

External and Internal Influences Affecting the Implementation of Incremental Credentials

Overview

[Credential As You Go](#) is a movement to facilitate the development of a national system of incremental credentialing that improves education and employment outcomes for all learners. This type of fundamental change is needed because the current system—in which postsecondary providers primarily focus on *degrees* and employers rely on degrees as a *proxy* for job candidates' knowledge and skills—is increasingly unfair and inefficient.

Credential As You Go calls for a system that recognizes learning as it is acquired throughout an individual's education and career journey. Such a system requires that the learning inherent in degrees and other credentials be unbundled into discrete, recognizable, incremental units.

Research is a major component of Credential As You Go, 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](#). Credential As You Go conducts research to assess the feasibility of developing an incremental credentialing system, and to examine learner outcomes from programs that offer incremental credentials. This brief summarizes the findings of one of the research studies.

Methodology

Evaluand, LLC conducted a focus group study to answer [three research questions](#) exploring how internal conditions in higher education—and factors external to it—affect the implementation of incremental credentialing. The aim was to learn from people already involved in incremental credentialing about what they see as catalysts and impediments to the movement.

Focus groups were conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sixty participants contributed their perspectives through 30 focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Groups included individuals

classified by the following roles: Learn and Work Professionals (10 sessions), Employers (three sessions), System Administrators (four sessions), Higher Education Institution Administrators (six sessions), and Higher Education Institution Faculty and Professional Staff (seven sessions).

Audio transcripts were reviewed, and qualitative analyses conducted to organize participants' perspectives into 20 domains (topical clusters) of influences affecting implementation of incremental credentialing.

A full report on the focus group results is available at [Credential As You Go Priority 1 Feasibility Study: Preliminary Summary](#).

Findings

Participants' perspectives ranged from external to internal conditions, with a blend of factors along the continuum. Few of the perspectives were surprising, as many of the factors and conditions had surfaced in Credential As You Go's earlier research and planning. What was surprising—and welcome—was the breadth and subsequent organization of these factors and conditions. Table 1 provides an overview of these findings, which synthesize research results presented by Knestis (2023).

Conclusion

This study highlights and validates what Credential As You Go has learned through several years of research and planning for the national initiative. The comprehensive insights from study participants offer important perspectives that will continue to shape the initiative. Though we cannot directly address the external factors that influence incremental credentialing—including workforce shortages and 21st century economic trends, remaining aware of these factors is important.

At the same time, we can focus on the many internal conditions that affect incremental credentialing. These include learner support services, new approaches to communication, technology, and faculty professional development.

Each of the domains that surfaced through this research is rich in itself and offers many areas for further exploration. A better understanding of the many influences on incremental credentialing—external, internal, and those that blend the two—can help ‘make the case’ for incremental credentialing and/or inform agendas that can advance this type of innovation work.

These findings and those that will emerge from an upcoming study of learner outcomes will help guide the Credential As You Go movement. They will also inform state systems, institutions, and other actors in the learn-and-work ecosystem as they work to implement incremental credentials to support learner success.

Table 1: Influences that Affect the Development of Incremental Credentials within Higher Education, from Focus Group Participants’ Perspectives

Eight External Influences Cited As Having Impact		
External & Internal Influence Areas	Supporting Incremental Credentialing	Confounding Incremental Credentialing
01 Economic Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weaker economy encourages people to return for upskilling and reskilling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger economy provides more jobs; fewer people attend postsecondary education
02 Postsecondary Education Sticker Shock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorter credentials cost less Most incremental credentials can be used toward additional ones [stacking] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost of degrees can be a deterrent for learners
03 Demand for Workplace Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More transparent skills documentation Frameworks exist to measure these skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hidden skills within a degree Employers see degrees as a proxy for these skills
04 Employer Hiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills-based hiring Removing degree requirements and becoming more competency and skills-based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependency on degrees as signal of skills
05 Higher Education Funding Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State, system, institutional funding incentives and grants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal and state financial aid rules are designed around degrees only Some fees being charged to learners taking incremental credentials that are designed around degrees
06 Higher Education State and System Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State and system policies support incremental credentialing Some provide incentives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many states and systems lack policies to support incremental credentialing
07 Proliferation of Credentials and Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many options for learners Shorter credentials can lead to jobs faster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusing landscape of credentials Most institutions only count degrees Quality is hard to determine when so many credentials are offered
08 Accreditation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accreditation policies support incremental credentialing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Myths are prevalent that accreditation policies do not support incremental credentialing

Twelve Internal Influences Cited As Having Impact

External & Internal Influence Areas	Supporting Incremental Credentialing	Confounding Incremental Credentialing
09 Faculty Labor Markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty who are on board provide examples that help others value incremental credentials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too few faculty members to teach additional coursework, especially in specialized areas due to restrictive policies and inability to pay competitive wages Some faculty hired to fill open positions may be less qualified, which can raise quality concerns
10 Issues Related to Hours, Days, and Weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexibility in delivery and timing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies around the credit hour and academic calendar limit how and when incremental credentials can be offered
11 Competency-based Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competency rather than time is measured A clearer message is conveyed to employers about what learners know and can do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of consistent, reliable ways to effectively assess knowledge and skills Educators may lack the skills to define and assess actual outcomes
12 The Credit-Noncredit Divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noncredit may offer greater flexibility for innovation in credentialing than for-credit Noncredit is being aligned to credit through crosswalks or prior learning assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all noncredit is aligned to credit Many stakeholders perceive noncredit as solely for workforce development Noncredit data systems are not well developed, making it difficult to track progress and outcomes
13 Generalized Education versus Skill-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills-focused, short-term credentials help some learners to obtain employment Learners want both skills-based credentials and full degrees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tension exists between specific skills development and generalized education There is a lack of good models of how skills-based credentials and degrees can integrate
14 Third-party Certifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When certifications are aligned to industry needs, learners and employers have more confidence in credentials' value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nature of many certification exams may not accurately assess skills-based mastery Faculty preparing learners for certifications must fully understand content Tests and certification requirements can change faster than curriculum
15 Perceptions of Value by Credential Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degrees are still valued in the labor market Documented evidence of credential outcomes (as in badges) can amplify its signal to employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incremental credentials are less known in the labor market Awareness and value of incremental credentials is still not widespread
16 Learner Advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some institutions are investing in technology to bolster advising information Some institutions are using navigator models to help learners make sense of credential and employment opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners may not be getting effective guidance on different types of credentials Academic advising and career counseling are often not integrated Advisors may not be well prepared to deal with the complexity of incremental credentials

<p>17 Dispositions and Culture of Higher Education Faculty</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some faculty on board with incremental credentials—“coalition of the willing” • Some see incremental credentials as supporting enrollment and completion, especially when they stack into a degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already overworked faculty are hesitant to take on more work • Lack of understanding around the benefits of incremental credentials • Fear of loss of enrollment in degree programs
<p>18 Dispositions and Culture of Higher Education Administrators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy and legislation supporting incremental credentials is an incentive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many institutions face competing priorities • Some policies (e.g., financial aid) do not support incremental credentials • Lack of data-driven success stories or analysis of outcomes for decision-making on incremental credentials
<p>19 Technology</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital learner records have potential to aid learners to share competencies and credentials • Some institutions are finding work-around models to use legacy technology systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current data systems can impede innovative credentialing models • Data systems often are not integrated (e.g., how credentials stack, noncredit to credit) • Policy or regulation can inhibit enrollment in incremental credentials, contributing to inequities in enrollments
<p>20 Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some badge graphics help communicate competencies contained within a credential • Effective collection and use of learner success data could improve communication around incremental credentials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different terminology imposes challenges, especially in-group lingo that makes credentials hard to understand outside certain circles • Terms used in education and the workforce are not well aligned • Improved communication is required to increase awareness and value of incremental credentials • Many departments and institutions lack marketing and sufficient budgets for messaging about innovative credentials

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