Making Sense of Microcredentials

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Presenters

Sara Weissman
Reporter
Inside Higher Ed
sara.weissman@insidehighered.com

Doug Lederman
Editor and co-founder
Inside Higher Ed
doug.lederman@insidehighered.com

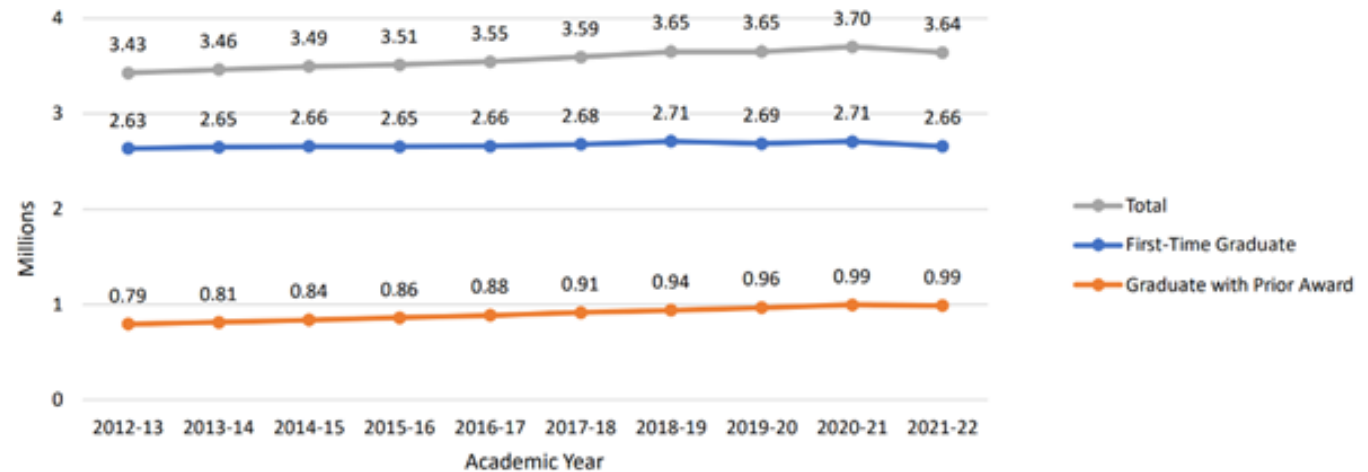# What Are Microcredentials, and Why Talking About Them?

- Microcredentials are **non-degree units of learning** (certificates, certifications, apprenticeships, digital badges) offered by colleges or non-traditional providers (employers, nonprofit groups) **less expensively and over shorter periods of time** than degrees.

- They are **exploding in number** as employers look for new ways of gauging employee readiness and would-be employees seek quicker, more-flexible paths to jobs.

- Information about their relative value lags – creating a bit of a wild west.

Making Sense of Microcredentials

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The Context

- Postsecondary enrollments have been flat or falling in recent years, exacerbated by the pandemic.

- Number of undergrad credentials awarded fell in 2021-22, for 1st time in a decade; only growth was amid certificate earners.

- Public and employer doubts about value of degrees growing, despite evidence that they remain valuable.

Figure 1. Overall Undergraduate Credential Earners

Total: 3.43, 3.46, 3.49, 3.51, 3.55, 3.59, 3.65, 3.65, 3.70, 3.64

First-Time Graduate: 2.63, 2.65, 2.66, 2.65, 2.66, 2.68, 2.71, 2.69, 2.71, 2.66

Graduate with Prior Award: 0.79, 0.81, 0.84, 0.86, 0.88, 0.91, 0.94, 0.96, 0.99, 0.99

Academic Year: 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

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4

What Do We Know?

- There are more than **1 million (1,076,358, to be exact) unique credentials** in the U.S. in 2022, in 18 categories (degrees, certificates, course completion certificates, corporate certifications, badges, licenses, apprenticeships). That was up from **967,734** in 2021.

- Four broad types of credential providers: postsecondary institutions, MOOC providers, non-academic providers, and secondary schools.

--Annual "Counting Credentials" report from Credential Engine

A Diffuse and Confusing Landscape

"The diversity of the marketplace is both a good thing and a challenge. It shows there's a lot of innovation and there's a lot of different ways to advance yourself, but we don't have good information still about which ones are the best ways, and that's what we really have to focus on … It's easy to get lost in this chaos."

--Scott Cheney, CEO, Credential Engine

What Don't We Know?

- Accountability systems for traditional degrees/credentials (accreditation, state oversight, U.S. Education Department) are far from perfect.

- But given how new many of these alternative credentials are, and how many there are, we have far less data by which to judge their effectiveness, and there is no existing infrastructure to oversee them.

"The U.S. Department of Education doesn't collect meaningful data on short-term programs, and that makes it difficult for both policy makers and the public to fully understand the return on investment produced by these credentials. … It's essential that the federal government and states gather and share data on the ROI of workforce programs in a systematic way."
--Joe May and Mark Schneider
"College Going Is Changing; We Need Better Data"

The Goal of 'Stackability'

- "Building blocks where each short-term credential that a person earns builds into a higher-level credential." – Higher Learning Advocates

- Short-term credentials should not be "instead of" degrees – ideally they are a step on a path.

- Particular benefits for underrepresented learners: RAND study found that low-income learners who earn a short-term credential are likelier than peers to earn a second credential within three years.

The 'Some College, No Degree' Crowd

- 40 million Americans who spent time in a postsecondary institution but never earned a credential. Number continues to grow.

- Likely place-bound, certainly time-restricted – unlikely to enroll full-time, return to a physical campus.

- Many colleges and states putting them at the center of their postsecondary attainment strategy, especially with demographic decline in the offing.

Changing Hiring Requirements

- Many employers say they're aware of nondegree credentials, per report from UPCEA. But many still lean on traditional credentials (degrees) in the hiring process.

- A number of states – Maryland, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia -- have joined numerous large employers in dropping their requirements that employees have four-year degrees.

- Sends strong signal, even if it doesn't magically change who is hired.

REMINDER
92% OF STATE JOBS DO NOT REQUIRE FOUR YEAR DEGREES
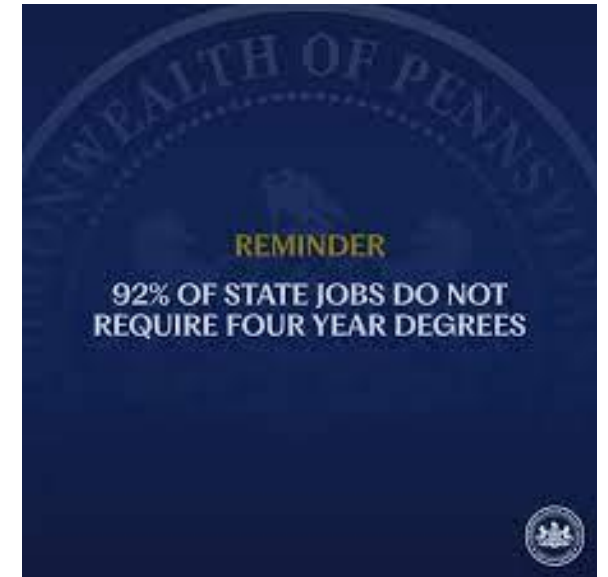
Do College Curriculums Need to Change?

Two viewpoints:

Higher Ed Curricula—the Short Game

It is time that we prepare for adding a more relevant, more responsive, student-centered, technology-delivered curriculum.

What Should Badges Add to the Curriculum? Nothing!

Instead, digital badges should enhance and highlight the value
of what students are already learning.

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Thanks