Stackable Credentials: An Approach for Middle Jobs and Beyond

Higher education is regularly confronted by shifting economic and societal trends that require thoughtful reaction. Two such current trends are (1) the decline of the American middle class and (2) the changing needs and demands of employers, paired with changes in student behavior. Indeed, the April 2012 report of the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges clearly noted that stagnant income levels and declining education levels are imperiling the American Dream.1

At the same time, students are looking for accelerated pathways into the workplace, and employers are looking for defined skill-sets to fill what Anthony Carnevale and his colleagues at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce describe as “middle jobs.” These jobs were once accessible to high school graduates. In the changing economy, these jobs now require education beyond high school. Carnevale defines middle jobs as those that require postsecondary education below the baccalaureate level and have an earnings threshold of $35,000 per year (or 185 percent of the poverty level for a family of four in 2011).2

The 21st-Century Commission report called on community colleges to reimagine and reinvent institutional roles. One approach that addresses these trends is the development of stackable credentials. The idea of stackable credentials is to form a pathway for students to acquire credentials along a trajectory that can lead to a baccalaureate and beyond but that has exit and entry points designed in a way to allow students to pick up wherever they left off en route to the next level of achievement. Of course, the notion of stackable credentials is not new. Associate’s degrees leading to bachelor’s degrees leading to master’s degrees are stacked credentials. The wrinkle in today’s approach is that the initial stacks are sliced thinner, typically starting with an industry certification or the completion of a course sequence that provides the student with a marketable skill.

Higher education should act in concert with industry to ensure that standards of quality and rigor are attached to any certification. The stack must be built on a solid foundation; without clear standards, we do harm to both the student and the workforce. Although a number of industries have set clear and rigorous standards for certifications (e.g., oil and gas, information technology), as this approach expands, additional certifications should continue to meet high standards. The acquisition of these initial certifications will enable students to enter the workforce with skills that will allow them to earn middle-job wages. This will be good for the students and good for the economy. But if these individuals want to advance in the workplace, they will need additional skills and credentials.

To effectively reengage and reenroll a student into the next level of certification requires that higher education institutions and faculty design a curriculum and process to meet the needs of students. In some cases, rather than building on traditional course units, institutions might find it more appropriate to design the curriculum using a competency-based approach. Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University are exemplars of this approach. Additionally, as students reenter education from the workplace, they will have acquired skills beyond their certification. Institutions can help students accelerate through the process of acquiring the next credential by integrating prior learning assessment when students rematriculate.

A second, and perhaps more critical, design piece is a strong system of student advising. Although there are great benefits to the student and the economy in acquiring a middle-job certification, the benefits can grow with additional education. Institutions will need to make students aware of their options for future educational opportunity while they acquire their initial certification. Institutions should maintain connections with students who exit, to increase the likelihood of reenrollment. Institutions will also need a solid support infrastructure for returning students.

The move to stackable credentials raises a number of policy concerns for both students and institutions. For students, financial aid is a critical component in their ability to return to college. Some aid programs have built-in clocks that start ticking with the first course. Policy-makers should consider a stopwatch approach for these students, provided a student...
leaves the institution in good standing and with a credential in hand. For institutions, the accountability measures used by many states and by the U.S. Department of Education do not count industry certifications as “student success.” Institutions should be given credit where it is due, and accountability systems should be amended to include solutions that benefit the student and the economy.

Sheri Ranis, Strategy Director at the Lumina Foundation for Education, has said that “proof or evidence of learning” described as “learning accumulation” should be the measure of student success. One approach to this measure is the development of stackable credentials. This approach can be a critical tool in the redesign of higher education to help many of our students live the American Dream.

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