



Summary of Summit on Language Used in the Credentialing Space: Big Concepts, Many Terms, Multiple Perspectives, Different Voices

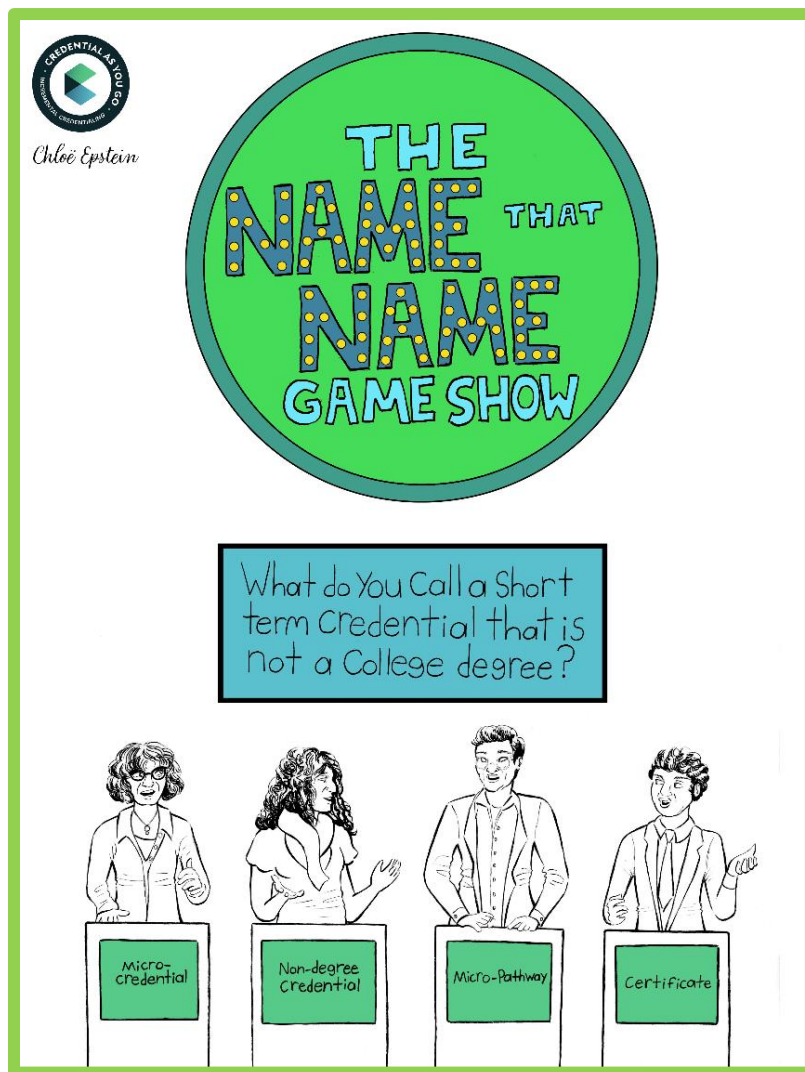
On March 16, 2022, [Credential As You Go](#) sponsored a virtual *Summit on Language Used in the Credentialing Space: Big Concepts, Many Terms, Multiple Perspectives, Different Voices* attended by 120 participants. Holly Zanville (CAYG) and Julie Uranis (UPCEA) set the stage for the discussions. Zanville noted that many concepts and terms in the learn-and-work ecosystem are new to the field and have no established definitions. Many are trending terms and concepts, not well understood. Others are used in different ways, depending on stakeholder perspectives and contexts. CAYG prepared a document that focuses on the terms, concepts, and the context related to incremental credentialing for the Summit, entitled [Working Draft: Definitions and Use of Key Terms in Incremental Credentialing](#). Criteria were established to collect and select terms with a main aim to capture diverse and nuanced voices from employers, research reports, college and university websites, media articles and blogs and dictionaries and glossaries. The working draft includes 73 terms that fall within 42 term areas and 168 entries. Entries come from 61 different organizations or individuals.

Julie Uranis noted that UPCEA represents higher education institutions engaged in these efforts, particularly professional and continuing education units at colleges and universities. One of UPCEA's committees focuses on typology, terminology and standards, and this work is directly relevant to CAYG's work on identifying the nuances in the variety of definitions in credentialing. The UPCEA group has observed this may not be the best time to try to lock in a set definition of particular terms; and that curating definitions is not only about adding definitions but also dismissing definitions that do not align with common thought or practices.

UPCEA is recommending that member institutions consider a "continuum of credentials" in creating order and sense-making for their institution. No institution is an island and creating order for one institution using concepts and terms that are meaningful and generally accepted will move us further towards more universal definitions. The key is transparency. We can call these things anything we want as long as we define them and put them in context. So what you call a short-term, non-degree credential, whether it's a microcredential, badge or certificate, is not as important as declaring that it is a short-term non-degree credential. Describing it as such, allows all of us to do some cross walking of these credentials for now, until we have a more common use of terms.

Uranis offered an example from Stanford University's School of Continuing and Professional Development. At its website, Stanford shares the degree of rigor for their credentials, the validation of learning and where credit and non-credit begins and ends. This type of information around pathways and continuum of credentials is increasingly important.

Before moving into the three panel discussions (Credentials and Pathways; Equity, Inclusion, Fairness, and Competencies, Skills, Learning Outcomes) Zanville shared a cartoon that highlights the confusion around terms.



The Credentials and Pathways panel focused on key credential and pathways terms, who defines the terms, and where and how they are being used. Moderated by Amelia Parnell (NASPA), the panel included Karen Elzey (Workcred); Deb Everhart (Credential Engine); Paul Gaston (Higher Education Consultant); and Cynthia Proctor (SUNY System). Panelists noted the sheer volume of terms and types of credentials and described ways this cacophony is adding confusion for students, higher education systems, and employers. This proliferation of credentials is creating obstacles for learners, particularly those who don't have access to effective advising and counseling, to navigate the system and identify which program(s) will help them achieve their goals. Higher education systems are also challenged to utilize consistent terminology in describing their credentials. This leads to confusion about the relationships among credentials. The lack of clarity impacts the employer community as well. They struggle to differentiate what is behind one credential or another. Panelists pointed to the use of policy, PR, and technology as tools to begin address the challenges, create credential transparency, and carve a way forward.

The Equity, Inclusion, Fairness panel explored the definition and implications of these terms, and factors that make credentials more equitable and inclusive. Moderated by Audeliz (Audi) Matias (SUNY Empire State College), this panel was comprised of Christine Barrow (Education Strategy Group), Wendi Copeland (Goodwill Industries International), Dhanfu Elston (Complete College America), and Tina Gridiron (ACT Center for Equity and Learning). The panelists defined the terms. *Equity* is what we measure so that we know we are making a difference. *Inclusion* is the environment created for the work to happen. *Fairness* is the work we do to ensure that all the intended and unintended biases are addressed in the design. Panelists encouraged the audience to focus on what it is we're trying to solve around disparities and how that end game affects educational opportunities, workforce opportunities, social mobility specifically for some of the most minoritized student populations, and social identities. Black and brown students are the least represented in the fastest growing, highest paying jobs in the country. To address that problem, panelists emphasized the need to leverage data and create systems and structures focused on credentials of value leading to careers where learners earn high wages and thrive.

The Competencies, Skills, Learning Outcomes panel considered how these terms are used and why it matters. Moderated by Melissa Goldberg (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce), this panel was comprised of Naomi Boyer (Education Design Lab), Sarah DeMark (Western Governors University), Amber Garrison Duncan (Competency-Based Education Network), and Nan Travers (SUNY Empire State College). Panelists noted that these terms mean different things to different stakeholders and are sometimes used interchangeably. Institutions are faced with determining whether learning is a skill or competency. They also have learning outcomes linked to accreditation, adding to the confusion for faculty especially. Context is key in terms of defining these terms. Panelists emphasized that while we talk about what people know and can do, we should also be talking about integrating the learning, regardless of the environment in which learning is gained. It's imperative to work on this language because we're creating a differential by our language, creating inequities in the way we're talking about learning. And there needs to be an accepted unit of translation to ensure different parties can communicate with one another—so learners pursue the right credentialing programs, educators create programs that reflect the needs of learners and employers, and employers understand what skills and competencies are being imparted to learners.

Following the panel discussions, Julie Uranis, Larry Good, Holly Zanville, and Nan Travers identified key takeaways and implications. All the panels underscored ways in which we're experiencing major problems in the use of language, with language defined as 1) the terms, 2) the concepts behind and related to the use of terms, and 3) the context in which these are used. Though there are many names for terms being used, "synonyms" are not the problem. The problem is lack of understanding that there are synonyms for the same definition. Issues of complexity in effective communications are growing as more terms appear on the learn-and-work landscape. These issues impact both undergraduate and graduate level education, with many developments in credentialing occurring throughout the higher education system. Important developments, of course, are underway among the third-party sector of the ecosystem that is awarding credentials as well. Furthermore, many stakeholder groups are impacted by the confusions around language: learners, higher education, employers,

creditors and quality assurance agencies, workforce boards, researchers, and policymakers.

Several issues were identified at the Summit including the following six very significant ones:

Whether to codify language use. There is a lack of understanding and transparency in the language we're using. Resources like the "definitions" document prepared for the Summit and others will be helpful in this context. There is tension between those driving for a codified definition vs. those who recognize that in our dynamic learn-and-work ecosystem, codified terms are not likely to occur. We should acknowledge the imprecision in language while recognizing the growing need for clear communication among the many stakeholder audiences; and in our communications, identify how we're using terms and concepts and the context with the goal of transparency and capacity for translation by our audiences.

Defining language fairly and effectively through diverse voices. There is a lack of inclusion of all needed voices contributing to the language of credentialing. *Positive asset framing* is needed in the design of credentials as well as in our communications (in presentations and documents). Language and its definitions have power and implications for an inclusive and fair credentialing system. What we call things and how terms are used impacts equity, inclusion, and fairness.

Impacts of transparency on particular stakeholder groups. There are unique impacts caused by confusion and lack of transparency in language use for particular stakeholder groups. Employers are especially impacted by language as candidates for jobs present with resumes, transcripts, and/or digital tools that are not readily transparent to employers. Learners are impacted by the confusion in the credentialing language, the different terms used and even what we mean by learners; e.g., learners are treated as though they are not students and students as though they are not learners in the ways terms are used but we know adults can be both.

Role of policy in shaping language use. Policy-setting plays a key role in defining terms, concepts, and context at both the federal and state levels. State statute and legislative budget notes, as example, can set the language in place for providing resources and permissions to public higher education institutions regarding the types of credentials they may offer. Once language is set in policy, there is frequently *interpretation* that follows by state and campus higher education leaders. One of the implications is to recognize policy as a driver of change for state and campus implementation of incremental credentialing.

Growing reliance on technology to capture and verify language use. Common language needs to be spelled out to those who have not thought about the relationship of technology to credentialing. There is a lack of use of machine-readable language, which if used, could open doors to greater transparency, data interoperability, and use of a more common vernacular. Technology advances and tools are a major part of the language issues. Incremental credentials will need to be defined by faculty and coded along with degree and certificate information in campus information systems so that digital records can be developed that are inclusive of all student learning. This data can then be used to build

Learning and Employment Records (LERs), e-wallets, and other self-sovereignty tools students are seeking to verify their learning.

Impact of value on definitions. In the credentialing arena, what learning we assess as “valuable” shapes our language. As soon as we put a value on something, we’ve defined it in a certain way that then has power over something else. As example, when we assess badges and add them to learner records, the term and concepts around badging become important to the credentialing language. As more and more terms enter our vernacular, they are entering because some groups are valuing them. The assessment and verification of learning then is an important part of shaping the language of credentialing.

CAYG’s first Summit underscores the confusions over the use of language.

CAYG will sponsor additional Summits on these issues and encourages feedback to improve the [Working Draft: Definitions and Use of Key Terms in Incremental Credentialing](#) document that will reside at the CAYG website.

Videos of the Summit panels are available at: [Credential As You Go - YouTube](#)