



— Making the Case —

Published September 2023

www.credentialasyougo.org



CREDENTIAL AS YOU GO

INCREMENTAL CREDENTIALING

www.credentialasyougo.org

info@credentialasyougo.org

About Credential As You Go

Credential As You Go is catalyzing redesign and integration of credentialing systems across states, higher education, and third-party providers, including employers, to recognize all learners for what they know and can do.

Credential As You Go focuses on building an incremental credentialing system, recognizing that many types of quality credentials (degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, badges, microcredentials) document an individual's learning, and credentials are awarded by many types of providers including community and technical colleges, four-year colleges and universities, third-party organizations, employers, military, and state licensing boards.

For too many learners, the only postsecondary credentials that count for employment are degrees. This focus limits access to further education and employment. Yet, many have acquired valuable skills and knowledge through life and work experience. The U.S. needs a credentialing system that captures and validates all learning.

© Copyright Credential As You Go, 2023. May be used for educational purposes without written permission but with a citation to this source.

This publication is protected by copyright, and permission must be obtained from Credential As You Go prior to any prohibited reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or likewise.

Suggested Citation:

Credential As You Go (September, 2023). Making The Case.
<https://credentialasyougo.org/playbooks/making-the-case>

Table of Contents

- 2 About Credential As You Go
- 4 Purpose
- 5 Overview
- 6 The Why
- 10 Incremental Credentialing
- 13 Benefits of Incremental Credentials
- 15 Assessing Readiness
- 16 Resources
- 17 References
- 19 Acknowledgements

Purpose

This playbook gives people in the learn-and-work ecosystem key information they can use to make the case for incremental credentialing. Case-making requires different information for various audiences, including the campus community, employers and industry partners, funders, learners, and policymakers. The playbook covers:

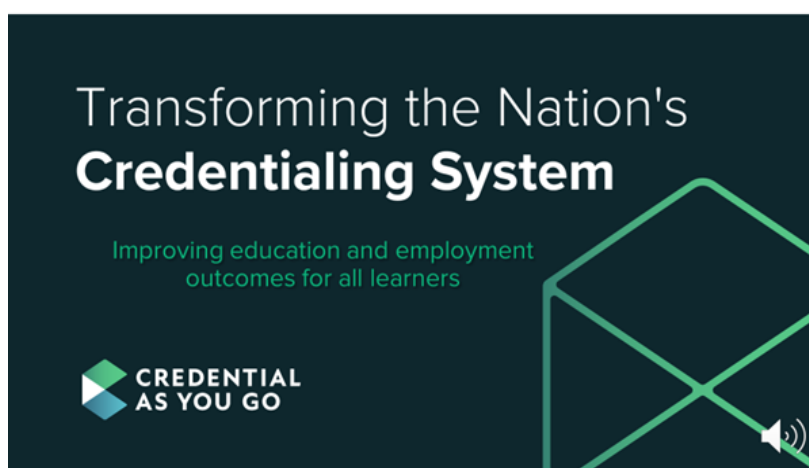
- The case for incremental credentialing, driven by four factors: (1) the nation's dated, degree-centric postsecondary system, (2) credential expansion, (3) the need to improve equity in education, and (4) rapidly changing workforce needs.
- How to define incremental credentialing and incremental credentials.
- The benefits of incremental credentialing to various constituencies.

Overview

For many learners, the only postsecondary credentials that count for employment are academic degrees. This focus may limit access to further education and employment. Yet many individuals have acquired valuable skills and knowledge through their life and work experiences. To “count” that valuable learning, the U.S. needs a credentialing system that captures and validates quality college-level learning, wherever and whenever it is acquired.

[Credential As You Go](#) is a movement to facilitate the development of a nationally adopted incremental credentialing ecosystem that improves education and employment outcomes for all learners. Transformation of this order 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. The movement 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 smaller, recognizable, incremental units.

Click here for a brief video which makes the case for incremental credential:



The Why

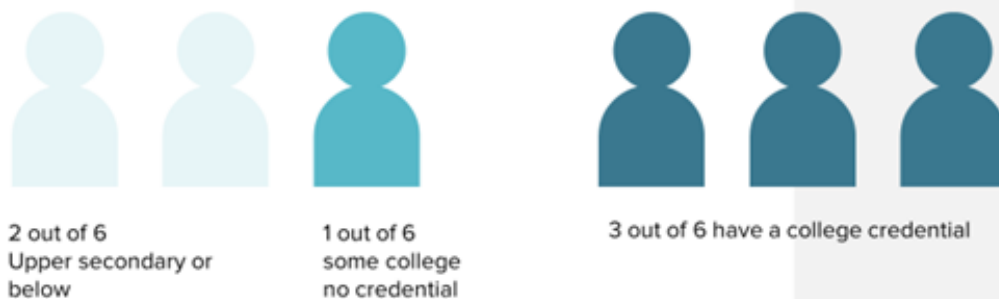
The U.S. postsecondary credentialing system does not serve the majority of Americans well. Four key factors are driving the effort to redesign that system: (1) its dated, degree-centric nature, (2) credential expansion, (3) the need to improve equity in education, and (4) rapidly changing workforce needs.

Degree-Centric Learn-and-Work Ecosystem

The current system of higher education in the U.S. leaves behind [over 40 million Americans](#) who have acquired some college credits but no credential. About one in six adults who dropped or stopped out of college have no credential to formally recognize what they have accomplished. The system also leaves behind [81 million adults who have no postsecondary experience. This represents 52 percent of the adult population.](#) For working adults, two- and four-year academic degrees can be difficult to achieve because of work, family, and other obligations. Meanwhile, because neither colleges nor employers consistently recognize partial degrees, people who lack a degree are treated as if they have no learning. These factors can hinder employment and further education.



Postsecondary Attainment in the U.S.



White – 71%
Black – 10%
LatinX – 10%
Asian – 9%

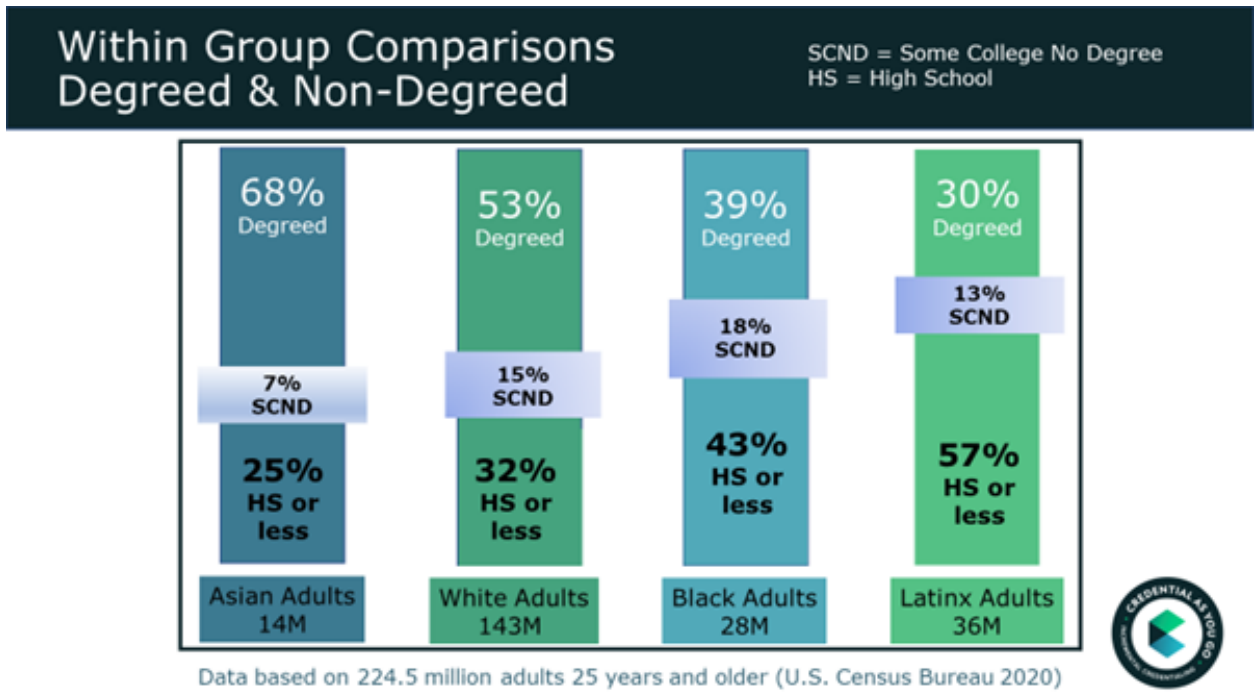


Source: Data based on 224.5M adults 25 years and older (Acquired from U.S. Census Bureau 2021)

Equity

Census data from 2020 shows that only 48 percent of Americans aged 25 and older have a college degree. Of those with a college degree, 71 percent are white adults.

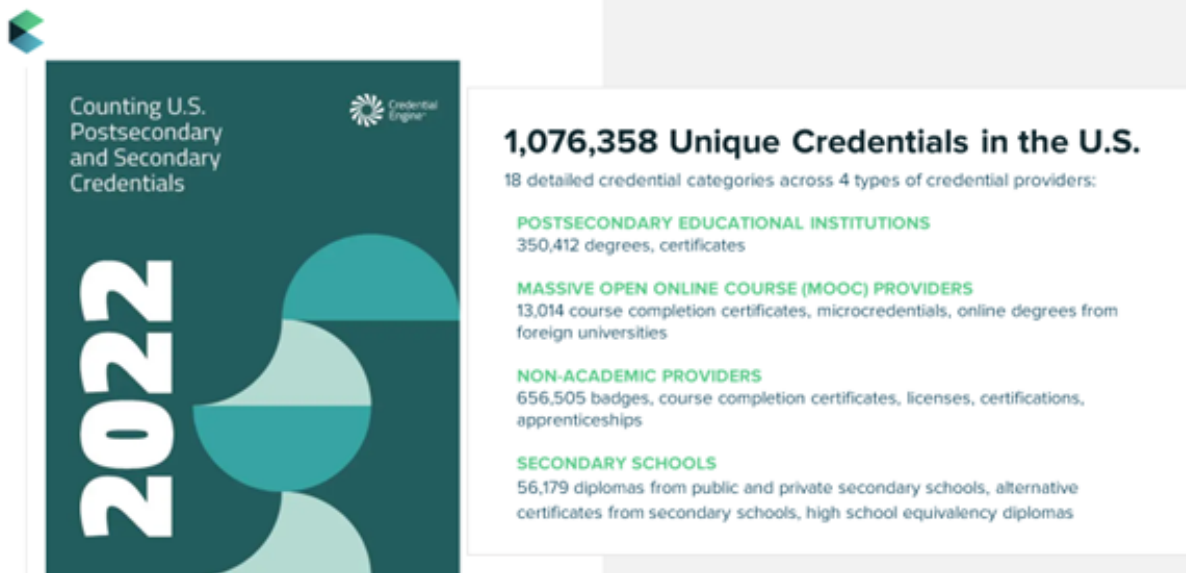
The data on degree completion by race/ethnicity reveals major disparities, with [38 percent of Black adults and 30 percent of Latina/Latino adults having a college degree](#). [This compares to 67 percent of Asian adults and 53 percent of White, non-Latina/Latino adults](#). Black adults also are the group with the highest proportion of people who have some college but no degree (18 percent) and bear the highest student debt load among all racial groups. There is a clear equity gap in credential completion, and this gap may be widened because skills and learning are not formally recognized by higher education. This can intensify equity-based challenges in education and employment.



Rapid Expansion and Proliferation of Credentialing

The U.S. credential landscape has become increasingly complex due to the proliferation of education and training providers and the growing demand for alternative credentials. The demand for new credentials is fueled in part by the increasing interest in certificate programs and alternative credentials. For example, [the number of available badges grew by 73 percent between 2020 and 2022](#). As learners and workers come to accept a growing number of new credentials, more and more employers have also become learning providers, offering their own curricula and credentials. This expansion of credentials and providers has made it difficult for learners to understand and evaluate the value of these credentials.

Findings from the [latest report from Credential Engine](#) indicate there are more than 1 million discrete credentials awarded in the U.S. They come from four types of providers: postsecondary education institutions, MOOC (massive open online course) providers, non-academic providers, and secondary schools.



Changing Workforce Needs

Today's labor market is markedly different from that of 40 years ago. While employers still need workers with industry-specific knowledge and skills (i.e., technical or “hard” skills), they increasingly value non-technical skills (also called “human,” “power,” “fundamental,” “essential”, “durable”, or “soft” skills) such as communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. Some employers struggle to find the workers they need because these non-technical skills and knowledge are often not well documented or credentialed. Meanwhile, [the current postsecondary system is challenged to meet the demands of a labor market](#) in which lifelong learning is essential.

Incremental credentialing can strengthen the connections between working adults, higher education systems and institutions, and the labor market. An incremental credentialing system would help clarify what skills are needed, for which industry sectors and job levels. It also would identify the entities that provide training for the available credentials. These all have important implications for workforce preparation and credentialing.



Incremental Credentialing

Credential As You Go calls for a nationally recognized system of incremental credentialing. Such a system would capture and validate all learning, thus enabling individuals to be recognized for what they know and can do via many types of credentials.

What is Incremental Credentialing?

The U.S. needs a fair and inclusive postsecondary system, one that captures and validates all types of valuable learning. Incremental credentialing is one approach toward building such a system – one in which the educational pathways offered by higher education institutions lead to transferable and usable qualifications for employment and further education. In such a system:

- All learners are credited for their knowledge and abilities.
- Learning is acknowledged from a variety of sources, not only higher education institutions.
- The value of credentials is recognized and understood by learners and their families, employers, educational institutions, policymakers, and others.
- Credentials are customized to learners' needs and inform education and career planning, navigation, transitions, and advancement.
- Credentials inform employers' decisions about hiring and advancement, and they count toward further learning in the postsecondary system.

Although incremental credentialing is not new, it is not inherent to the design of the U.S. learn-and-work ecosystem. [Still, experts in the ecosystem are increasingly calling for the growing number of valuable credentials — degree and non-degree — to be organized into a coherent system.](#) This requires redesigning of credentialing systems across states and higher education institutions. Such redesigns are necessary to reduce confusion, increase learning recognition, and integrate what people know and can do.

Incremental credentialing does not aim to disrupt the existing benefits of higher education. Rather, its goal is to help institutions lessen confusion – among learners and employers – about the value of all credentials, including degrees. It strives to enhance learning recognition and enable the integration of learners’ knowledge and skills into qualifications that support employment and further education.

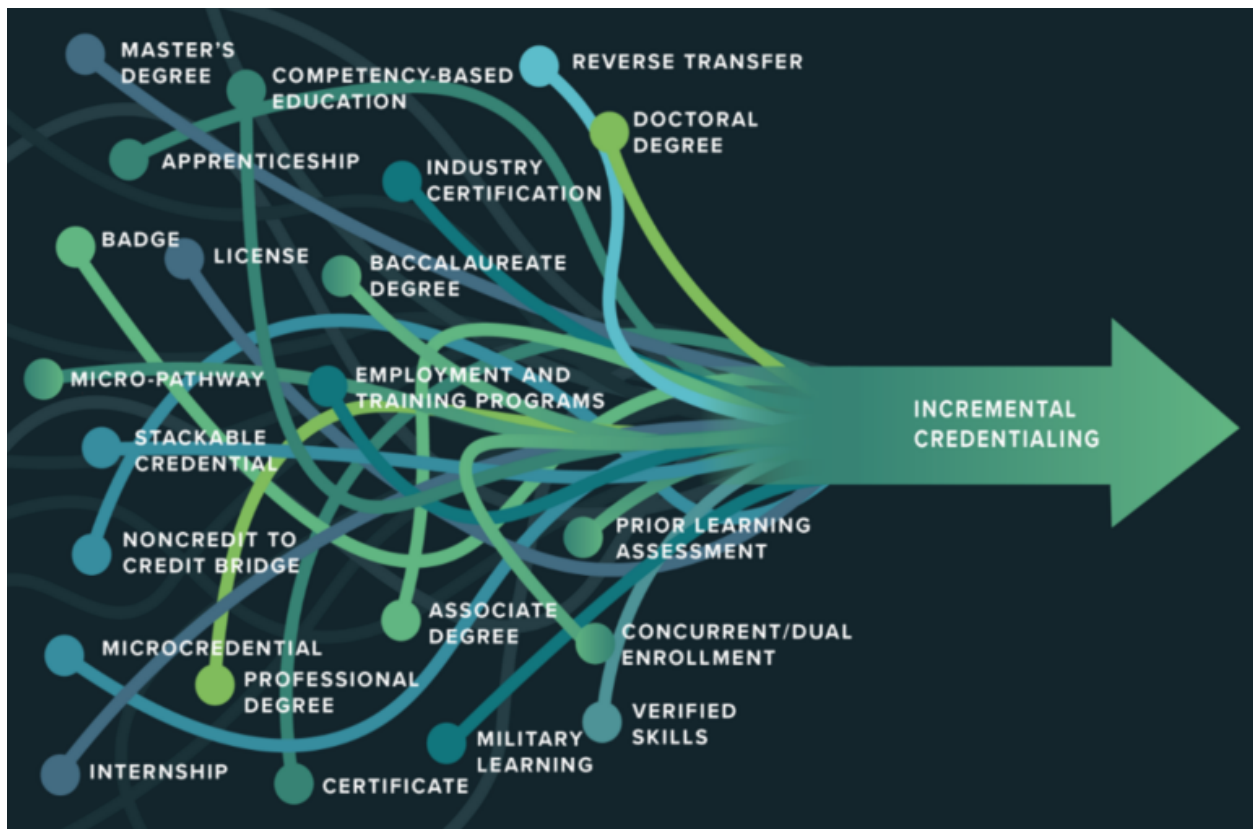
What are Incremental Credentials?

Incremental Credentials capture learning as it is acquired along the learning pathway and formally recognizes and connects that learning to a larger context. Incremental credentials can be non-credit or credit-bearing; undergraduate or graduate level; of any size, from small units of learning up through degrees. The purpose of incremental credentials is to ensure learners are recognized for what they know and can do as they acquire the learning and not leave learners without formal documentation of that learning.

[Definitions & Use of Key Terms & Concepts in Incremental Credentialing](#)

[Incremental credentials](#) refer to all types of credentials that formally document learning, including certificates, badges, microcredentials, academic degrees, apprenticeships, licenses, and other non-degree credentials. Incremental credentials can be noncredit or credit-bearing; undergraduate and graduate level in higher education or at any level in industry; and any size, from small units of learning through degrees. Incremental credentials can:

- Be combined to reach a full degree
- Be developed to fit into parts of a degree
- Provide specializations for a degree
- Provide different tracks to a degree
- Be awarded based on courses already completed
- Embed credit for prior learning
- Be focused on employment, particularly for noncredit courses and programs
- Articulate noncredit to credit learning



Many credential providers issue a variety of credentials upon program completion, ranging from trade schools to post-doctoral institutions. Regardless of credential type, incremental credentials capture learning acquired along the learning pathway, and formally recognize and connect that learning to a larger context of work and schooling.

Benefits of Incremental Credentials

Incremental credentials offer numerous benefits:

- ✓ **They can alleviate labor shortages.** Current research suggests that some [1.4 million jobs may open to workers without degrees over the next five years](#) as employers broaden their candidate pools to fill middle-skill positions. Incremental credentialing, as a process, can help institutions of higher education formalize learning into qualifications that are recognizable by employers. In turn, this helps adult learners communicate their qualifications to gain employment.
- ✓ **They save learners time and effort.** Incremental credentials can reduce learners' need to repeat learning and demonstrate knowledge and skills they have already obtained. Incremental credentialing also may enable learners to [transfer what they know](#) to the workplace and across various training entities and higher education institutions. Through incremental credentialing, institutions may [retroactively offer learners](#) certificates, credentials, and degrees. All these factors may speed individuals' entry into employment or enhance upward mobility.
- ✓ **They empower learners with options and information.** Incremental credentials can increase the ability of learners to [specialize as they go](#) and tailor their educational pathways to their career goals. Through incremental credentials, learners may have more entry points into programs, certifications, and jobs. [Recent research](#) suggests that learners want higher education institutions to offer [stackable](#), entry-level professional certificates and industry and microcredentials within both two- and four-year academic programs.
- ✓ **They help close equity gaps.** Incremental credentialing is a strategy that holds promise for narrowing equity gaps because such credentials allow people without a college degree to get recognition of their knowledge and skills and, ideally, gain greater access to family-sustaining wages. [Research suggests](#) that non-degree credential attainment – especially industry-recognized credentials in high-demand STEM and business fields – [may improve transitions to the labor market](#) and enrollment and persistence in college.

- ✓ **They increase demand for higher education.** As incremental credentials empower adult learners to continue their education, they also offer institutions a strategy for boosting enrollment and retention rates, thus enhancing institutions' financial sustainability. Incremental credentialing can help institutions of higher education formalize learning into transferable and usable qualifications for adult learners, who can use these qualifications to gain employment and continue their education. Leaders from colleges and universities nationwide – [including Colorado State University – Global Campus](#) and others – recognize that incremental credentials help make degrees more relevant for learners.

- ✓ **They provide a framework for policymakers to transform higher education.** Incremental credentialing, when implemented, supports the structural transformation of the U.S. legacy degree system that no longer adequately serves the needs of learners and employers. There are multiple entry points for these parties, especially governor's offices and state systems of higher education, working closely with credential providers.

Assessing Readiness

The learn-and-work ecosystem is a connected system of formal and informal learning (education and training) and work. The ecosystem is composed of many building blocks. When all the building blocks are working together, individuals are able to move more seamlessly through the marketplace using a variety of credentials to communicate the skills and knowledge acquired in multiple settings (e.g., school, work, service, self-study). Employers have more detailed and externally-validated information during their hiring and upskilling processes. Schools are better able to count learning obtained outside of academic settings toward a degree or other credential. And the public is informed about our learn-and-work ecosystem. For the ecosystem to function effectively, all parts of the system must be connected and coordinated. The following readiness checklist, informed by work with states, higher education systems and credential providers, is designed to help providers, systems of higher education and states, assess their readiness to engage in incremental credentialing.

- ❑ **Policy.** The entity has [policy](#) in one of three stages: the planning stage, the approval process, or approved and implemented.
- ❑ **Vision.** The entity has a clear vision to transform its credentialing system.
- ❑ **State infrastructure.** There is infrastructure at the state, coordinating board, or system level to support the award of incremental credentials at the institutional level.
- ❑ **Prototyping higher education institutions.** There are higher education institutions ready to develop incremental credentials and pathways.
- ❑ **Participating institutions** are committed and able to **develop incremental credentials.**
- ❑ **Research.** The entity has the capacity to collect data on credentials and learner outcomes, as well as tracking learner progress through credentialing pathways.
- ❑ **Commitment to equity.** The entity is committed to increasing equity.
- ❑ **Workforce readiness factors to support the entity's efforts.**

Resources

Resource: Credential as You Go Cornerstones

The following resource can be downloaded and shared with others when making the case for incremental credentialing. It also describes the national Credential As You Go initiative.

Link to file: <https://credentialasyougo.org/about/credential-as-you-go-cornerstones/>

Resource: Slides to Support Making the Case

The following set of slides may help you make the case for incremental credentialing and describe the incremental credentialing movement in the U.S.

Link to file: https://skilledwork.sharepoint.com/Shared%20Documents/Projects/National/Credential%20As%20You%20Go/CAYG_Making%20the%20Case%20Playbook_Slides_2023.pdf

Resources for Further Information

[Credential As You Go](#) Links:

- [Building Incremental Credentials Playbook](#)
- [Credential As You Go Dictionary](#)
- [Credential As You Go Readiness Checklist](#)
- [Credential As You Go Research Plan](#)
- [Incremental Credentialing Framework Playbook](#)
- [Policy in Incremental Credentialing Playbook](#)
- [Why Does Credential As You Go Matter?](#)
- [Learn & Work Ecosystem Library](#)

References

1EdTech Consortium & Credential Engine. (2022). *Summary of findings: Badge count 2022* [Report]. Retrieved from <https://content.1edtech.org/badge-count-2022/findings>

Credential As You Go. (2023). Retrieved July 14, 2023, from <https://credentialasyougo.org/>

Credential Engine. (2022). *Counting U.S. postsecondary and secondary credentials*. Washington, DC: Credential Engine. Retrieved from https://credentialengine.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Final-CountingCredentials_2022.pdf.

Ferguson, K. (2019, June 24). *Save the degree from irrelevance: Rethinking on-ramps to higher education*. *EvoLLLution*. Retrieved from <https://evollution.com/programming/credentials/save-the-degree-from-irrelevance-rethinking-on-ramps-to-higher-education/>

Fuller, J. B., Langer, C., Nitschke, J., O'Kane, L., Sigelman, M., & Taska, B. (2022). *The emerging degree reset* [Report]. The Burning Glass Institute. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6197797102be715f55c0e0a1/t/6202bda7f1ceee7b0e9b7e2f/1644346798760/The+Emerging+Degree+Reset+%2822.02%29Final.pdf>

Giani, M. (2022, August). *How attaining industry-recognized credentials in high school shapes education and employment outcomes* [Report]. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED625598.pdf>

NSC Research Center. (2023). *SCNC report 2023* [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCNCReport2023.pdf>

Shireman, S. (2023, February 2). *New Coursera survey shows high demand for industry micro-credentials from students and employers in tight labor market*. Retrieved from <https://blog.coursera.org/from-higher-education-to-employment/>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2022, October 26). *Educational attainment and school enrollment in the United States: 2022* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/educational-attainment.html>

Zaber, M. A., Karoly, L. A., & Whipkey, K. (2019). *Reimagining the workforce development and employment system for the 21st Century and beyond*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2768.html

Zanville, H., & Elzey, K. (2020, May 25). Embedding certifications into bachelor's degrees could improve transitions into the labor market. *Evolution*. Retrieved July 6, 2023, from <https://evolution.com/programming/credentials/embedding-certifications-into-bachelors-degrees-could-improve-transitions-into-the-labor-market/>

Zanville, H., & Travers, N. (2022). Transforming the nation's degree-centric postsecondary system to an incremental credential system. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(5), 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2022.2101859>

Acknowledgements

Credential As You Go created this playbook with the help of the following authors and editors. We sincerely appreciate their efforts.

- Lead Author: Nan Travers, [SUNY Empire State University](#) & [Credential As You Go](#)
- Holy Zanville, [George Washington University](#) & [Credential As You Go](#)
- Melissa Goldberg, [Corporation for a Skilled Workforce](#) & [Credential As You Go](#)
- Jenny Poole, [Corporation for a Skilled Workforce](#) & [Credential As You Go](#)

The Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education funds Credential As You Go (Grant R305T210063), which focuses on rapid prototyping of and research on incremental credentials with a national campaign. A Walmart Grant supports systems change for expansion and sustainability of incremental credentials. The opinions expressed in this Playbook are those of the author(s) and do not represent views of our funders.

Additional Resources

Please check our website for updated content, strategies, and examples:
www.credentialasyougo.org