

# Credential As You Go Summit

## Higher Education Quality Assurance & Incremental Credentialing



**CREDENTIAL  
AS YOU GO**

INCREMENTAL CREDENTIALING

February 2023

## Overview

Credential As You Go hosted the Summit on *Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Incremental Credentialing* featuring a panel representing institutional accreditation (Higher Learning Commission, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges), specialized accreditation (Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education), and state department and systems of higher education (Colorado, New York). Registrants totaled 412 for the online February 1, 2022, Summit.

The discussion focused on ways accrediting bodies support incremental credentials, and what institutions and state systems of higher education are doing to ensure quality and address accreditation requirements in incremental credentialing. Key takeaways include:

- There are growing numbers of credential providers in addition to higher education institutions in the marketplace. Increasingly, this raises questions around quality control and trust, especially for students, higher education institutions, employers, policymakers, and others.
- There is a lack of information about the rapidly changing world of credentialing and how to make curricular changes on the ground—and how and when to work with accreditors around their standards for quality programmatic change.
- Accreditors are being called on to respond to questions around quality assurance for all types of credentials, even though they have traditionally focused on degree programs. Non-credit and smaller credentials are challenging accreditors to respond to the growth and offerings of these credentials.
- It is a myth that institutional accreditors and specialized accreditors are blocking innovation in credentialing although there is a widespread perception, especially by faculty, that accreditation organizations are blocking change.
- There are blockages in innovation stemming from traditionally structured higher education systems, especially from federal policy on financial aid and state policy on credit hour budget formulas rather than competency-based formulas.
- Federal policy will impact the credentialing marketplace in major ways if Short-term Pell is approved.
- State policy is a major driver in credentialing change, providing enabling legislation and incentives to drive innovation by credential providers, especially public institutions. However, when funding is not coupled with policy, resulting initiatives can be slowed down.
- Using policy, institutions and state systems of higher education can move incremental credential programs forward, based on experiences in Colorado and New York. The latter, for example, has system policy that enabled more than half of SUNY's 64 institutions to develop over 500 microcredentials. This type of policy work does require engaging accreditors, and ensuring that institutions understand what is required to keep accreditors informed about substantive changes in curriculum.
- We are on the precipice of building a potentially fairer credentialing system for students and one that is more responsive to employers' needs.
- There are concerns about equity—we run the risk of tracking individuals into certain pathways and we must be cognizant of that. Every student in a pathway should have access to multiple options to expand their social and economic mobility options.

- Five years from now, the panel predicted many credentialing changes around non-degree credentials will be integrated into the marketplace.
- There are many national initiatives in the credentialing space. Key groups like UPCEA are working to advise their members. More events like these are needed because of the confusing and dynamic marketplace and these events are an opportunity to tease out the nuances of what is happening in the changing credentialing landscape.

The Summit discussion is captured in the following Summary that has been abridged and edited from the recorded transcript.

A recording of the 90-minute Summit can be viewed [here](#).

A number of links were provided by panelists and audience members to support questions and discussions in the Summit chat:

### **UPCEA**

- UPCEA, association for postsecondary leaders in professional, continuing, and online leaders, has a Hallmark document that addresses quality in non-credit programs at postsecondary institution: <https://upcea.edu/credentialhallmarks/>
- Institutions have been in the space for a very long time: <https://moderncampus.com/pdfs/shifting-paradigms-understanding-institutional-perspectives-on-microcredentialing.pdf>
- UPCEA has a white paper on non-credit to credit pathways: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Rq5dgm4Y4DJFwFtCsTBmbLnxOI6oNtk2/view>
- UPCEA authentic assessments: [www.upcea.edu](http://www.upcea.edu); <https://upcea.edu/resources/#hallmarks>
- In UPCEA presentation see graphic for stackable credentials: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1anp8914xpyWwrXw6PDYKFSpCeZTR4U2f/edit?usp=sharing&oid=106302559633455497677&rtpof=true&sd=true>

### **Higher Learning Commission**

- Roundtable thought paper on trends at Higher Learning Commission: <https://download.hlcommission.org/initiatives/2022StakeholdersRoundtablePapers.pdf>  
<https://download.hlcommission.org/initiatives/2022StakeholdersRoundtablePapers.pdf>
- Higher Learning Commission: students need to know what questions to ask: <https://studentguide.hlcommission.org/>
- Higher Learning Commission 's shift to students under "Vision" section of strategic plan: [https://download.hlcommission.org/EvolveStrategicPlan\\_2021\\_INF.pdf](https://download.hlcommission.org/EvolveStrategicPlan_2021_INF.pdf)
- Higher Learning Commission on Testing Student Success - stop out, job out, drop out: [https://download.hlcommission.org/initiatives/TestingStudentSuccessData\\_2019.pdf](https://download.hlcommission.org/initiatives/TestingStudentSuccessData_2019.pdf)

### **Other**

- Credential Engine's most recent reports are available here: <https://credentialengine.org/resources/counting-u-s-secondary-and-postsecondary-credentials-report/>
- "Creating a High Quality Microcredential Program" includes SUNY policies and related documents: [www.suny.edu/](http://www.suny.edu/)

- NSC quality credentials framework is starting place for a state's stackable credentials work: <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/resource/publications/expanding-opportunities-defining-quality-non-degree-credentials-for-states/>
- What is Open Recognition? <https://blog.weareopen.coop/what-is-open-recognition-anyway-9f38ec1f8629>)
- Moving away from the credit hour: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED598333.pdf>
- Cracking the credit hour: <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/cracking-the-credit-hour.pdf>
- Lumina Foundation REACH Collaborative Website: <https://reachcollab.org/>
- 60-year curriculum/Lifelong learning 2.0: <https://www.continuum.uw.edu/about-us/the-60-year-curriculum>

## Summit Summary<sup>1</sup>

**Holly Zanville** from [Credential As You Go](#) opened the Summit by noting that Credential As You Go hosted a 2022 [Summit on language issues in credentialing](#).<sup>2</sup> That Summit covered issues around, 'what we call the wide array of credentials we're seeing more of', and 'why are we calling them what we are without a consistent standard around naming', which leads to questions about 'what credentials mean and can we trust them?' These questions come from employers, students, credential providers like colleges and universities, policymakers, and quality assurance entities like the institutional and the specialized accreditors.

This 2023 Summit delved into issues around quality assurance and incremental credentials. A panel of experts from institutional accreditation, specialized accreditation, and state systems of higher education who are already participating in major credentialing efforts spoke to these issues. **Nan Travers** from Credential As You Go brought questions and issues identified in the robust audience chat to the panelists following the panel presentation.

**Barbara Gelman-Danley**, president of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), served as moderator for the panel:

- **Belle Wheelan**, President, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- **Angela Kennedy**, Chief Executive Officer, Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIM)
- **Deb Moeckel**, Assistant Provost for Assessment and Community College Education at State University of New York (SUNY)
- **Kim Poast**, Chief Student Success & Academic Affairs Officer, Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE)

### How ready are accreditors to address the changing credential landscape?

**Barbara:** The HLC has been working on the changing landscape for quite a while, especially on 'what do credentials mean?' We commissioned research and have been studying annual trends—the trends are going way up as far as the role of credentials. As Chair of the Credential Engine Board, there are amazing statistics coming out—there are over 1 million unique credentials in the U.S., 350,000+ in postsecondary education. The non-academic provider numbers are over 600,000 and secondary schools are approaching 60,000. When you put all that together, it's very clear that we all need to stay on top of what is going on with credentials.

**Belle:** Readiness depends on the accreditor and how many of their institutions are involved in implementing credentials, either on the credit or non-credit side of the house. It depends on whether there are programs already in place for which the institution has been approved and the credentials are merely a piece of that approved program. It depends on whether it's a brand-new certificate or other type of credential—and whether the institution would have to go through the substantive change process. So, although it depends, the answer is yes, I think we're ready to

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<sup>1</sup> The Summary was abridged and edited from the recorded transcript of the Summit.

<sup>2</sup> 2022 Summit: "Big Concepts, Many Terms, Multiple Perspectives, Different Voices: A Summit on Language Used in the Credentialing Space." The Summit presented multiple perspectives on three key concepts and terminology areas: Credentials and Pathways; Equity, Inclusion, Fairness; and Competencies, Skills, Learning Outcomes.

deal with it because we've already been dealing with it. The challenge as institutional accreditors is we don't currently evaluate stuff on the non-credit side of the house, and a lot of these credentials are coming through non-credit education. In our agency, we are putting together a regional committee to talk about credentials—what do we need to do and how do we evaluate what's coming through the non-credit side of the house? We think we're pretty okay with the credit side, but the non-credit side, where they're coming in fast and furious—we just don't have the standards in place. The institutions do have to deal with that.

**Deb:** What SUNY has done is apply the standards used for credit to what's been done for non-credit. We have microcredentials that are non-credit, non-credit to credit, all those kinds of things. We require them to assess those programs the same way they would any other program. The other piece that matters to us is that it goes through faculty governance, whether non-credit or credit. There is a process to ensure quality from the very beginning. We have been working very closely with the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools on this (our institutional accreditor). We had extensive conversations with them when we began this process to be sure credentials of less than a year were included within the scope of their accreditation. It turned out to be a simple notification process. There is no cost to the institutions. That's worked tremendously well. About half of our 64 institutions are offering microcredentials and this has happened essentially in the past 5 years.

**Kim:** A lot is going on in Colorado around microcredentials and prior learning assessment. From a state system of higher education perspective, the institution first has to have the statutory role and mission that allows them to offer the kinds of credentials they want. Then we have a portfolio in place: credit for prior learning, work-based learning for college credit, military experiences, standard Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), and a new strand of work looking at stackable credentials and non-credit credentials and how we bring those in primarily through prior learning assessment. We passed a bill last year that enables some four-year institutions to address students who have stopped out and want to earn an associate degree at the four-year institution. We've been working proactively with the HLC to accelerate the substantive approval process with those institutions of higher education. So, like Belle said, it depends on the kinds of programs we're trying to offer, how those are counted in our system, how we pay for those credentials, etc. We're leveraging our partners and the HLC and other accreditors to help us think deeply about accelerating a process and making that process easier for the institutions of higher education.

**Angela:** As a specialized accreditor, CAHIIM encourages our colleges and university programs to innovate and evaluate prior learning credit credentials. There are many terms being used. On our website, we've provided a definition where we will accredit some of the micro-programs popping up within the body of academic degrees we accredit. We're encouraging programs to develop ways a student can enter in, bring in prior learning credit or credentials, and leverage that to achieve maybe some type of badge, micro-certificate, or certificate. If they have to then leave prior to the degree, they leave with something. So, we are ready for this and have been working on this for quite some time—I think other specialized accreditors have as well. One of the things very important as a specialized accreditor is if you have a credentialing agency or licensing body—you also work very closely with them to make sure there aren't barriers that exist on the licensing side that prescribe curriculum or has some type of requirement that often says, 'you can't do that'. We do often hear, 'my institutional accreditor doesn't have a way we can do this; or there's a

barrier by our programmatic accreditor.’ Through townhalls, summits, and the education we provide to the public and programs we accredit, we constantly talk about institutional effectiveness, advise folks to build relationships with their registrar, find out what their institutional policies are and how they can do this. We also encourage them not to just focus on credit on entry, because in the health professions we have a lot of people already working in the industry. They may be earning badges, receiving professional development which is quite costly through their companies or through industry. They’re earning while they may be working toward a degree. We encourage programs to have conversations with students through advising and recognize what they may be doing while they’re enrolled.

**Belle:** Many times, people have no clue whether the accreditor will accept something or not. If they don't see a standard on it, they assume we don't. There are a lot of innovative ideas we've approved for which we have no standards as it were, because we treat them on a one-on-one basis. So, I hope there's no one in the southern region's membership that will say 'we won't approve something' until they've at least come to us to see if indeed we will. We have a lot of credit for prior learning, and that's the way we treat much of the workforce credentialing that's coming from the non-credit side of the house. Every institution has to have a policy on how they translate non-instructional into instructional learning. That's how a lot of the credentials are being approved for us right now. I've been here 18 years and can't think of a time we've said no when somebody has brought us an innovative idea.

**Barbara:** Accreditors are often accused of standing in the way of innovation. At HLC, the only innovation blocks are at home—it's not us. So, work with us on what is possible. The most important thing is transparency—reading about something in the press or coming up with a really big idea and ready to take it to market and letting us know a month before - that won't work. It's important to talk to us/call upon the kinds of things that are needed. Admittedly, there are some federal compliance issues that can get in the way. And, there are things that we could do about that as far as lobbying and in some cases not.

**Belle:** And note, there are other reasons for saying no—lack of qualified faculty or there is not the space to pull it off.

**Angela:** We hear programs complain that professional associations are moving in on our space. And because you're the accreditor, you are not allowing, or not creating ways we can innovate. Well, we accredit programs and evaluate quality. As an accreditor, we want them to innovate, we want to encourage that. That's why we have developed some programs to spark innovation, but we don't have barriers. In the healthcare space, there are 300+ licenses and credentials. They're offered by non-industry, industry professional associations. All those types of learning experiences are competing with academic programs. The last thing that we want to do is be a barrier to innovation with our schools. But I can't tell you the number of times we hear about being blocked. So, we ask why and where did you hear that? And have you really evaluated your policies at your institution? Oftentimes we find out they have not. We then try to share best practices. We have a lot of schools, universities both large and small, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, from the associate degree to the master's degree, where we encourage those schools to share what they're doing, how they do it, and their policies and the specific departments and units within their college or university that they work with in order to make this happen.

**There are several credential providers attending the Summit that are not from higher education. This raises a question about credentials — what they are. What lane, panelists, do you see yourself in with the third-party providers, if any?**

**Barbara:** The way we see it at HLC, the concept of a credential includes the full range of credentials. This is the way it's defined by the Credential Engine software system that's being used. That includes degrees, certificates, and those kinds of smaller units of learning that could lead toward a degree. Sometimes higher education is partnering with outsiders to offer a wider array of credentials; sometimes there are third-party providers who do it themselves. But all are responsible for quality.

**Kim:** One of the things we struggle with the most is how does a non-credit credential or something that lives outside in a third-party space have currency in a higher education system? To do that, you need to ensure that it's aligned with the institution's role and mission, aligned with the current quality standards they have, and you're able to demonstrate there are student learning outcomes that are aligned with courses within the institution of higher education. A third-party vendor can offer whatever kind of credential they want, and students certainly have the opportunity to pursue whatever pathway they want in terms of learning and continuing education. However, if what you want to do is to have that course or competencies embedded in an institution of higher education for consideration of credit to move a student along a pathway, then it has to be aligned with the student learning outcomes that exist at an institution. The two complaints I hear the most from students and other organizations are 'my credits won't transfer' and 'HLC gets in the way.' There is a ton of myths around what HLC or accreditors don't do. I think about the institutional approach to ensuring consistency across the institution, and that consistency has been acknowledged by whatever accreditor you're using.

**Systems of higher education, are you getting to the program level?  
Do you provide guidance to your institutions about partnerships?**

**Deb:** As a system, one of our major ways to influence obviously is through system policy. After many years of revisions, we reworked our credit for evaluation policy, which was first published in the 1960s. This updated version will be reviewed by the SUNY Board in February 2023 and provides for things like guarantee of transfer of credits, suggestions as to how faculty can review external credentials for inclusion in their degree programs, which would ensure alignment. The other policy prong is the microcredential policy, which was developed a few years ago. We have that on our website. It outlines what the process is, what the requirements are, and what kinds of things institutions have to consider as they're going to offer microcredentials. These include things like stackability, portability, industry alignment, and quality. We also stay close to our role with the accreditors. I meet with Middle States regularly as a system representative to make sure we're on the same page, that we can act together, inform each other, and make sure we're doing what we can in the interests of our campuses. My role with the campuses is to try to help them make sure they are in compliance with accreditation standards; and my role with the accreditors is to make sure they understand the needs of the campuses.

**Are the accreditation standards sufficient to cover the quality of what is going on with these credentials? Are the array of credentials and their quality raising equity concerns?**



**Belle:** If I had the answers to those, I wouldn't need to form the group we are doing. One of the things mentioned is working with what I call educational entities, non-institutions of higher education that offer educational offerings. If an institution of higher education is going to transcript something on their transcript as having given credit for it, then we hold that institution responsible for the quality of whatever the credential or experience is. So that's one of the challenges that was mentioned. Yes, you need to make sure that the faculty who were offering it are qualified faculty, however you define qualified faculty. You need to make sure that the student learning outcomes are identical to something you would accept in your own academic program. That's where some of our institutions run afoul of getting some of those credits brought into their institution because they can't do that or because that non-entity doesn't need it. Of course, that's our fault, because that's our standard. If that's what you're defining as our fault and we're standing in the way, then yes we do, because that's how we define quality. We define quality as people knowing what they're talking about to offer it, that the things they're teaching are relevant to whatever the credential is they're giving. That's how we do it right now. Your curriculum still has to be approved by the faculty at the institution who is offering it. That's what we're doing right now, dealing with all of the credentials coming through, whether microcredentials or whether they're coming from outside the institution. That's what I'm trying to get this committee to tell me, 'is there a better way to do that? Is there an easier way to do that? Is there a more acceptable way of doing that? And yet assure that the quality is still high quality?' The other thing is there's an assumption that institutions of higher education have to accept every credential that's being offered. They don't any more than they have to accept any credit from another accredited institution. That's entirely up to the institution. One of the things we try to do is be less prescriptive — leave it up to the institution to determine what it accepts and how they accept it. They just have to have policies and explain to our satisfaction that it's going to meet higher education standards.

**Barbara:** There's a lot we can all encourage but we can't make things happen that we think are overstepping our place. That is really important.

### How can institutions understand this emerging market?

**Kim:** Workforce in our ecosystem is changing faster than higher education. The speed of change is going so quickly that unless higher education really leans into the application of workforce credentials, counting credits, thinking differently and innovatively around how credentials are offered and honored and things like that, then we risk becoming irrelevant in the entire marketplace.

**Angela:** It's important for accreditors to broaden the standards to include non-credit and to include all the other kinds of things that people do. We have been working with our institutions on how to assess their non-credit, and then as they're looking at doing non-credit to credit pathways, it's all about the learning outcomes. And it's all about how those translate from one end into another, whether it's through articulation or through some type of assessment process. A lot of what we need is already in the standards. We just have to translate it for people to help them understand what they need to do.

**Barbara:** We're looking at who do we involve in these discussions. Each of you has set up an advisory board, work with people, and work with the institutions. You have to get outsiders

involved. We have involved, for example, Workcred and Credential Engine in HLC work. We have been trying to step outside of the way we normally think.

**Competency-based education is an opportunity built on the idea that as you move forward, you learn something. Is CBE providing examples for quality assurance?**

**Belle:** We have several institutions who have submitted perspectives for approval for totally competency-based programs. And then they backed out and went to more of a hybrid model. And in asking why did you decide to make the change back, many of them said it was because faculty were afraid they were going to become obsolete, because they didn't have to stand in front of a class anymore, to teach anything. When we said, but they have to develop the learning objectives, they have to be the ones to assess where the students have met; however, they did not resonate with that. I don't know that they felt there was more work than it was worth, but most of our institutions that are doing anything competency-based are doing it as a hybrid model (students have to be in person for some courses, and for others can sit for a test). I think that it is different on one level than credentials because credentials can be competency-based. They can be 'you come sit in the class for eight hours a day for a week, or three days a week or eight hours or whatever.' The point is, the institution has to decide whether it's going to just offer a credential that has nothing to do with any degree that they offer, or take their degrees where they all have already identified student learning outcomes and parcel them out into stackable credentials. That's the biggest challenge. As we said before, industry is changing so rapidly and the business community is saying, 'I need all these employees – I don't need them to have a four-year degree. I don't even need them to have a two-year degree. I just need them to know how to deal with these widgets or deal with these people, or deal with this team, or whatever it is that they need in a very short period of time'. The community colleges are accustomed to dealing with this. They have advisory committees for every program they have. It's the senior institutions that are becoming involved in this, making this new. Some of them are doing a great job because they have had long-standing, practical programs or applied programs where it's easy to build a credential off of that. For the other, more general education, liberal arts kinds of programs, it's a little more difficult to come up with some kind of credential. But I think all our institutions are getting into it now. They recognize it's an enrollment issue because I can bring students back for just one or two classes, and especially our state institutions that are publicly funded based on full-time equivalence. Our role as accreditors is to ensure that no matter what you're doing, that it's the same quality you've been offering for all the years you've been in existence.

**Barbara:** There are barriers being mentioned by the audience in the chat. CBE is one. Many institutions don't really know how to assess if learning is taking place—in the transparency of it, and the credit hour.

**Imagine it is 5 years from now. What would we change at the federal level that could make higher education in the U.S. stronger and those outside of higher education offering credentials stronger? An example is Short-Term Pell.**

**Kim:** A reauthorized Higher Education Act would be awesome at some point. But at the local level and how that translates into federal policy, how are we thinking differently about the ways in which students are learning, in general. And there is a point here around the credit hour. How do we look at the credit hour as not just this box to be checked, but how do we think about breaking

apart our courses in a way that is more digestible to students? If you're taking English 121, for example, can you meet one of those competencies or the equivalent to a credit hour instead of three credit hours? Then how does that translate into a transcript and how does that lead into a degree program or certification option that is eligible for federal financial aid for students who are low income or have a hard time accessing those resources? I think higher education needs to lean into re-imagining this linear pathway to degree programs, and think much differently about the circular nature in which students/learners/earners are approaching education in general.

**Deb:** Financial aid needs to be reimagined. We have to be thinking differently about how we fund education in this country. And it's so degree-based, so graduation-rate oriented. This is not helpful. It does not mirror what students' goals actually are. I don't know if this is a federal regulation thing, but we need to do more work with our own institutions on translating what grades actually mean. What did students actually learn? I mean, any number of faculty that I've spoken with will say, well, industry say they want certain things. Well, they get that from a liberal arts degree. They say, we're not articulating well what students have actually learned within those degree programs. And a better way to communicate would be extremely helpful.

**Angela:** I would like to see federal financial aid fund something other than students enrolled in an academic degree program. I would also like to see specialized accreditors accredit something other than higher education programs. Sometimes when we talk about accreditation as accreditors, we don't think about the industry programs that are out there. Industry plays a huge role in defining quality based on their needs. In higher education, when someone graduates and they go to work, they are going to be evaluated by industry from that point forward. So, industry plays a huge role in what happens here. Engaging with industry to meet their needs, I think, is super important. One of the ways that can happen is accreditors can accredit other things outside of higher education. Federal financial aid could also fund things other than just students. That may sound unusual for a higher education accretor to say but that is probably going to open some doors for a lot of people that are closed right now.

**Barbara:** The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions had this discussion recently about Short-term Pell —there will be a number of impacts if federal policy moves forward.

### **Are we staffed to handle these changes? Are we involving employers and other perspectives in these discussions?**

**Belle:** We're working on it. I've got two positions being requested to help with the workload because of all of the new requests coming in for microcredentials, new certificates and things that are offered. We're going to be subjected to the labor market just like every other employer is.

**Kim:** One of the things that's been super helpful as we're looking particularly at stackable credentials is to have industry-specific colleagues gather in the same room. We have had general industry represented and general faculty, but don't find a ton of value in this because I think industry wants to know, 'how is this going to impact my workforce, how are we going to get the students we need?' So now we have specific groups targeted towards early childhood, K-12, information technology, or behavioral health. That's easier to see the 'what's in it for me' and also broadens the perspective of faculty that have been working at the institution. It's important to have the student voice in these conversations.

**Julie Uranis/UPCEA (in the audience, asked to speak to this issue):** We have broadly engaged a variety of constituencies within the university system, and also within industry when we did the initial micro-credential policy work. We had continuing education, business, and faculty at the table. For many of us, it is natural. Someone mentioned earlier that a lot of the community college programs have advisory committees so they're already connected with local industry and other kinds of groups. What we have to remember is that our faculty don't get out much—that's not a criticism of them, it's just a fact of higher education. So, providing opportunities for them to see other ways of thinking about things is tremendously important for the work we've been doing. We've done a lot of training on the difference between grading and assessment, for example, and there is still a lot of training that needs to be done. Bringing in the right people from the right places makes a huge difference. They need to hear different voices.

**Barbara:** The reward system in higher education doesn't necessarily give the faculty an opportunity to get out there, through travel, etc. We encourage co-ops, internships, and apprenticeships of our students, but we don't always provide that opportunity to faculty. So, the reward systems also need to adjust. This doesn't just sit on the academic side. Some of you are asking how do I set up an advisory board, how to do engagement? Talk to your alumni office, talk to the fundraising people. People want something they can get in a shorter period of time. They want it stackable in some cases. In other cases, they already have degrees. There are experts who are offering it and they want it to result in something. This is a new continuing education. Yet at many institutions, the continuing education and the rest of the university or college are very separate. Intercampus interaction is critical.

**Belle:** We have two opportunities for faculty and staff to get to find out what's going on. First of all, because as you said, Barbara, they don't often get to travel. And so this is one way they can. We have a Summer Institute, the whole focus of which is how to develop student learning outcomes and how to assess whether they're effective and what we do with the results after you get them. I think that's where part of this starts, because faculty often have difficulty translating workforce certifications into credit instruction. That's what they're being asked to do—until we come up with a transcript just for workforce, things are still going to be filtered through the credit side of the house. At our annual meeting, we also broach these subjects and have workshops from institutions that are already involved. Last year the president of Credential Engine came to talk to our presidents about what's going on out there. We had workshops on which institutions are already involved in that. Part of this is trying to avail yourself of information available on what else is going on out there. The bigger challenge as an institutional accreditor is stepping on the toes of programmatic accreditors when we make too many rules and regulations about how to be responsive for these particular kinds of certifications. The conversations we have when an institution is out of compliance with one of our standards is to share that information with the programmatic accreditor and vice versa, is one of the ways that we stay in communication with each other to know what our institutions are actually doing.

**How can we shift away from being so dependent on the credit hour?  
[audience question]**

**Barbara:** The credit hour is something that I sat on a negotiated rulemaking a few years ago, and it was brought up by the former administration. It didn't go anywhere because we haven't figured

out an alternative to that when it comes to federal financial aid. Financial aid is driving decisions on our campuses, and it really should be the reverse.

**Belle:** This stuff is on the non-credit side of the house, so it's not strangled by credit. The institutions of higher education are reimbursed based on seat time. Until that changes, I don't know how else we're going to do it. That is one of those federal issues. They tried to do that 9-10 years ago, tried to find a way to redefine it. And they went right back to the same definition around seat time that came out of the Red Book at Harvard 300 years ago.

**Barbara:** It doesn't make sense, it's archaic. It is an anchor on our feet, which is why there are outside providers who are not tied to federal financial aid. The students have to ask the right questions of anyone whether they attend college or not, whether it's outside academia. There was recently an article about one of our institutions that wanted to have a shortened degree, and the comment was made HLC is standing in the way. We don't want to say it's not us, but it's the credit hour and it is barrier.

### **What are you seeing in your states or as a programmatic accreditor – Are you finding a way to be in compliance but work around this?**

**Deb:** I think the biggest example actually has been approval of distance learning programs. If you're looking at online education, something solely online, you don't have the same kind of judgment of seat time that you would in a face-to-face course. And the best way that they have to deal with this, at least for us at the state education level, is to say, what's the equivalent? You know, give us an equivalent in seat time. So, it's still there with regard to how faculty are compensated. That's all built around seat time as well. We'd have to completely abandon what we currently do and completely reimagine it in order to come up with something different, I think. We don't have an alternative at this point, not something that is going to work across all the different areas.

**Angela :** CAHIIM has a 3-year project on competency development for the largest number of the academic programs we accredit. They span from the associate to master's degree. We can write the competencies, roll those out to the schools, but the schools still have to package a curriculum in a way that is going to match seat time. We're hoping that through education, we have probably a year and a half of competency development work and then a year of faculty training where we'll train the faculty or provide free training to the some 350 schools we accredit. In the end, it'll be up to the institution to make those adjustments. But I'd love to see in 5 years where that goes away.

**Kim:** The state funding formulas are still based on seat time and credit hours and the value of a certification versus a two-year versus four-year degree. If there's a brave state out there that rethinks the way we fund institutions of higher education from a completion and seat time space to something more competency- based as well, then you might see some changes.

**Deb:** This past year, New York passed a part-time tuition assistance program, which is great because this really works well with our microcredential efforts. But it only covers 6-11 credits, so they're still working off of credits for everything connected with the financial aspects of things.

## In what ways could accreditors, departments of higher education, and system offices help move the needle, help the institutions move forward?

[audience question]

**Belle:** Our staff doesn't dream up stuff for institutions to do. Our members make up the rules—they come up with our standards, determine what's important. And it is our board that's elected by those members that approve the policies by which those standards are carried out. That's why we're putting together a committee from across the region of institutional members who are heavily involved in credentialing to see what are you doing, how are you doing it, and what we should be doing. From that, a standard and/or policy will evolve. It takes time to do this work, but it is important for people to understand that the institutions have to speak up and say, this is something important. Until the institutions speak up and either tell us what they want and/or how they want it done, I'm not sure that the accreditors are going to be responsive to our institutions.

**Barbara:** That's why we became an agile organization because it's impossible to operate in a vacuum and you have to do things in an iterative way. You reach out to those impacted. In our case, we see that as beyond our members.

**Kim:** The speed of changes has been ramping up faster than we're able to keep up with. If the pandemic has taught us one thing it's that we can be flexible and nimble. That has really challenged institutional leaders and faculty and staff to understand that there's much more nuance and complexity that we can apply to our current context. If we fail to take some of the innovations we implemented during the pandemic forward, I think we will have failed our students and our economy.

## What promising efforts are happening around equity and credentialing?

[audience question]

**Kim:** We have to be conscious of not establishing credentials that track certain students into one area and other students into another. If you're developing a program, there should be a continuum whereby every student on that pathway can have access to the multiple options out there. We do run the risk of continuing to track individuals into certain pathways and we have to be really cognizant of that.

**Deb:** We really need to be able to review our data to make sure that the data are disaggregated in such a way that we know what's really happening. Our microcredential work at SUNY is new enough that we don't have those data yet, but making sure that our information systems are set up so that we can be sure to get the information we need is going to be critical.

**Barbara:** We have institutions that are magnificent examples of this. They're very responsive to what's going on in the market. Arizona State University is always used as an example, but it's for a reason. Iowa State University is a very innovative institution looking at everything from student intent, which has been mentioned in the chat to student success and how to get them there. HLC through some outside work we did, has learned it is not always what our colleges and universities think that the students should do. What is a student's intent and how can we acknowledge that along the way—the degree may not always be the intent.



**Belle:** From a past life, maybe three iterations ago, the institution at which I was working was heavily involved with the local industry. And that's where a lot of these credentials start –with the industry in your area, whether it's a region, city, or cul-de-sac. It was important to work directly with the industry representatives to say, 'what are the skills you need and students to have in order to be successful in your company?' The curriculum was then developed with input from them. A lot of our institutions, especially community colleges, are still doing that and being successful. That's limiting because it's only feeding the local community and of course, many students do move and then are able to become employed someplace else. I think a lot of the efforts in our region right now are going to be community-centered, for lack of a better word.

**You were called regional accreditors, then institutional accreditors. If you start providing quality assurance services to employers/companies and other third-party providers of credentials, would your name need to change again?  
[audience question]**

**Belle:** We have always been institutional accreditors – for us since 1895. That has never changed. It's just that when we first opened business, it was the institutions in our area that decided there were enough similarities among themselves that we formed the regional co-op. I think that's true for all of the other regionals. We've always been institutional accreditors. The recognition of us being "institutional" now has come from the fact that the previous administration decided that the organizations previously known as "national accreditors" were all over the country, but they all had the same mission, did the same things as regional accreditors, where our institutions were, geographically reduced. Our institutional missions varied all over the place, but we were doing the same things. So, they decided just to refer to us all as "institutional accreditors." The reality is we've not seen a lot of movement, from the traditional regions. So among ourselves, we still refer to ourselves as "regional accreditors" or you may hear us say "formerly known as regional accreditors." I don't get caught up in what we're called. The bigger distinction, I think, is between being an institutional accreditor and being a programmatic accreditor. Those are the two big differences there. A few years back, there was a major meeting of providers in Washington, DC. And there were over a hundred we had never heard of before. There was a call for somebody to become the accreditor of those entities' programs. So far, nobody has stepped up to the plate for that. So there is not an accreditor of non-higher educational programmatic programs as it were, regarding workforce certifications, etc. Many are sending their credentials back to the American Council on Education (ACE) because they've been evaluating outside-of-higher-education-experiences for a very long time. But right now, that is not what we do—we accredit institutions of higher education and until that scope changes, that's what we will continue to do.

**Barbara:** I'm going to answer this question by reading HLC's revised mission statement. Effective, 2021: 'The common good through quality assurance of higher education is a leader in equitable, transformative, and trusted accreditation in the service of students and member institutions. Our vision statement is that HLC will be the champion of quality higher education by working proactively in support of students and institutions in their communities.' The difference here is we became a student-centered accreditor. So, I cannot answer the question fully but will say, stay tuned because there are some things underway. When you look at students, you can move beyond traditional higher education structures to provide services.

**What do you think about incremental credentialing, where it's going, what will this look in 5 years? What is your 1-sentence statement about the future?**

**Belle:** Continue to grow and challenge both our institutions and our accreditors to ensure that there's quality in whatever's coming out around this wider array of credentials.

**Kim:** Incremental credentialing will provide learners and earners with more transparent options.

**Deb:** I agree with that and also think innovation often happens faster than regulation reform.

**Angela:** We're going to see rapid change and there will be some changes that force changes to higher education, maybe even to accreditation as well.

**Barbara:** The changing credential landscape will change learner's lives and as a result their communities in our country. My 5 year-from-now-legacy would be that we've been able to reimagine it. We have to think big.

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The Summit closed with the forward-casting perspectives of the panelists. Credential As You Go is committed to continuing discussions on quality assurance and will be planning future events. Credential As You Go thanks the panelists for bringing such a wealth of knowledge and experience to the table, and the audience for sharing so many useful links for further information and engaging in robust discussion in the chat.

The recording of the Summit is available [here](#).