priorities

The following priorities are high-level guiding principles.
For more detailed questions to inform state policy considerations, see the Overview section.

- Leverage short-term credential programs for populations facing the highest unemployment rates.

- Monitor equitable program participation and outcomes by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status.

- Establish a statewide definition of program quality and mechanisms for enforcement.

- Ensure programs are effectively promoted to those most in need, providing transparent and easily consumable information on quality and outcomes.

- Prioritize programs that align to in-demand jobs and result in transferable credits aligned with relevant degree pathways.

- Require programs that receive state funding to provide for students' basic needs—from technology access to food and housing.

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has decimated the United States economy and left a record number of individuals unemployed. In slightly under five months, more than 54 million people applied for unemployment for the first time, while the economy contracted by 33 percent, the largest dip in history. While the impact will likely be short-term for some career fields, for others, hastened automation will restructure the economy and permanently eliminate many jobs. In other fields, such as hospitality, COVID-19 dealt such a harsh blow that recovery is not expected until 2023 or beyond.

These economic challenges compel us to forge new pathways to high-quality credentials. Such pathways can provide short-term learning aligned to in-demand jobs, helping individuals return to work as soon as possible while offering clear routes to further learning in the future.

The economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt unequally; therefore, equity must be a central consideration in advancing these quality credential pathways. For example, recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed Latina women have the highest level of unemployment among all groups. The data also showed a more than five percentage point difference in the number of Black men unemployed relative to white men. Immigrants, young adults, and those without postsecondary credentials also have been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 recession.

For states, an investment in building quality short-term credential pathways will pay dividends. States have gradually increased their investment in short-term credentials, but it remains a complex area of state policy, and the sheer number of credential types and providers complicates efforts to ensure transparency regarding program quality and outcomes. That said, the current crisis should lead states to wade further into these murky waters. Short-term credentials are not the only solution, but if appropriately leveraged, they can play a key role in recovery by aligning workers to jobs. Their affordability and short-term nature make them particularly useful tools as states grapple with the enormous economic and social impacts of COVID-19.

Essential Policy Questions

It will take a great deal of focused effort to build and expand quality credential pathways. Here are some policy questions state policymakers and institutional leaders can use to guide and assess their ongoing efforts.

Equity: To ensure short-term credential programs provide equitable benefits to those most in need, consider:

1. Which populations are experiencing the highest unemployment rates?

2. Do program access and outcomes differ by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status?

3. Are any groups of students disproportionately pursuing programs that result in lower earnings or reduced job security?

Quality: To provide for consistent quality of programs and protect students' valuable time and resources, consider:

1. How is the quality of short-term credentials being measured and monitored?

2. Do potential program participants have a clear understanding of program quality and anticipated career outcomes?

3. Are programs stackable, leading to additional credentials if students desire them?

Access: To reach those most in need of the benefits that short-term credential programs provide, consider:

1. How is information about these programs being shared, particularly with the recently unemployed?

2. Are there distinct communications efforts targeted to reach underserved populations?

3. Is funding available to ensure that those with limited finances can participate?

Workforce: To ensure that short-term credentials lead to employment for participants, consider:

1. How has COVID-19 affected employer needs within the state?

2. Which industries have been most affected and expect the most workers in need of retraining?

3. How are programs aligned to in-demand jobs?

4. How is information about workforce alignment embedded in the state's definition of quality?

Student Supports: Student success in short-term credential programs requires more than access. To ensure students have what they need to succeed, consider:

1. Do students have access to the resources they need to succeed, such as broadband, computers, and advising?

2. Are programs sufficiently flexible and supportive to meet the needs of a variety of learners?

3. Does the state definition of short-term credential quality include expectations related to student support?

Promising Policies and Practices

The following examples of states' efforts can serve as valuable guidance for state policymakers as they navigate ongoing changes:

Use CARES Act Funding to Increase Investment in Short-Term Credential Programs

• In Indiana, the Governor's Workforce Cabinet announced a student-centered "Rapid Recovery for A Better Future" plan that uses $50 million from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to double its investment in two short-term credential programs. An easily navigable website was launched for Hoosiers to walk through a step-by-step process based on their needs and interests.

Align Funding with In-Demand Jobs

• Ohio's "TechCred" grant predates COVID-19, but the laser-like focus on the most in-demand credentials (those that are industry-recognized and technology-focused) increases the likelihood of strong, long-term employment opportunities for those who earn the certificates.

Partner with Employers

• Virginia's FastForward program was designed through close collaboration between employers and program providers who worked together to develop a list of eligible credentials. Most graduates have seen significant wage gains, from 25 to 50 percent.

• The San Diego Workforce Partnership and the Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Workforce Innovation Network, which predate COVID-19, are strong models for what integrated partnerships between employers and providers can look like.
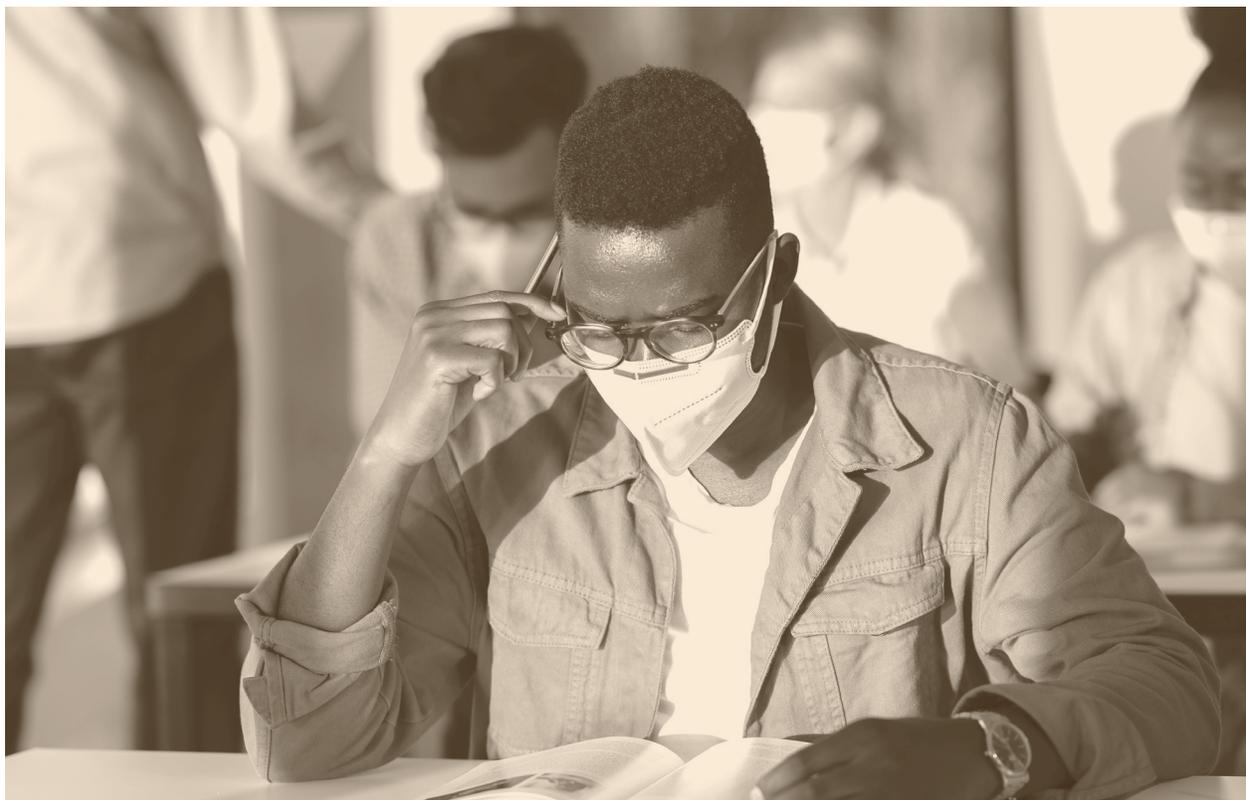
Data for Decision-Making

State policymakers should continue to monitor state and institutional data—disaggregated when available—to assess progress and consider programs' equity implications. Additional indicators and resources that state policymakers should consider include:

Employment Statistics: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' "COVID-19 Questions and Answers" page explains how COVID-19 has affected a variety of federal employment-related statistics. This includes development of new tools, such as the Business Response Survey to the Coronavirus Pandemic, which attempts to capture employer changes such as the number of workers employed, hours worked, and wages paid.

Household & Employer Needs: Several new tools from the U.S. Census Bureau capture more real-time information about the impact of COVID-19. These include a "household pulse survey," which may be useful for thinking about target populations for short-term credentials, and a "small business pulse" survey, which provides additional context on employer needs.

Vulnerable Jobs: The Brookings Institution's "Visualizing Vulnerable Jobs Across America" tool was designed to give cities and states better insight into how COVID-19 is likely to affect local workers in the short term. It assesses a state or city's vulnerability based on the number of low-wage jobs without health benefits and the employment sectors within which those jobs fall.

Certificates Earned: The National Center for Education Statistics provides a high-level look at the trend line of postsecondary certificates earned used data using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Several organizations have created resources to help state leaders develop strong practices for building quality credential pathways:

Quality: The National Skills Coalition has developed a definition of quality that states can use and adapt for their work. The coalition has also prepared a report on using "pathway evaluators" to assess the strengths of various pathways and a report outlining several online dashboards that states have used to monitor and communicate progress related to short-term credentials. Also, a task force convened by Lumina Foundation released a 2019 report featuring a model that states and institutions can use to ensure credential quality and produce more equitable outcomes.

Tailored Guidance: Education Strategy Group has created an online toolkit to guide states through the step-by-step process of helping more learners earn high-value credentials. This includes a self-assessment tool to help states gauge their current status and map out next steps.

Credential Comparisons: Credential Engine houses a Credential Registry, an inventory of existing credentials that allows for cross comparisons.