

Lessons Learned & Milestones in Credential As You Go (2021-2023)

Background

[Credential As You Go](#) works toward transforming the U.S. degree-centric system into a nationally recognized, incremental credentialing system designed to meet mid-21st century workforce needs and open opportunities for learners. This new system—which is cross-disciplinary, undergraduate and graduate, and includes noncredit and credit courses—will be an equity-focused system that enables individuals to be recognized for what they know and can do as they acquire learning.

Credential As You Go focuses on 10 areas of work:

- Ensuring availability of incremental credentials for learners.
- Launching a national campaign to raise awareness of the value of incremental credentials.
- Researching the feasibility and learner outcomes in an incremental credentialing system.
- Supporting professional development through advising tools and resources.
- Ensuring equity.
- Advocating for the provision of student support services.
- Advocating for policy and practice reforms to support incremental credentialing.
- Advocating for improving technology that supports incremental credentialing.
- Ensuring quality and building trust.
- Building connections with related initiatives across the learn-and-work ecosystem.

The national initiative, launched with a planning ‘proof of concept’ phase in 2018, now works with 54 organizations (eight higher education systems, 44 colleges and universities, and two credentialing organizations). It is guided by a National Advisory Board of more than 130

higher education experts, industry leaders, and influencers; and has co-founded the [Learn & Work Ecosystem Library](#).

The initiative is led by a partnership among the Center for Leadership in Credentialing Learning at [SUNY Empire State University](#); the [Program on Skills, Credentials & Workforce Policy at George Washington University](#); and [Corporation for a Skilled Workforce](#).

Progress

The organizations in the Credential As You Go Network are at various stages in their work to implement incremental credentialing. Some are building a policy infrastructure to support incremental credentialing. Some are developing new courses, components, and programs. Others are marketing incremental credentials to learners and developing verification and recordkeeping improvements to recognize learning in the new system. Some members are addressing multiple areas of incremental credentialing; others are focusing on only one or two.

Credential As You Go does not dictate which strategies members pursue. Rather, the initiative provides tools, resources, and professional development opportunities to help organizations progress. For example, Credential As You Go holds webinars and network meetings—both large-group and affinity-group gatherings—where participants can share their approaches. It has published a series of playbooks that serve as guides to important topics in incremental credentialing. The initiative also conducts research on the feasibility of building incremental systems and on the outcomes of learners who participate in such programs. Finally, Credential As You Go holds one-to-one meetings to offer technical assistance to network organizations and to learn more about their progress.

Lessons Learned & Milestones

Credential As You Go has been meeting with individual network organizations for the past two years to offer technical assistance and gather data on

the organizations' progress. The initiative also sought feedback on the resources it has provided, including its website, case studies, playbooks, webinars, summits, affinity group and large-group meetings, and technical assistance. The discussions additionally focused on the organizations' biggest challenges and the lessons they've learned.

2022 Cohort Institutions

In total, these meetings yielded more than 100 hours of discussion with faculty and practitioners among the 2022 cohort of institutions and systems funded by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education. Though these institutions and systems entered the project at various stages in their work to develop incremental credentials, several lessons emerged from these discussions:

- *Curriculum “chunking” was a natural place for many faculty to begin.* It was a painless entry point to look at current degrees and identify “chunks” of three to four courses that communicate a certain level of understanding and skills embedded in a degree or relevant in the workplace.
- *Students are central.* At several institutions, strong student voices were advocating for—sometimes demanding—shorter-term, incremental credentials. In some cases, learners pursued the entire institutional governance process to advocate for themselves, and the institution listened. This helped create some powerful credentials that have increased enrollments and improved student success.
- *Data was and is key.* Institutions learned that examining student leakage points helped them determine where smaller credentials could be useful: What skills and knowledge did students gain prior to stopping out and entering the workforce? What are the trends in the labor market? What are the workforce needs at the state and national levels?
- *Partnerships with industry and community played a major part in development.* In their conversations with industry and community, institutions asked vital questions: What competencies or skills are needed for employees to move to the next level? What skill sets can be identified and provided? What fields are already positioned to accept shorter-term credentials?
- *Policy and/or legislation can be a driver of change.* Many pilot opportunities were influenced by official actions, including decisions to prioritize certain career fields, or legislation directing that funds be spent in certain ways.

- *Incremental Credentialing Framework.* The introduction of the Credential As You Go [Incremental Credentialing Framework](#) has influenced the development of such programs. Institutions looked at how their proposed credentials would fit into the Framework. They used the Framework to identify which approaches they were using and to determine how to incorporate additional approaches—whether by creating new credentials or adding to an existing one.

Incremental Credentialing Framework

The Framework features six approaches to credentialing that can be used to design incremental credentials and to facilitate auto-awarding of credentials. These approaches, including a focus on recognizing prior learning, help speed students' journey to graduation.

1

Learn As You Go

Incremental credentials prepare individuals for up-skilling, re-skilling, or developing new skills in specific workplace areas. These credentials can stand on their own or be connected to a degree.

2

Add On As You Go

Incremental credentials are obtained for specializations that add onto a degree pathway, but may not necessarily be planned in the pathway.

3

Stack As You Go

Incremental credentials add up or stack into larger credentials and degrees, and are planned into credentialing pathways.

4

Transfer As You Go

Incremental credentials are built to transfer across institutions and are a potential cost-sharing mechanism. (Students cross-register to another institution to pick up a specialty that the home institution does not offer.)

5

Partner As You Go

Incremental credentials prepare for and include field-expected credentials for work, as well as work-related credentials that are accepted into degree or other credentialing pathways. These credentials are developed in conjunction with business/industry partner(s).

6

Retro As You Go

Incremental credentials are awarded for learning that has already been acquired but is not yet credentialed.

Among the 2022 cohort, organizations developed 111 incremental credentials in two years. Of these, credentials aligned to the six approaches in the Incremental Credentialing Framework in the follow way:

- 38% are ‘learn as you go’
- 34% are ‘specialize as you go’
- 47% are ‘stack as you go’
- 5% are ‘transfer as you go’
- 21% are ‘partner as you go’
- 7% are ‘retro award as you go’
- 15% took just one approach; a large majority of the new credentials combined two or more approaches.

Among the 111 incremental credentials, 62% are launched, 46% are credit-bearing, 38% are noncredit and 13% are a combination. The last group often includes industry credentials or credit for prior learning.

These credentials also reflect various designs. Some have been built into a degree, align to a specific job or industry, use prior learning and industry certifications, and/or bridge noncredit to credit programs.

Across Colorado, New York, and North Carolina (the three states in the IES initiative), the highest number of incremental credentials developed to date are in information technology, followed by business, and

then health care. Other disciplines are education, trades, hospitality, communications, advanced manufacturing, veterinary science, criminal justice, design thinking, art, human services, and aircraft and flight.

Addition of the Walmart Cohort

In early 2023, 30 additional organizations joined Credential As You Go as part of the Walmart initiative. The 2023 cohort includes state systems of higher education, colleges and universities (public and private), and two credentialing organizations.

Between June and September 2023, Credential As You Go met individually with the organizations in the Walmart cohort. As with the 2022 cohort, these one-to-one discussions (totaling nearly 100 hours) were held to assess organizations’ progress, to gain insight on the utility of the initiative’s resources, and to learn about organizations’ challenges and the lessons they’ve learned.

Lessons Learned

Combining input from the 2022 and 2023 cohorts, 13 key lessons emerged. Table 1 summarizes these lessons within four broad categories: communications, curricular, infrastructure, and climate for change and external factors.

Table 1: Lessons Learned in Credential As You Go (2021-2023)

Communications	
Themes	Lessons Learned
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At higher education institutions, a core of early responders typically understand the importance of incremental credentials, but there is not yet campus-wide awareness of the case for incremental credentialing. • There is a gap in knowledge or awareness of what others are doing outside their academic department or outside their institution. • Many institutions asked about the best ways to increase campus-wide awareness.
Marketing and Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting incremental credentials is key—to engaging employers and learners. This requires effective branding, as well as targeted and consistent messaging. • This type of marketing requires resources, yet many institutions lack sufficient funds. • There is a hunger to learn how organizations are leveraging different resources to support these marketing efforts.

Curricular

Themes	Lessons Learned
Impacts by Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The process of implementing incremental credentials differs by discipline. Some disciplines are required to move faster, such as nursing, teacher education, and information technology. These areas are affected by workforce needs, learner needs, and state policies—as well as other initiatives that focus on high-demand fields.• Institutions identified four key drivers of change as workforce needs, learner needs, state policy, and high-demand fields.• Network members asked for ways to make these external change directives and internal solutions more evident through examples, such as in playbooks, case studies, and affinity group discussions. Examples of solutions that address internal roadblocks are helpful.
Noncredit/Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some institutions struggle with the connection between noncredit and credit opportunities in incremental credentialing—including which types of credentials should be on the noncredit side and which on the credit side. Other institutions are working to align and stack noncredit to credit.• Credential As You Go is being asked to help inform efforts related to credit/noncredit. Requested resources include a playbook, professional development events, and specific examples and case studies of how to build noncredit-to-credit or credit-to-noncredit pathways.• Some organizations ask how to marshal institutional leadership, support, and understanding for the use of credit/noncredit credentials in incremental credentialing. Examples of how they support one another is important for long-term success. Examples of ways that institutions are supporting learners in these pathways would be helpful.
Prerequisites	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An emerging area of focus at some institutions is creating credentialing opportunities through addressing prerequisite requirements to courses and programs. Some of this work has required the revision of institutional policies.
Employer Engagement and Curricular Alignment with Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutions face challenges in aligning incremental credentials with employer needs.• Many struggle to understand the skills needed for in-demand occupations.• In many cases, employers still seek workers with traditional degrees and do not understand or trust incremental credentials.• Some employers are creating their own educational and training programs.• Colleges are struggling to effectively incorporate workforce programs into a credentialing pathway that facilitates upward mobility.• Aligning and/or embedding industry certifications, many of which are required in the workplace, into a credential pathway is challenging.• Network members are interested in learning more about how their peers are addressing these challenges effectively.

Infrastructure

Themes

Lessons Learned

Policy

- The need to design and offer incremental credentials is causing institutions and state systems to rethink state and institutional policy.
- Some states and institutions have created new policies to allow for smaller credentials to be awarded and counted toward degrees.
- Systems and institutions are rethinking policies related to prior learning assessment.
- There is growing interest in creating a credential for the general education core. Many institutions are studying these developments at other institutions and request more information from Credential As You Go about policy.

Leadership

- Leadership from the top helps—in many cases is required—to move innovation. That said, some institutions have experienced administrative changes and work has been delayed as new leadership came on board.
- Other institutional priorities also compete for leaders' attention, which can affect the rate of progress.

Staffing/Teams

- Institutions are speeding the development of their credentialing programs by involving internal and external stakeholders—including faculty, staff, student working groups, registrars, and community employers/regional workforce leaders.
- After some months into the effort, some are finding that not everyone is on board or that full participation is not sustainable. This sometimes leaves just a few people to continue the work. They seek examples of ways in which other network entities address this challenge.
- Implementing something new can affect many areas across an institution, so broad buy-in is needed. Faculty, student supports, and registrars all need to be part of the development process. Collaboration across many different areas is needed to create seamless credentialing opportunities for learners.
- Tight funding and limited staff can hinder innovations and the development of new credentials. Creating new credentials can be a heavy lift for faculty with competing demands on their time.
- Lack of professional development to undertake this work can also slow progress.

Technology

- To capture learning along the way and create true learning pathways, technology and learning management systems are key.
- Learner record systems are mostly designed around degree structures. This makes it difficult to integrate other types of credentials.
- Noncredit programs or departments often lack learner record systems, and learner data are often stored in spreadsheets on individual computers.
- Usually, noncredit and credit learner records are not integrated making tracking of learner progress and persistence difficult.
- Higher education learner records and employer records for industry certifications and other verified knowledge and skills are disconnected.
- Current systems make tracking student progress and success within incremental credentials difficult as they are designed around degrees.

Climate for Change and External Factors

Themes	Lessons Learned
Related and Competing Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As interest in shorter-term credentials intensifies nationally, the number of such efforts proliferates. Some Credential As You Go members are unsure how to balance these various efforts. How to manage the push and pull of multiple efforts—in their states or even within their institutions—is not always clear.
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The current policy climate is having an impact on DEI initiatives, especially in states that have passed specific anti-DEI legislation.• Some changes underway include moving DEI to different units on campus (e.g., to student services); losing staff positions; renaming or making changes in language (e.g., use “opportunity;” focus on research and data points to address the language issues).• Broader policy movements are not changing the institutions’ commitment/intent to DEI in this climate. Institutions noted they are responding by using research-informed data points to express institutional equity measures in a very transparent way. This will result in measures backed by factual evidence, including anecdotes and learner stories about success through pathways.
Participating in a Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being part of a national effort and receiving the many supports from Credential As You Go (e.g., playbooks, professional development through webinars and summits, meetings to enable networking opportunities) is extremely helpful.• The website and playbooks provide content support and also show members that incremental credentialing is a bona fide movement. Members use these tools to engage their peers and leadership.• Many organizations choose not to read a playbook from start to finish, but are looking at the parts that are most relevant to their circumstances.• Members appreciate the case studies and hearing from other members.• Many members have expressed appreciation for the playbook walk-throughs that occur at the large gatherings, but they want to make sure they know who is in the virtual room and how they can follow up with one another.• Many expressed appreciation for the one-on-one meetings, saying they helped them focus their thinking as they move forward.• Network members continue to have questions and seek opportunities for deep dives and how-to discussions. In particular, they want help in engaging employers, developing and implementing noncredit-to-credit pathways, financing shorter credentials, and providing advising and support services.

Conclusions

Incremental credentialing approaches appear to be progressing throughout the Credential As You Go Network. The fact that the credentialing environment is changing is widely understood. Progress is particularly notable in specific academic disciplines that must move quickly to respond to workforce needs in high-demand areas such as health care, information technology, teacher education (especially early childhood), and cybersecurity. In these areas, institutions are developing accelerated credential pathways and expanding opportunities for learners.

Rapid growth in some disciplines can lead to the creation of “innovation pockets” at institutions; however, some find it difficult to move to institution-wide approaches.

Given the many common challenges facing entities working in incremental credentialing, network members

raised a number of ways Credential As You Go could continue to be helpful:

- Uncover the gaps and provide information on incremental credentialing to inform policy and practice.
- Inform future research needed to build the case for the incremental credentialing movement.
- Provide ongoing technical assistance and professional development through additional webinar and summit topics, tools, and by helping facilitate and deepen connections among network partners.
- Assist with outcomes research to inform fine-tuning of incremental credentialing practices, help with engagement, and expand the messaging around the importance and relevance of incremental credentialing.

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Current funders include the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education (Grant R305T210063) which focuses on rapid prototyping of and research on incremental credentials with a national campaign; and Walmart which focuses on systems change for expansion and sustainability of incremental credentials. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute of Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of Education, or Walmart. Lumina Foundation funded the planning ‘proof of concept’ for Credential As You Go.