



# Lifelong Learning

## Through Alternative Credentials

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In 2017, the Digital Economy continues to evolve at breakneck speed. New technologies emerge that seemingly drive tectonic shifts in how we connect, communicate, and consume. Within this “always on” digital world, though, a less-told story revolves around the impact of these changes on employer needs, student know-how, and the ability of universities to remain on the cutting edge of skills-based training.

To be sure, the Digital Economy demands talent. In the 12 months preceding the publication of **Lifelong Learning Through Alternative Credentials**, more than 1.3 million software development jobs were open in the United States. Employers report that computer-related positions are the most difficult type of role to fill, but perhaps the most sobering fact involves the readiness of graduates to tackle the tasks and challenges that the Digital Economy has. According to a McKinsey study, although 72% of universities believe that their curricula adequately prepare students for success in the workforce, only 45% of students and 42% of employers agreed.

Keeping up with the Digital Economy is difficult, and in response, students and education administrators alike have witnessed the rise of Boot Camps and other alternative credential programs. Nonetheless, increasing numbers of universities (led by leaders in their schools of professional studies and continuing education) are bucking this trend by recognizing the need for a new pedagogy—one that combines technical instruction with career readiness training and access to industry.

Today, Trilogy works with 20 universities across the United States as a Continuing Education Program Manager (CEPM), creating and managing skills-based training programs that are university-run, student-tested, and employer-approved. We’ve invested more than 3,500 hours into curriculum development, collected more than 8,500 student feedback reports, and engaged more than 500 employers—all in an effort to understand what it takes to produce workforce-ready students. Collectively, we’ve gained unique visibility into the trends affecting students, employers, and universities as they work toward meeting the needs of the Digital Economy, and we invest those insights back into our classrooms.

I welcome you to read **Lifelong Learning Through Alternative Credentials**. In it, you’ll find many of the groundbreaking insights that are driving how universities are preparing today’s students for tomorrow’s jobs.

We are thrilled to partner with Inside Higher Ed in delivering this booklet, and we hope you enjoy reading.

Sincerely,

**Dan Sommer**

*Founder and CEO*

*Trilogy Education Services*

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# Introduction

Lifelong learning once meant that some adults, some years after finishing their undergraduate education, would enroll in graduate or professional degree programs. While some still do just that, a broad array of options now exists for those seeking new skills or career shifts.

Boot camps, competency-based learning, badges and more provide ways for adults to organize and demonstrate learning, without additional degrees. This compilation of articles looks at some of the options, and why colleges and nontraditional providers see this as such an important area.

*Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues, and welcomes your thoughts on this compilation and your ideas for future coverage.

--The Editors  
editor@insidehighered.com

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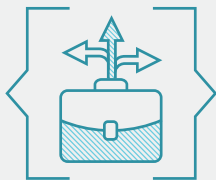
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# News

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

## Coding Goes Mainstream

By MAXINE JOSELOW

Traditional colleges, including Northeastern University and Bellevue College, are entering the coding boot camp market by partnering with boot camp providers or creating their own programs.

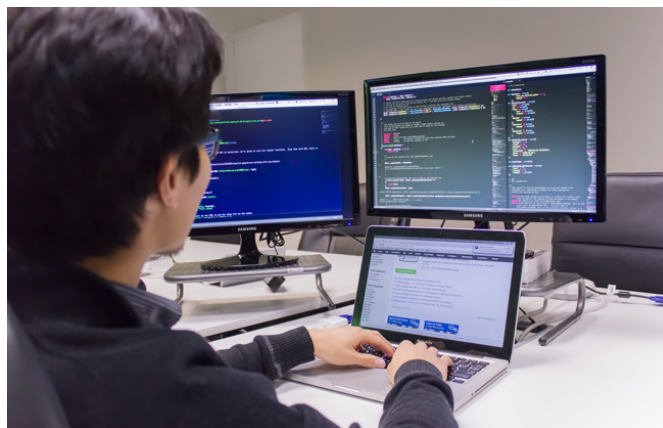
The demand for employees familiar with coding and data analytics has never been higher. By [one estimate](#), the number of job openings including the phrase “data analytics” has increased by 372 percent since 2011.

Many traditional colleges are rushing to meet this demand. And there’s arguably no better way than by entering the coding boot camp market.

Coding boot camps are immersive programs that teach students programming languages. They often last several months and offer some sort of career counseling at the end. In 2015, according to a [study](#) by Course Report, 67 coding boot camps nationwide produced over 16,000 total graduates and raked in \$172 million in revenue.

Some colleges have created their own boot camps from scratch. Others have partnered with outside organizations that already offer boot camps, drawing on existing instructors and resources.

“The whole premise of the coding boot camp is there’s a big skills gap,” said Kevin Saito, vice president of marketing and product management for [Coding Dojo](#), which offers boot camps in six cities as well as online. “The need for developers in our economy exceeds institutions’ ability to produce them.... But web development as a skill itself is something that someone can pick up in a relatively short



amount of time with perseverance.”

### Pushing for Partnership

Graduates of Bellevue College don’t have to look far for jobs in the tech industry. The community college’s north campus in Bellevue, Wash., sits across the street from Microsoft headquarters. Dozens of other tech companies -- including Amazon, Google and Boeing -- have offices nearby in the Seattle area.



"We're lucky. We kind of won the zip code lottery," said Mark Veljkov, product manager for Bellevue.

The college is capitalizing on its luck by partnering with Coding Dojo to provide a boot camp. Starting in September, students will meet two days a week in a classroom on Bellevue's continuing education campus. They will also complete online assignments through Coding Dojo's learning management system. (They will not be enrolled as credit-seeking students at the college.)

Partnering with Coding Dojo was much easier than launching a new program would have been, Veljkov said. "Creating high-quality content for a coding boot camp is expensive," he said. "You not only have to create the content, but you also have to find subject-matter experts. And that's just to get you started, since sometimes six months later you have to redo the content because the technology has changed."

The typical student in the boot camp will be a working professional, Saito said. "These are people who have a good day job and are looking to enhance their skills," he said. "Maybe they work in a somewhat technical field, and they're looking to become more technical. Maybe they're a software tester, and by learning Ruby on Rails or Java they could transition to a software developer."

Graduates of the program will get a hand with finding jobs. Recruiters from the staffing firm Insight Global will help graduates identify their interests and secure a permanent po-

sition or contract work, Veljkov said.

The program comes with a relatively steep price tag. Each web development stack has three modules, and students can pay \$1,299 for an individual module or \$3,500 for all three modules. Since Coding Dojo is unaccredited, students can't receive financial aid to offset that cost.

While these figures might give some potential students sticker shock, they're fairly typical of the market. The average boot camp costs around \$11,000 for 11 weeks of training, according to the 2015 Course Report survey.

Still, Bellevue has been mindful of opening up the program to low-income students. The college's Economic Workforce and Development Office can offer some students funds through a federal grant, Veljkov said. The college will also track the progress of a [2015 project from the U.S. Department of Education](#), which could pave the way for access to federal financial aid.

In October 2015, the department announced an experimental program called Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships. The program provides a pathway to federal aid for partnerships between colleges and nontraditional providers, including those that run skills boot camps or offer unaccredited online courses.

"The feds are pushing really hard for more accountability and partnering from schools," Veljkov said. "I'll be anxious to see how the Department of Ed's project comes out. If they expand it, I'm going to push

Bellevue to be part of that."

Besides Bellevue, several other colleges have opted to provide boot camps through partnerships. [Institutions such as Lynn University have worked with nonaccredited General Assembly](#), the largest boot camp provider, while Northwestern University and the University of Texas at Austin have teamed up with [Trilogy Education Services](#).

UT Austin launched the first round of its boot camp in April 2016 and the second round in July 2016, said Stephen Walls, deputy director of Texas Extended Campus and senior lecturer of marketing at UT Austin. The program costs \$10,000 for 24 weeks, and the university remains hopeful about working with the Education Department to receive federal aid in the future, he said.

"The overarching goal is to get students both the educational knowledge and the practical skills to be ready for an appropriate job coming right out of the boot camp," Walls said. "What's been really exciting is to see interest from employers in the IT industry broadly, meaning companies that are focused on IT services as well as companies that have large IT departments."

In September 2016, Northwestern launched a boot camp that costs \$9,500 and targets working professionals, said Mary Cohen, associate dean of academic programs at Northwestern's School of Professional Studies. Northwestern will oversee the curriculum and faculty hiring, while Trilogy will provide its signature platform and a full-time

career coach, she said.

"We really wanted an experienced partner who had direct connections in this field and who could help our students make a direct career path from this very short, intensive program into the job market," Cohen said. "From that standpoint, we are starting ahead of the curve by having a partner who already has experience in this area."

### Going Solo

Not all institutions feel pressure to find a partner. For at least one university, boot camps are best undertaken as a solo venture.

Northeastern University offers its own boot camp, called [Level](#), in four cities. The program graduated its third group of students in July 2016, with 85 graduates in total so far.

Northeastern has a longstanding, popular [co-op program](#), which allows students to alternate semesters of academic study with semesters of full-time employment. By the time they graduate, participants in the co-op program have a year to 18 months of work experience under their belts.

The ethos of the co-op program drove Northeastern to enter the boot camp market, said Philomena

Mantella, the university's senior vice president of enrollment management and student life.

"Northeastern has always been sort of at the juncture of higher education and industry, most symbolically with our signature co-op program," she said. "We acknowledge that there are certain high-demand fields, where our traditional format of instruction is not the only way to create the skills and competencies that can meet today and tomorrow's industry needs. The boot camp format is focused on a high-demand area."

True to its name, Level boasts different tiers of programs. Students can currently choose from an introductory program called Level Set, an intermediate program called Level Core and a special program called Level Focus tailored to the domain of marketing and analytics.

Students in hybrid sessions of Level Set and Level Core complete lessons online at their own pace, meeting periodically in person. Level Set costs \$4,995, while the other two programs cash in at \$7,995.

Level is distinguished by its emphasis on experiential learning, said Nick Ducoff, vice president for new

ventures. All students work with an employer partner on a capstone project, applying data skills to real-world cases, he said.

For example, one student in the Boston program recently worked with a Latin American start-up that offers designer handbag rentals, Ducoff said. The student analyzed data and conducted a survey to determine which handbags were typically rented and for how long, he said.

Many students already hold an advanced degree and are looking to grow their tech skills. According to a survey taken upon entrance to the program, approximately 30 percent of students have a master's degree or a Ph.D., Ducoff said.

Graduates of the program have had success with securing employment. According to a survey taken six months after graduation, 100 percent of students from the first cohort are now working, Ducoff said.

Many have secured jobs in their field -- graduates are working as a commodity analyst at Raytheon, with a defense contractor and as an ecommerce web analyst at the women's apparel company J. Jill. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/10/traditional-colleges-enter-coding-boot-camp-market>

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# Risky Gimmick or Risk Sharing?

BY PAUL FAIN

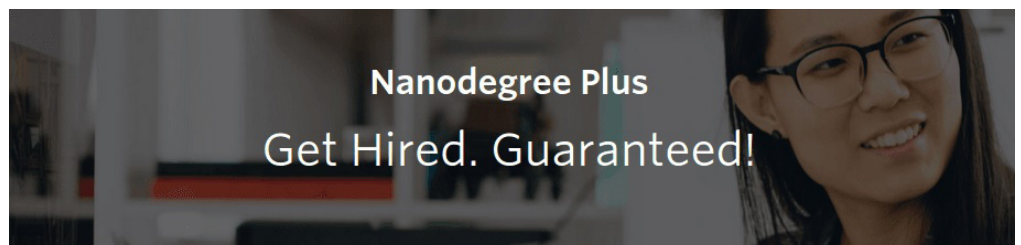
Udacity and some boot camps offer money-back guarantees despite state bans on job-placement promises in higher education. But some say the offers are a form of risk sharing worth considering.

In 2016 Udacity, a Silicon Valley-based online course provider, announced a new perk for those considering its nanodegrees, which are short-term bundles of courses in technology-related fields such as data science, basic programming and app development.

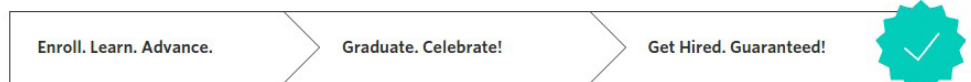
“Earn a nanodegree credential and we will guarantee you a job within six months of graduation or give you 100 percent of your tuition back,” Sebastian Thrun, Udacity’s co-founder, [wrote in January](#). (Thrun left his CEO perch with the company in April 2016.)

Udacity isn’t the only nontraditional higher education provider to offer some form of money-back guarantee. Several coding boot camps, including Bloc, the Flatiron School, App Academy and others, have in place [similar tuition refunds](#) that are tied to employment.

The idea, say those companies, is to stand behind their product,



Get hired within 6 months of graduating or  
receive a 100% tuition refund



putting money toward the promise that students can earn a valuable credential in exchange for their tuition dollars, time and effort. And the money-back guarantees come as public doubt is growing about the value of postsecondary credentials.

State and federal agencies, however, tend to take a dim view of money-back guarantees in higher education. After cracking down in past decades on colleges that made

fraudulent promises of high-paying jobs for graduates, regulators generally prohibit colleges and even nonaccredited providers from offering such guarantees.

For example, laws governing for-profit postsecondary institutions in New York State prevent “assuring or seeming to assure employment in any business, establishment or occupation.” The state also requires education providers to say in enroll-

ment agreements that “while placement service may be provided, it is understood that the school cannot promise or guarantee employment to any student or graduate.”

California has similar rules in place, requiring that institutions not “promise or guarantee employment, or otherwise overstate the availability of jobs upon graduation.”

Likewise, the Federal Trade Commission [has investigated](#) degree-is-suing colleges over job-placement claims, sometimes collaborating with the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies in those probes.

Yet the rules on money-back guarantees are hardly clear, varying across states and applying differently to noninstitutional online providers. As a result, Udacity and boot camps have largely avoided running afoul of the rules, typically through being exempt from state licensing or with money-back guarantees that sound more like tuition-refund policies than riskier employment guarantees.

And some higher education observers think the time has come to revisit the concept, saying a money-back guarantee can be a valuable form of accountability that in some ways resembles the thinking behind risk sharing in higher education.

Risk sharing, an [increasingly popular concept](#) with bipartisan support in Washington, refers to policies that would put colleges at least partially on the financial hook for their graduates’ ability to repay loans or their performance on other debt- and

employment-related metrics.

Beth Akers, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, in August [wrote](#) that higher education offers the sort of expensive, complicated product that is well suited to a money-back guarantee.

In the essay, Akers cited several traditional institutions that have edged closer to this approach, such as the State University of New York at Buffalo, which [allows students](#) to finish their degrees free if they fail to graduate after four years despite participating in advising programs, declaring a major early and taking full course loads.

Likewise, Adrian College, a private institution in Michigan, reimburses students for all or part of their student loan payments if they earn less than \$37,000 in annual pay after graduation.

Udacity and the boot camps have taken this promise farther, Akers said in an interview.

“This is institutions getting ahead of risk sharing,” she said. “They’re the innovators in the space.”

Money-back guarantees could be worth a look if they go beyond marketing gimmicks, said Rick O’Donnell. The founder and CEO of Skills Fund, a [company](#) that is both a private lender and a kind of alternative accreditor for boot camps, O’Donnell is a former Colorado regulator who currently serves on the federal panel that oversees accreditors.

“If done well, [guarantees] can be an indication about how the school is standing by the education they provide and their students,” he said.

However, O’Donnell said, colleges and even noninstitutional providers should tread carefully. Boot camps and Udacity are subject to the FTC’s rules on truth in advertising, he said. And at the state level, job guarantees could spark an investigation by an attorney general’s office.

The best way to avoid such scrutiny, said O’Donnell, is to not include too many qualifications with a guarantee and to stick with a “forthright statement of integrity and quality.”

Some boot camps have been frustrated by the murkiness around money-back guarantees and resulting regulatory risk, he said, and have avoided making such offers.

“Why don’t we have a regulatory scheme that would allow that?” O’Donnell said. “It’s a conversation that higher education should be having.”

### When Regulations Apply

Back in 2014, California’s for-profit regulator made waves by somewhat belatedly [warning several boot camps](#) that they were operating in violation of state law and would face fines and possible closure if they did not apply for state recognition.

Several companies [successfully did so](#), including General Assembly, the largest of the boot camps. But App Academy, Udacity and Bloc currently are not approved by California’s regulator, the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education, said Joanne Wenzel, the bureau’s chief.

Bloc has filed an application. So has App Academy, but the company [was fined](#) \$50,000 in 2015 for oper-

ating in California without a license.

Udacity received an exemption, said Wenzel, because it charges less in tuition than the minimum state threshold for being licensed, which is \$2,500 per year.

A spokeswoman for Udacity declined to comment beyond confirming that the company received an exemption and charges less than the threshold.

It's also not clear if the three companies' guarantees would violate California law. App Academy, for example, does not charge tuition up front, but instead takes an 18-percent cut of graduates' first year of salary. But its boot-camp preparation course comes with a money-back guarantee that graduates will be accepted into the most selective boot camps. *(Note: This paragraph has been updated from an earlier version to clarify how App Academy's tuition model works.)*

Wenzel said the three boot camps' language is "more along the lines of a refund policy," but she adds that "every case needs to be reviewed in depth and probably passed through our legal office before a decision is made."

In New York, App Academy has received "candidate school" status, meaning they are in the process of applying to be licensed. Flatiron, Udacity and Bloc currently are not licensed to operate there. It's not

entirely clear that they need to be, particularly for online programs. Even higher education lawyers are unsure about this question but said a money-back guarantee could provoke unwelcome attention.

An official with the New York Education Department's Bureau of Proprietary School Supervision said the state's rules on money-back guarantees are "relevant" in these examples. But the official would not comment on the "propriety of the schools' advertisements."

### Job Placement Is Job One

Bloc and the Flatiron School began their money-back guarantees before Udacity. Both apply to online programs (Bloc is online only), where such guarantees are less of a regulatory challenge than they are with in-person programs.

"We wanted to put our money where our mouth is," said Clint Schmidt, Bloc's CEO, adding that the company's tuition-reimbursement guarantee helps students be more at ease about the money and time they will spend completing Bloc's online programs in software development or design, which can take nine months to complete and cost \$19,500 or \$9,800, respectively.

Flatiron spent months designing and preparing its money-back guarantee, which the company began in 2015.

The philosophy behind it, said

Adam Enbar, the boot camp's co-founder and CEO, is that Flatiron knows exactly what it takes for students to get a job in the field. "If that doesn't work for you, you should get your money back," he said.

The promise goes both ways, said Enbar, and helps encourage students to do what their instructors recommend.

The company promises that students who complete the work and meet Flatiron's requirements, such as answering emails and showing up to interviews, are guaranteed a job within 180 days.

So far, the company has yet to issue a refund. Its [jobs report](#), which was audited by an independent accounting firm, claims a 99 percent job-placement rate for 2015 graduates who were seeking employment.

"We're keeping ourselves on the hook for outcomes," said Enbar.

Even so, he's not sure money-back guarantees are feasible for traditional higher education, where financial aid and federal loans would complicate the offers. They work for boot camps like Flatiron, Enbar said, because the sole goal of the enterprise is to help people get jobs as programmers.

"We are not intending to be a replacement for college," he said. "Colleges are selling much more than that." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/11/29/udacity-and-boot-camps-offer-money-back-guarantees-job-placement>



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# Accreditation Outside the Academy

BY PAUL FAIN

As boot camps, online courses and other nontraditional academic offerings expand, several organizations angle to play an accreditor-like role in the growing space.

Interest is building for an alternative type of accreditation for online courses, boot camps, corporate training and other nontraditional education providers. And while that form of quality assurance remains a work in progress, a growing number of organizations are seeking to fill the need.

For example, a group of accreditors, associations and other established players in higher education have banded together to create a new umbrella group on quality review for alternative providers.

"We think it's time to start having conversations, much the way regional accreditors do," said Leah Matthews, executive director of the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, a national accreditor that has participated in the umbrella group's initial meetings. "If this takes off really fast, we think it would be good to have some groundwork laid."

Likewise, Skills Fund, an [upstart form of accreditor](#) and a student lender for boot camps, has expanded its reach. In March 2016, it an-

nounced a partnership with General Assembly, the biggest boot camp provider. So far 25 boot-camp companies have teamed up with Skills Fund.

And Entangled Solutions, a higher education [consulting firm](#), also has made noise in the quality-assurance space. The company in 2015 released a [paper](#) describing its approach, which focuses on measuring the value that programs claim to be providing, comparing it to what students actually buy.

Michael Horn, a principal consultant with Entangled Solutions, has helped lead an [effort to create a nonprofit group](#) that will develop quality standards for nontraditional providers. Participants in those discussions include boot camp providers; Beverly Perdue, the former North Carolina governor; and officials from Western Governors University, a pioneer in competency-based education.

The U.S. Department of Education has helped fan the flames for alternative accreditation. In 2015, the feds announced an [experiment](#)



to make a small number of nonaccredited education providers eligible for federal financial aid. For the boot camps and online courses to qualify, however, they must partner with an accredited college and bring along a third-party quality assurance entity (QAE).

The department plans to announce the winning eight or so proposals sometime soon. And several of the potential accreditors that were part of applications have banded together to help create the new umbrella group.

The nascent organization still lacks a name. But likely participants

have met three times, with another gathering slated soon. The group has received some start-up money from USA Funds and will be housed at the Presidents' Forum, a collaboration of colleges and organizations that focuses on adult students and online learning.

Participants so far include officials from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Quality Matters, the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, the National College Credit Recommendation Service, the United States Distance Learning Association, Charter Oak State College and the Online Learning Consortium.

The broad range of organizations means several approaches to measuring and verifying the quality of academic programs are represented.

"We do all take a different approach and bring different strengths," said Deb Adair, executive director of Quality Matters, which reviews and certifies individual online courses.

Adair said the new group is working on "how to collaborate in ways that make the most sense for us and the industry."

Ed Klonoski, Charter Oak's president, has helped pull together the various organizations. He said it includes ones that focus on quality review at the course, academic program or institutional level.

The group's goals are still taking shape. But Klonoski said they could

include collaboration on national standards for academic quality among alternative providers. A big part of the work will be information sharing, including research on what works in quality review.

"We're about ready to lay out a landscape," he said. "We clearly want to have a voice at the policy table."

Whether or not the group might have a revenue-seeking side remains to be determined, said possible participants, who said there are mixed feelings among the group on that question.

role like that of accreditors. To participate in the experiment, colleges must get approval from their accreditor -- so the new form of review appears somewhat symbolic.

However, the department is interested in seeing what emerges in the review part of the experiment. And groups that work as third-party quality reviewers as part of the project will have a leg up if alternative accreditation heats up.

"Somebody needs to set a lead role in setting baseline, credit-level equivalencies, for everybody," not just alternative providers, said Burck

Smith, the CEO and founder of Straighter-Line, a company that offers low-cost online courses that lead to credit recommendations from the American Council on Education

“

The new QAE standards need to be decided and governed by a nonprofit organization.

”

### Trust but Verify

Alternative forms of education and training are expanding. That, in turn, is driving calls for trusted outside groups that can kick the tires on those education providers and then provide information students can trust.

"The new QAE standards need to be decided and governed by a nonprofit organization," said Paul Freedman, the CEO and co-founder of Entangled Solutions' parent company.

The federal experiment on non-traditional providers is contributing some momentum, although it's not clear that the quality-assurance entities eventually will grow into a

Take boot camps, for example.

A growing number of students are willing to pay more than \$10,000 on average for 12 weeks or so of training in coding, data science or other information technology-related fields -- as well as in business and other areas. But a big part of the draw, however, is that boot camp providers typically claim job-placement rates of more than 90 percent. But what do those numbers mean, and who's checking them?

That's where Skills Fund comes in. The company reviews the pedagogy of academic programs, curriculum, the admissions process, leadership of providers and out-



comes like the job-placement rates and starting salaries of graduates, said Rick O'Donnell, the company's founder and CEO, who also serves on the federal panel that oversees accreditors.

"We're actually doing quality assurance every day," he said. "We do a comprehensive look. Outcomes are the anchor."

Skills Fund has reviewed and approved the training at boot camps that enroll 60 percent of the fast-growing sector's students. Several boot camp providers have failed to make the cut, said O'Donnell, which means students in those programs are not eligible for loans from Skills Fund.

Participation for boot camp companies is voluntary. But they must open their books to earn a stamp of approval. In March 2016 Skills Fund announced that General Assembly had gone through the process. The

lender will offer financing to eligible students at a few General Assembly campuses to start, with plans to roll out to all 15 of the company's locations.

"At General Assembly, we are incredibly mindful that education is an investment of both time and money," Anna Lindow, the company's general manager of campus education and operations, said in a written statement, "which is why we've always built our programs with an education-to-employment approach -- keeping both student experience and ROI top of mind."

It's not just boot camps that are joining together to find some mutually agreeable standards for learning outside of the traditional classroom.

For example, six colleges that have long focused on adult students recently created the Consortium for the Assessment of College Equivalency (CACE). The group has

created an agreement on how and when to grant credit for college-level learning from noncollegiate settings.

Charter Oak, Excelsior College, SUNY Empire State College, the Community College of Vermont, Granite State College and Thomas Edison State College are the consortium's members.

The goal of the agreement, said Tina Goodyear, who directs Excelsior's Center for the Assessment of Post-Traditional Instruction, Training and Learning, is for the colleges to share information about their review process of the creditworthiness of students' previous learning and experience. Members of the group have agreed to accept one another's reviews.

"It's really hard to get six colleges to agree and share," said Goodyear. But she adds that "it will be a cost saver for institutions." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/18/groups-seek-become-quality-reviewers-boot-camps-online-courses-and-other-noncollege>

## Enablers, but for Boot Camps

BY CARL STRAUMSHEIM

Ed-tech companies are seeing a new market of program management developing as colleges get into the coding boot camp business.

The rise of coding boot camps is creating a new market for companies that help colleges break into the business.

The growth in online education at public and private nonprofit institutions created what has been come to be known as online program management (OPM) providers -- a term that encompasses companies such as 2U, Academic Partnerships and Bisk Education, but also divisions of larger education companies such as Pearson and Wiley. Central to many of them is that they offer marketing, enrollment, instructional design and student support services to colleges looking to offer fully online degree programs.

Now a new market segment is materializing. Call it "continuing education program management."

Start-ups not affiliated with universities -- think companies such as Flatiron School, General Assembly and dozens of others -- already have a head start in the boot camp space. But the market is still developing, and the companies working

Northwestern | CODING BOOT CAMP



with colleges to launch their own boot camps say higher education, with its tradition of offering continuing education, is well positioned to capture market share.

"The boot camp space doesn't have to be owned by Silicon Valley-backed companies," said Todd Zipper, CEO of the Learning House. "It could easily be brought to you by Ohio State University."

Learning House has since its founding in 2001 established itself as an OPM provider that mainly works with small- and medium-size colleges. In 2015, the company made two acquisitions: Acatar, an

The Coding Boot Camp  
at UT Austin

UCLA Extension  
The Coding Boot Camp

education platform the company said would make it more competitive among prestigious universities, and the Software Guild, a boot camp provider.

Since then, Learning House has signed partnerships with five institutions to build online boot camps: Baker University, Kent State University, Oregon State University, the University of Georgia and Wichita State University (the Software Guild also had an existing partnership with Concordia University St. Paul). Some of them, like Baker, already have boot camps up and running, while others have begun marketing

and intend to enroll their first students later in 2017.

"The Learning House is in the business of translating curricula from face-to-face to online, so we saw an opportunity there," Zipper said about the company's expansion into the boot camp business. He added that he views boot camps as a "logical extension" for colleges as well, given their history of teaching computer science.

Trilogy Education Services works exclusively in this market. The startup is younger -- it launched its first class in fall 2015 -- but its list of clients already includes 18 universities, among them Northwestern University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of California, Berkeley. About 10 of them have boot camps up and running.

Unlike Learning House, Trilogy focuses on boot camps where education is delivered mostly face-to-face. Its boot camp at the University of Texas at Austin, for example, meets three times a week -- three hours each on Tuesdays and Thursdays and four hours on Saturdays -- for six months.

"I thought that if we could combine the best of what higher education institutions provide and the format and some of the best practices of boot camps, we could have a very powerful combination," Dan Sommer, CEO and founder of Trilo-

gy, said in an interview. "Historically continuing education has been a center of innovation at many institutions -- a place where there's a lot of focus on meeting the needs of industry. There are certain areas where we at Trilogy believe we can supplement and support [them]."

Of course, not all colleges are choosing to partner with companies such as Learning House and Trilogy. Some, like Northeastern University, have [launched boot camps on their own](#). Northeastern now offers its Level boot camp in five different locations in the U.S. and Canada.

Baker University, a private Meth-

find faculty -- especially locally, because there's a lot of money to be made in the private sector."

The university is exploring additional ways to offer credentials other than college credit, and is considering additional programs to add to its boot camp lineup, Bucher said.

"We're trying to find ways to deliver Baker education and meet the needs of our working adults and industry," Bucher said. "Boot camps are one option."

Several independent boot camps market their programs to potential students with money-back guarantees tied to job placement. Many

states prohibit that practice, however, though it is [in some cases unclear](#) how the bans apply to boot camps.

Mindful of those rules, the colleges

launching boot camps and the companies helping them are steering clear of making guarantees.

"We try to avoid making those claims and guarantees at all cost," Zipper said, but added, "talking to people about results is a different thing."

Similarly, Sommer said, money-back guarantees are "not something we need to do nor desire to do. If we're providing a great service to students, we're priced right and we're delivering good results to students, that's not an area of differentiation that we're focused on."

Awarding college credit to stu-

“

I thought that if we could combine the best of what higher education institutions provide and the format and some of the best practices of boot camps, we could have a very powerful combination

”

odist institution located southwest of Kansas City, Kan., was not in a position to go it alone, said Jacob Bucher, dean of the School of Professional and Graduate Studies. The college, which enrolls slightly under 3,000 students, turned to the Software Guild mainly for help with finding qualified instructors to teach programming in Java and .NET. The boot camp enrolled its first students last fall.

"We didn't at the time have the faculty to launch a full-on coding bachelor's degree," Bucher said in an interview. "With higher education accreditation standards, it's hard to



dents who finish the boot camp programs could be a differentiating factor, but Sommer and Zipper said that idea has only reached the discussion stage at this point. Since boot camps typically attract working professionals either looking to add to their skill set or make a career change, colleges aren't prioritizing awarding college credit.

"We're not trying to force the issue, because we know we can make the model work without it, but we think over time it can open them up to a

substantially larger buyer base," Zipper said.

That audience -- working professionals -- presents a lucrative opportunity for colleges.

Boot camp programs are normally priced between \$10,000 and \$15,000, and students generally pay the entire sum themselves. Baker's program is priced at \$8,500, but it is set to increase to \$10,000, Bucher said. The university offers a \$500 discount for alumni.

As with OPM providers, the com-

panies helping colleges build boot camps normally pay for start-up costs and recover their investments through tuition revenue-sharing deals.

Sommer declined to say how big a share of the tuition revenue Trilogy keeps, but he described the agreements the company makes with colleges as "extremely equitable." Bucher said the university keeps less than half of the tuition revenue generated by its partnership with the Software Guild. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/10/program-management-market-expands-boot-camp-space>

# 'Safe Space' for Experimentation or Dangerous

BY PAUL FAIN

Two experts -- Barmak Nassirian and Paul LeBlanc -- discuss federal experiment to open up student aid to eight noncollege job training programs.

In August 2016, the U.S. Department of Education [unveiled](#) eight applications it had selected to participate in an experiment to allow students to use federal financial aid to attend programs run by colleges and nontraditional providers, including boot camps, companies offering online courses and employers. Each partnership also features a quality-assurance entity, which will act like an alternative form of accreditor.

The project -- dubbed Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships program, or EQUIP -- has both fans and critics. So Inside Higher Ed moderated a debate over email between Paul LeBlanc, president of Southern New Hampshire University, who helped create EQUIP during a stint at the department in 2015, and Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, who has questioned aspects of EQUIP. The exchange follows.

**Q. How could the EQUIP program open a "loophole" to future waste,**

**fraud and abuse, as you and other critics have argued?**

**Nassirian:** While the colleges participating in the program are highly reputable institutions, there are multiple grounds for concern with this initiative and the policy goals that it may be designed to rationalize. The program is labeled an experiment but fails virtually every design requirement for one. It does not draw from a random sample of institutions or potentially eligible new providers, uses actual students with no apparent safeguards against consequences of failed experiments, relies on predictions of unproven third parties who have nothing to lose if they turn out to be grossly incorrect and will end (presumably declaring victory by acclamation) way before actual data on its long-term impact on students and taxpayers could be known.

Given all this, it seems that EQUIP is really intended as a pretextual



prototype of a policy whose architects believe couldn't possibly go wrong. That this judgment is being rendered by an agency with a consistent history of gatekeeping failure ought to be quite alarming. The U.S. Department of Education has had a catastrophic track record of poor oversight of current providers, and here it is on the verge of expanding the universe of potential participants to thousands of unknown players on the say-so of untested and questionable new quality-assurance entities.

I appreciate the instinct behind the effort, which is to desperately seek out ways in which to broaden access, contain costs and promote innovation. But I'm afraid that the



*Barmak Nassirian*

urgency of quickly realizing these ideals is blinding policy makers to the predictable pitfalls of what they are proposing. We've been down this road before with previous panaceas. Consider, for example, how the elimination of the 50 percent rule [which allowed all of an academic program to be offered virtually or online, whereas previously programs had to be at least 50 percent in person] 10 years ago was supposed to accomplish all of the above, but gave us a decade of rampant fraud instead. I fear that EQUIP is just greasing the skids for a new cycle of waste, fraud and abuse in the hands of fly-by-nights, "disruptive innovators" and here today, gone tomorrow start-ups.

**LeBlanc:** As someone at the table when EQUIP was designed, I can attest to the keenly felt anxiety among many in the department about not revisiting the fraud and abuse that followed the lifting of the 50 percent rule. That concern has had a significant shaping influence on EQUIP. How so? Critics within the department successfully limited the

number of approved experiments to eight when many of us hoped for two dozen or more. The quality-assurance entities that will offer up new approaches to quality assurance for non-institute of higher education (IHE) providers must do

evaluations at multiple points in the program schedule (early stage, midpoint, completion and post program) and report on that provider's performance to the IHE partner, the regional accreditor and the department every six months. Reinforcing this belt-and-suspenders approach, the host IHE's accreditor must also approve the partnership. In other words, the experiment is being kept on a very short leash and is under a high level of scrutiny.

When we look back at the lifting of the 50 percent rule, there was nothing like EQUIP's safeguards in the 1998 demonstration project that tested a waiver of the rule, nor in the 2005 Higher Education Reconciliation Act that [codified](#) the rule's elimination and spawned the rapid growth of online education. In stark contrast, the most important goal of EQUIP is around discovering new and better approaches to ensuring program quality.

Its focus on outcomes, outputs, rigor in design and assessment, and transparen-

cy is exactly what we need as we assess new innovative approaches to educational delivery, approaches that try to lower cost, increase access and improve quality -- a goal that Barmak agrees with in his comments. That focus on quality, how we know and what we report is fundamentally different than the 50 percent rule change and its lack of quality assurance. It is precisely why there should be support of EQUIP.

I had to chuckle just a bit at the idea that EQUIP was rushed into being with false urgency. I started working on it in March 2015, when I started a three-month stint within the department, and it has taken 18 months of discussion, debate and labored-over detail to get this far. There's much work still to be done before we see the first programs approved and launched. I wouldn't get too hung up on the word "experiment" here. Better to think of EQUIP as simply creating a very modest

*Paul LeBlanc*



and tightly controlled space to invite innovation around high-quality programs and new quality assurance, to learn and to inform eventual policy making. Eight tightly controlled partnerships hardly puts us on the “verge of expanding the universe of potential participants to thousands of unknown players on the say-so of untested and questionable new quality-assurance entities.”

If we are to eventually reform and improve higher education, we need the sandboxes that programs like EQUIP provide -- carefully managed “safe zones” for trying new things and assessing their efficacy.

**Q. Could the experiment lead to an alternative form of accreditation, and are you happy with the mix of selected quality-assurance entities?**

**LeBlanc:** For many of those working on the design of EQUIP and then advocating for it within the Education Department, the most important part of the experiment is the standing up of new approaches to quality assurance that could either lead to improved accreditation practices among existing accreditors or the creation of new, alternative accreditors. Fair or not (I think much is unfair), there is pervasive criticism of existing accreditation in and outside the department. And whatever the criticism, I think we’d acknowledge that most accreditation is built on a foundation of inputs or prescriptions. I led the working group that created the quality-assurance entity questions outlined in the *Federal Register* [notice](#) that an-

nounced EQUIP, and there are three immediate observations one might objectively make by looking at the questions being asked of the QAE process:

- The questions focus on detailed outcomes and outputs;
- There is rigor defined to an unusual degree (note, for example, item B3 on the validity of assessments);
- There is a demand for transparent data and reporting.

Indeed, one could legitimately ask how many traditional institutions would today pass muster if their accreditors adopted these standards.

Generally, I am happy with the mix of quality-assurance entities chosen for the experiment. It includes some very traditional established players like the American Council on Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, some players who have worked in quality assurance in other ways and are now bringing their strengths to the challenge (the American National Standards Institute and Quality Matters), and some QAEs not previously on the radar screen that may take very novel approaches to the questions outlined in the Federal Register (such as Entangled Ventures, Climb and Tyton Partners). The fact that some innovators roll their eyes at the more traditional players while some traditionalists do the same for the new, largely unknown QAEs is probably a good sign in the end. As a skeptic of some specialized accreditation, I’m not sure I would have included HackerRank, given

the narrowness of their scope. But if they can successfully address the questions we outlined, more power to them.

The idea -- one can’t say it enough, but this is an experiment -- is to see how well these new approaches work. It’s easy to imagine that some might fall short of what is desired, others might contribute some valuable new approaches or thinking to accreditation and others may prove so effective that they could be encouraged to apply as Title I approved accreditors. There was some hope that existing regional accreditors might participate, and while none raised their hands in the end, they will be watching closely and it’s quite possible that the experiment sparks new thinking among them.

**Nassirian:** Unlike Paul, I am not as sanguine about accreditation and its effectiveness in assuring institutional integrity, although I do continue to harbor hopes that we can restore and preserve accreditation through fairly minor tweaks to its statutory function in Title IV. Having said this, I think we should also be open to alternative mechanisms of quality assurance in case efforts to get the accreditors to take their gatekeeping role more seriously continue to prove futile.

Unfortunately, EQUIP’s quality-assurance entities fall short of what is needed for purposes of validating hitherto untested providers. First of all, the entities themselves are untested in the roles to which they are assigned, a fact that makes them poor candidates for assessing a



high-risk program. Furthermore, while I agree that the focus of their assessment of programmatic performance is shifted from inputs to outcomes, it is important to note that they are not actually observing the most crucial long-term outcomes, but are in effect vouching that they will be realized. I say this because it'll be years into the future before we really learn how the programs might have affected the students on whom this experiment is being carried out.

In fact, EQUIP's quality-assurance methodology is even more abstract and less reliable than that of current accreditors, who, at least in theory, make a judgment about the adequacy of observable resources and real inputs. I'm afraid that most of EQUIP's quality assurance will be reducible to grading glowing reports of participating programs, solely on the basis of how narratively compelling they sound, not on the basis of actual data and facts. Ironically, the government could have used actual data for quality-assurance purposes, as [Tony Carnevale argues](#), but has opted for a Rube Goldberg alternative. Added to the two concerns above is the fact that, just as with our current quality-assurance regime, the selected entities face no adverse consequences for failure. There is no penalty or even minimal risk retention for poor judgment by entities whose oversight is a condition of eligibility for millions of dollars of federal funding. And lastly, there are real questions about the resources, capabilities and potential

conflicts of some of the entities selected as quality-assurance agents.

**Q. Was it a mistake for the department to pick mostly for-profits as the alternative providers?** And is your concern with EQUIP or that some future version of it -- without safeguards -- gets codified by legislation?

**Nassirian:** I am not so much concerned about their tax status as I am about the fact that the product they are offering is untested and a little too good to be true. It's important to take a step back and really think about the hypothesis that this pseudo-experiment is supposed to be testing, which is that these participants can somehow more effectively produce better learning and employment outcomes faster and less expensively than schools. And what do the advocates of giving these players a shot -- with real students and real federal money, no less -- offer as probable cause that these fantastic claims are worth testing in the first place? The very fact that they have no significant track record! In a more orderly policy environment, these claims would be verified in the marketplace with private money over a longer haul before they are elevated to the status of candidacy for experimental federal funding. I think policy makers are in such panic to find easy solutions to vexing and complicated problems of access and affordability that they have suspended all disbelief.

And yes, I am quite concerned that this initiative will play into the hands of industry lobbyists working

the Hill by making the ludicrous respectable enough to be written into legislation. The department may think it is moving prudently, but I remain unimpressed with the safeguards and oversight mechanisms of the program. There are inherent problems with relying on attestations and forecasts of quality-assurance entities, some of which have significant conflicts of interest. In any case, the U.S. Congress and the industry won't wait for any results to come in before they universalize the concept that entities that don't even purport to be schools should gain access to billions of dollars of federal student aid. And what little actual monitoring there is will be swapped out in favor of a simple veneer of oversight, just as with the current system.

**LeBlanc:** It is often said that this administration has it out for for-profits, and it is undeniable that (A) it has aggressively gone after for-profits it believes are poor quality, offering poor outcomes or engaged in outright fraudulent activity and (B) the Education Department has people with a reflexive antipathy towards any for-profit provider. Like Barmak, many people in the department, including the Office of Inspector General, are scarred by the abuses of the correspondence programs and for-profits they saw emerge after the 50 percent rule was lifted.

However, there are four problems in Barmak's response here, in my view:

- It continues to ignore the multi-level safeguards that EQUIP has in

place and that I described earlier;

- It ignores that these are not for-profits acting alone, but in partnership with IHEs whose reputations and good standing are also at stake here, excellent institutions like Northeastern University and the University of Texas at Austin;

- It ignores that there is now a sizable contingent of skeptics within the department who will be watching this experiment closely;

- Most importantly, it is simply not true that these providers are untested. For example, the Flatiron School has something like a 99 percent placement rate at graduation with starting salaries that average \$75,000. Moreover, they use an independent third-party auditor to verify their outcomes and publish those. If an IHE is partnering with a company in designing an advanced manufacturing program, it is hard to imagine a better partner than General Electric.

I might not have made all the choices the selection committee made, such as bachelor's degree programs (there is an enormous number of affordable options out there for those), but there is nothing "fantastic" about the claims being made. My hope is that the department will soon release the actual proposals so people can see for themselves.

As for the dangers of making bad policy, the logic here is: don't create any safe places to innovate new models because bad actors may subsequently take those models and legislate impoverished or poor

quality versions of them. That feels like a recipe for never getting better. I suggest that the real problem here is in policy making, not in safe innovation spaces like EQUIP. Indeed, we need more safe spaces like EQUIP to try new things, learn and inform eventual policy making. Safe spaces also include room for making mistakes and learning from them. Any of us who work at innovation know this from experience. Policy makers struggle with that fundamental truth, so resist efforts like EQUIP or build in so many safeguards and restrictions that it becomes almost impossible to actually innovate. I wholly agree with Barmak that an eventual version of EQUIP open to all without the considerable safeguards that EQUIP provides would be a disaster, but that is a problem in policy making, not in EQUIP itself, and the answer can't be a version of the slippery slope argument, which is never try anything new.

**Nassirian:** First, I want to emphasize that the problem here is with the basic thesis and the framing of this misadventure, and that the for-profit/nonprofit distinction is not the proper lens for evaluating the initiative.

Second, the placement and salary data that Paul cites are self-reported and highly exaggerated, as has been reported in the news media. Also, it is doubtful that these niche offerings can scale and still remain as effective and lucrative as they claim to be. There is a limit to the number of people needed for coding jobs, for example. In addition,

there's the problem of long-term impact of these programs, which will take a couple of decades to come in. We have had too many examples of short-term labor-market phenomena that have proven unsustainable over the long haul. We couldn't get enough people with basic HTML skills in the late 1990s, but those jobs disappeared within a few years. Postsecondary education is like an annuity. The costs are incurred up front, but the benefits are supposed to trickle in over many years.

Finally, I am struck by Paul's use of the term "safe spaces" and want to understand what he means by that. Safe for whom? Certainly not for the students who are used as canaries in the coal mine. If any of these experiments fail, what protection or recourse will the victims have? They will have already exhausted a good chunk of their Pell eligibility and they may have racked up debt on top of that. The program is certainly not safe for them, unless, of course, Paul is absolutely certain that none of these programs could possibly fail. And that would bring me back to my initial objection: EQUIP is not so much a test of a credible hypothesis as it is a pretext for doing things that have been decided a priori.

**LeBlanc:** The article and misreporting of salary data that Barmak cites surrounds providers not included in EQUIP. I cite the Flatiron School, that does not self-report, but has an independent auditor verify its placement data. Niche offering? At least one study projects a need for 1.4 million full-stack web

developers over the next five years and a one-million-person shortfall on the supply side. Tell companies screaming for these positions that they are niche. I'm not saying that these programs are for everyone or should replace the four-year degree with all of its lifelong benefits, but if EQUIP allows a low-income person to access a program that virtually guarantees them a job and a starting salary of \$75,000, I'll take it (and please don't again cite the schools that fall short -- they are not in EQUIP).

As for the safe spaces for students, EQUIP requires full disclosure to prospective students regarding the nature of the program and its being part of EQUIP and what that means (including termination and teach-out of the program). In addition, the partnerships must describe in detail the ways they will make students whole, including loan repayment and refunds "above what is normally required of them under the existing Title IV, HEA program regulations." Did you read the actual Federal Register notice?

There's a "people in glass houses" dimension to Barmak's objections, as traditional nonprofit higher education has millions of students who exhaust their Pell Grants, don't complete a degree and rack up enormous amounts of debt. The difference here is that EQUIP asks far more of the providers than do the existing regulatory and accreditation frameworks and provides far greater transparency and testing of the claims providers make to stu-

dents. Barmak and I share a real fear of an eventual legislation that allows watered-down quality control and protections for students -- EQUIP does neither -- and we need to bring to any eventual policy discussion the kind of rigor that has been brought to EQUIP over the last 18 months.

**Nassirian:** I agree that Flatiron has been a good operation. But since Paul brings up their audit, I suggest that readers [take a look at it](#) and judge for themselves as to whether the methodology and the n-count gives them his level of comfort. They have a grand total of 244 graduates over a two-year cycle, and generate their stunning statistics on the basis of excluding many of the nonemployed graduates for various reasons. And this is before the spigot of easy federal financing is turned on. Oh, and the entire report is based on tracking graduates for a whopping 120 days. As a reminder, standard amortization for federal loans has a 120-month term, and runs much longer for many borrowers.

As to giving low-income people guaranteed \$75,000 starting salaries, yes, that sounds great, but there is literally zero evidence that coding boot camps can do that. Their students are disproportionately college graduates, with significant employment experience and great credit histories or \$12,000-\$20,000 on hand to pay their fees. How you get from outcomes for that population to a belief that identical results would also be achievable for low-in-

come students, I don't know. What I do know is that there is a feeding frenzy among some of the worst actors in the for-profit sector to acquire boot camps, for reasons that should be obvious.

**LeBlanc:** So, Barmak, you are blaming them for being too young to have more data? The 244 students they report on are all of their graduates thus far -- it is as complete a sample as it can be. The exclusions? Graduates who returned to their home countries, others who went on to graduate school and others who started their own companies instead of going to work for someone. Those seem like very reasonable exclusions to me. The 120 days -- four months -- is a very reasonable milestone for determining the success of the program in placing people in good-paying jobs. On that front, they perform exceedingly well. If you were to look closely at their program, you'd see that it is rigorous and demanding in ways wholly absent from the fraudulent programs you fear.

When you write, "As to giving low-income people guaranteed \$75,000 starting salaries, yes, that sounds great, but there is literally zero evidence that coding boot camps can do that," you are simply incorrect in this case. Flatiron is partnering with New York City to offer the program to lower-income students without college degrees in Brooklyn. And while those students require about 120 additional hours of "bridging" or ramp-up time, their outcomes equal those of the col-

lege educated students in the Manhattan-based program, while their average starting salaries are slightly higher.

More importantly, the quality assurance that EQUIP demands of QAEs doesn't allow the "worst actors" or any actors to get by with poor-quality programs. Look at the questions being asked -- the level of detail, the focus on outcomes and outputs, the rigor demanded -- and tell me where EQUIP falls short.

You keep saying you are not persuaded, but have not yet addressed the details of the program. Not to mention the very short reporting intervals (every six months) and the multilayer oversight (institutional partner, accreditor, Education Department) for the QAEs and new providers. Add to that the aforementioned protections for consumers.

The response seems to be:

- I wish for-profits were not allowed to be part of the higher educational landscape;
- There are bad actors out there who would love to find ways to access Title IV dollars;
- We should not try anything innovative because policy makers might later on take only parts of what works and create bad policy; and
- I don't trust the department to manage this program well.

That is not really a detailed critique of EQUIP, an appraisal of its

actual design. It's more a contextually situated unwillingness to take a look and acknowledge the genuine strengths, safeguards and advantages of a well-designed, if modest, program.

**Q. Should ACE and CHEA have been included as QAEs? Critics said they, as establishment players, would have conflicts of interest.**

**LeBlanc:** There are really smart people at both ACE and CHEA and both have been grappling with the recent criticisms of accreditation and new ways to think about quality assurance, especially with the emergence and growth of competency-based education. For many working on EQUIP, there was also some hope that at least some of the more traditionally situated players would want to participate. So on those grounds, I'm generally OK with their participation. I'd be happier if they were two of 20 rather than two of just eight, since the goal was to encourage as many new approaches to quality assurance as possible, knowing that in each case as backup a regional accreditor had to review and approve (as well as the department itself). It may be telling that the two partnerships they are involved with are the two most conventional offerings on the list, but it is also encouraging to see CHEA talking about things like repayment ability as part of the outcomes it will examine. Again, I'm ea-

ger to see the full proposals, as the shorter descriptions make it hard to understand what's innovative about the ACE approach of surveys. (To be fair to ACE, the provided descriptions are shorthand and there is likely much more at work there.)

If the department too much ignored the quality-assurance questions we originally developed and that it listed in the Federal Register notice,

I will suddenly join Barmak in being far more worried than I am thus far. Fundamentally, those who worry that a CHEA or ACE are too grounded in the traditional to do something innovative and effective in evaluating the new providers are arguing that only outsiders can innovate. That is often true. I hope to be pleasantly surprised.

**Nassirian:** I certainly agree that there are very smart people at ACE and CHEA but question the wisdom of assigning federal gatekeeping responsibilities to trade associations that lobby for schools. We have been down this road before, and the results were as terrible as any reasonable person would expect them to be.

Congress explicitly disqualified trade associations from serving as accreditors back in 1992 for this very reason, but the department has decided to ignore that blanket ban by slapping a new label on the function because ... it couldn't find smart people anywhere else? ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/09/06/nassirian-and-leblanc-debate-new-federal-experiment-noncollege-job-training>



## Digital, Verified and Less Open

BY PAUL FAIN

More colleges are issuing digital badges to help their students display skills to employers or graduate programs, and colleges are tapping vendor platforms to create a verified form of the alternative credentials.

Digital badges aren't replacing the bachelor's degree any time soon. But a growing number of colleges are working with vendors to use badges as an add-on to degrees, to help students display skills and accomplishments that transcripts fail to capture.

Illinois State University is an early adopter. Students in the university's honors program have earned roughly 7,400 digital badges as part of the experiment, which just began at full scale last year. The university brought in Credly, a badging platform provider, for the project.

Administrators at Illinois State said the badges serve as a form of verified "three-dimensional transcript," which augments the traditional degree.

"It's a way for them to organize all of their experiences, all of the skill sets they learn," said Rocio Rivadeneyra, the honors program's interim director.

Students control which badges are public, and the credentials are aimed at helping students position

themselves with potential employers or graduate programs, said Amy Oberts, the honors program's associate director, who helped create the badging project.

"Even their diplomas would not necessarily reflect their good standing and ongoing achievements as honors students," she said, adding that the badging platform creates a "collection of iconic badges that actually comes up on their phones."

This form of digital badge, Oberts said, is a visual way of displaying both curricular and cocurricular experiences and achievements. That could include academic achievements, like seminar courses or biology lab work, or noncollege skills learned through internships or volunteer work.

For example, Jackie Durnil, a senior in the university's honors program, includes 60 earned badges on her Credly profile.

Durnil, who is majoring in com-



munication sciences and disorders, displays badges that describe scholarships she earned, a presentation she gave at a professional development night, her role as a peer mentor, her 4.0 grade point average last semester and her independent study in speech pathology.

She also earned a badge for working with a nonprofit that makes meals for malnourished children and for going on an alternative

spring break last year, during which she worked with a Georgia chapter of Habitat for Humanity.

Badges earned by students at Illinois State are backed with evidence and the imprimatur of the university. That differs from Mozilla Open Badges – freely available software and badging standard that is perhaps the most prominent foray into digital badging. Anyone can issue a badge on the Mozilla platform, to anyone, even themselves.

Illinois State's honors program created the criteria for earning a badge. Faculty members and students can submit evidence of their learning or skills, such as PDFs of essays, cloud-based documents like infographics, YouTube videos and PowerPoint or Prezi presentations. Many of Durnil's badges, for example, include uploaded documents and links, such as a PDF documenting research she conducted for an independent study project.

Course instructors typically evaluate the evidence behind a badge application, with exception being when honors program or other university staff can review the evidence, such as for service learning badges or ones that simply draw from a GPA or other student record.

"We chose Credly because their badges offered the option of requiring evidence to be uploaded by students, and we wanted a way to encourage students to create compelling artifacts in response to their different learning experiences," Oberts said via email. "The artifacts created by students become the ev-

idence of learning that is evaluated by instructors and, at the discretion of the student, shared with future employers."

### Between the Résumé and Google

One in five colleges have issued digital badges, according to the results of a recent survey of 190 institutions by the University Professional Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and Pearson. And like Illinois State, most institutions that have dabbled with the form of alternative credentialing hired an outside company to get the ball rolling.

The New York City-based Credly, along with Merit Pages and Pearson's Acclaim, is among those making the most headway as a skills-displaying platform in higher education. Other platforms experts say are worth watching include Badgr, BloomBoard and the PD Learning Network.

The platforms vary in many ways, including whether they technically issue "badges." Merit Pages, for example, began working with colleges on its visual, verified profiles of students' skills before Mozilla began its open-badging project. The company now has more than 250 colleges as clients, ranging from small religious colleges to Georgia State University and the University of Iowa.

The company began with the goal to "take all the things that are happening at colleges and put it in one place," said Colin Mathews, Merit's founder and president. College employees in marketing, student affairs or even athletics departments up-

date students' profiles to recognize their participation in study abroad, the college newspaper or intercollegiate athletics. And colleges "record the outcomes as they happen," Mathews said.

One key difference between badging platforms is how easy they make it for potential employers to search for someone's profiles or badges.

Sheryl Grant is director of alternative credentials and badge research for HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory), an interdisciplinary academic social network. She said vendor-run badging platforms exist somewhere on the continuum between a static résumé and a Google search about a job applicant.

Vendors and their expertise make it easier for colleges to create badges, said Grant, who is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Information and Library Science. She praised Credly for encouraging the use of evidence with badges, including from professors, who can recognize learning beyond the grades they issue.

"When you earn it," Grant said of a high-quality, verified badge, "it's going to be meaningful, and you should talk to an employer about it."

Grant and other experts describe digital badges as being related to competency-based education, where mastery of learning concepts, not grades, is the primary currency.

Students in competency-based programs appreciate the "value of credentialing in real time," said Jon-

athan Finkelstein, Credly's founder and CEO.

Pearson describes Acclaim as a way for "respected brands," including colleges, to "recognize individuals' competencies through digital badges." And there's a big need to be filled, said Peter Janzow, the senior director of business, market development and the open-badges lead at Pearson VUE.

"Once we get out of school, there's no formal way for representing what we know and can do," he said.

Institutions with deep track records in competency-based education have been natural fits for digital badging -- Brandman University and Capella University both have been active in the space. But many community colleges and four-year universities also have hired Acclaim, Credly and Merit Pages.

At Santa Barbara City College, for example, students can earn digital badges on the Acclaim platform in digital design, blogging for business and computer hardware fundamen-

als, among others. Janzow said the "outcomes-based credentials" are designed to answer the questions: Who did this? What did they do? And who says they did it?

"We don't want to empower organizations that are making this up as they go along," said Janzow, adding that a digital badge "has to be valuable in an outside context."

The most important contexts are searching for a job or trying to get into a graduate program. Credly and Acclaim work with many employers -- IBM uses both, for example.

Finkelstein said companies like Time Warner Cable issue badges on the Credly platform to recognize their employees' skills and accomplishments. Harvard University is also a client, and uses the platform in a similar fashion with its IT employees.

When companies already use badges internally, Finkelstein said, they're more likely to look at them in the hiring process. And in some cases, such as with the Colorado

Community College System and the state's advanced manufacturing companies, employers and colleges collaborate to design the criteria for earning a badge.

"They want to ensure that the badges have market value," he said.

The Lumina Foundation has taken notice. Lumina, which is leading a group project on alternative credentials, earlier this year contributed to \$2.5 million in seed financing for Credly. The goal, Lumina said at the time, was to the creation of high-quality credentials that recognize lifelong learning.

Badges, if they take off, have the potential to be earned by people long after they graduate from college. And proponents of badging said that feature will become more useful as the knowledge economy matures.

"People should own the evidence of their own achievements," Finkelstein said. "Skills that have been verified by a third party should be a very valuable currency." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/08/09/digital-badging-spreads-more-colleges-use-vendors-create-alternative-credentials>

# Views

A selection of essays and op-eds

## In Search of a College MVP

BY RYAN CRAIG

What is higher education's version of the minimum viable product -- the smallest, simplest unit that meets the public's needs? Developing it will be a key goal for college leaders over the next decade, Ryan Craig argues.

One of the most important developments out of Silicon Valley in the past decade is not a technology but a concept. A minimum viable product -- or MVP -- is the simplest, smallest product that provides enough value for consumers to adopt and actually pay for it. It also is the minimal product that allows producers to receive valuable feedback, iterate and improve. A minimum viable product is one of the core tenets of the so-called [lean start-up](#) and explains why many technology entrepreneurs are able to launch businesses with practically no investment at all.

For example, the Zappos founder Nick Swinmurn famously launched his business not by investing millions in an e-commerce backend, but by simply taking photos of desirable shoes at shoe stores and posting them online. When custom-

Cognitive + non-cognitive skills

Technical skills

Placement

ers clicked buy, Swinmurn went to the store, bought the shoes, shipped them -- repeating hundreds of times before getting the necessary feedback to validate further investment in Zappos.

College as we know it is the polar opposite of a minimum viable product. A bachelor's degree is neither simple nor small. It wasn't constructed to encourage colleges and universities to iterate and improve. And it's certainly not minimizing anyone's investment. Which is why the most important development in

higher education in the next decade will be a College MVP.

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Some of the lean start-ups proliferating in Silicon Valley and elsewhere are boot camps, providing "last-mile" training to unemployed, underemployed and unhappily employed young people and -- critically -- placing them in good jobs in growing sectors of the economy, like technology and health care. This largely technical training is increasingly referred to as last mile not only because it leads directly to employ-



ment, but reflecting the last mile in telecom, where the final telephonic or cable connection from trunk to home is the most difficult and costly to install, and also the most valuable.

Boot camps like [Galvanize](#), [Revature](#) and [AlwaysHired](#) are busy installing these last-mile connections. Making and maintaining connections to employers is complicated and costly -- exponentially more so than developing new academic programs in isolation.

As these connections are made and reinforced, last-mile providers will be tempted. While today they're serving a population that is roughly 90 percent college graduates, some are already spying a larger opportunity than simply serving as a top-up program for bachelor's degree completers. Some will be inspired by the Silicon Valley ethos to ask this question: How do we move from "top-up" to "alternative"?

The answer, of course, is by adding a program ahead of the last-mile technical training to form the first stage of a comprehensive pathway to a good first job.

Such a program would equip students with cognitive and noncognitive skills -- not necessarily at the level one would expect of a college graduate, but at the (presumably lower) level employers require for entry-level positions. It would also be much shorter and less expensive than what we know and love as college.

The very concept of a College MVP raises a threshold question:

Would any employer hire a candidate with this level of preparation rather than a college degree? Sure, most employers will continue to prefer whole bachelor's degrees. And many will continue to insist on it. But what if employers could start MVP candidates off at lower salaries? Why? Because MVP graduates won't have forgone four years of full-time employment and won't have incurred tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt.

Another reason to believe employers might take an interest in MVP candidates is that no one -- least of all employers -- knows what cognitive and noncognitive skills are expected of college graduates. Because no one -- least of all colleges -- is measuring anything. Meanwhile, you can bet that last-mile providers who add an innovative College MVP will be asking questions of employers, assessing constantly, measuring and communicating back to employers -- and almost certainly doing a better job of selling their candidates to employers than colleges and universities do.

Finally, employers with any sense of the broader socioeconomic context will - when presented with a potentially viable alternative -- recognize that requiring a whole bachelor's degree [excludes virtually half the work force](#), many of whom might be great fits.

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Be disrupted or disrupt thyself? Many colleges and universities will face this choice in a few years. While last-mile providers will be first

to market with College MVPs, some colleges and universities will see the writing on the wall and attempt to do the same. Here are the challenges they're likely to face in doing so.

1) Associate Degree Paradigm. Most colleges and universities probably think they have a College MVP. It's called an associate degree. The problem is that the associate degree is a flawed credential, failing in many cases to prepare students with the requisite cognitive and non-cognitive skills required by employers, and giving rise to studies showing [half of associate degree holders are underemployed](#).

The associate degree is a credential that's derived from and beholden to the bachelor's degree. In contrast, a College MVP won't be organized around credit hours or precepts of general education, but will attempt to maximize development of critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork skills in a minimal period of time.

It will also attempt to provide students with cognitive frameworks that facilitate future learning -- on the job and in continuing formal education and training. And while my guess is that College MVPs may look different depending on the industry or even the type of entry-level job, it seems likely that they'll emerge from a paradigm shift from how we currently think about college -- much more than simply cost and length.

Colleges and universities that aspire to develop a College MVP will

TRADITIONAL COLLEGE	COLLEGE MVP
Faculty-centric	Employer-centric
Learning outcomes	Competencies/skills
Curriculum	Assessments
Assignments	Work product
Liberal arts	Critical thinking
Electives	Prescribed pathway

need to disabuse themselves of the illusion that the associate degree provides a viable model.

2) Building the Last Mile to Employers. Building a College MVP only makes sense if institutions are able to build the last mile to employers, which requires a lot more contact with employers than most colleges and universities are used to having.

The vast majority of colleges and universities continue to believe they're not in the business of preparing students for their first job, which runs counter to the [top reasons](#) matriculating students cite for pursuing postsecondary education, namely to improve employment opportunities (91 percent), to make more money (90 percent) and to get a good job (89 percent). Meanwhile, at most colleges, career services remains the [Las Vegas of the university](#). Northeastern's co-op program gets so much attention because

it's so rare. It's also not replicable overnight. Building a network of thousands of employers has taken Northeastern decades.

3) Isomorphism. Perhaps the most significant impediment is cultural. The concept of a minimum viable product is anathema to the culture of higher education. Why would respectable institutions offer less than a bachelor's degree when their models -- our most elite colleges and universities -- aren't likely to consider doing so for a very long time? Moreover, higher education reveres tradition, which is too often taken for granted as a signifier of quality -- to the point that U.S. News might as well rank colleges each year based on age. As a result, it's hard to imagine MVPs popping up at more than a handful of colleges and universities. Which is sad, because [tens of millions of Americans could use them right now](#); college

MVPs have the potential to be higher education's most valuable player.

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Even if colleges and universities are likely to lag in the emergence of college MVPs, they're already leading the way in the development of master's MVPs. When universities like MIT are comfortable rolling out [MicroMasters](#) credentials, thousands of institutions are sure to follow.

This is critical, as college MVPs won't be the end of the postsecondary road for most students. After following a College MVP to last-mile training to placement pathway to a good first job in a growing sector of the economy, subsequent pathways will emerge to equip new employees with the higher-order thinking capabilities required for more complex and managerial positions. Higher education will go from a one- or two-time purchase for most students to a product [employees consume as needed throughout their professional lives](#). And none of the aforementioned barriers to the College MVP are likely to stop colleges and universities from growing significant enrollment in thousands of master's MVPs. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/12/02/building-higher-educations-version-minimum-viable-product-essay>

# Unwelcome Innovation

BY COLIN MATHEWS

Proponents of digital badges and alternative credentials have valuable goals, writes Colin Mathews, but are pushing a universal language of credentialing that is unnecessary and unfair.

*Inside Higher Ed* [recently checked up](#) on adoption of badges specifically, and alternative credentialing generally, with a look at early adopter Illinois State University's rollout of a badge platform. The overarching goal of badging and alternative credentialing initiatives is very valuable: to better communicate the value and variety of people's skills to employers so that it's easier to connect with and improve job outcomes. Yet the focus on badges and alternative credentials is like trying to facilitate global trade by inventing Esperanto.

The conception, theory and adoption of badge-based alternative credentialing initiatives starts as far back as 2011, when Mozilla announced the launch of its Open Badge Initiative and HASTAC simultaneously made "Digital Badges for Lifelong Learning" the theme of its fourth Digital Meaning & Learning competition. In the five years since, much has been written and even more time spent developing the the-

ory and practice of alternative credentialing via badges -- from Mozilla and its support by the MacArthur Foundation to Purdue University's Passport, to BadgeOS and Badge Alliance. Lately, the Lumina Foundation has [taken the lead](#) promoting alternative credentialing, most recently [participating in a \\$2.5 million investment](#) in badge platform Credly and a [\\$1.3 million initiative](#) to help university registrars develop a "new transcript."

The premise behind all of the badge and alternative credential projects is the same: that if only there were a new, unified way to quantify, describe and give evidence of student learning inside the classroom and out, employers would be able to appropriately value those skills and illuminate a path to job outcomes. These kinds of premises often lead to utopian, idealized solutions that imagine transforming society itself. From Lumina's ["Strategy 8" overview](#):

To maximize our collective potential as a society, we need a revamped system of postsecondary credentials -- a fully integrated system that is learning based, student centered, universally understood and specifically designed to ensure quality at every level.

The problem for Lumina, Mozilla, Credly and the rest is that they're proposing to replace a rich variety of credential "languages" with a universal one that's not just unnecessary, but that's modeled on fundamentally flawed analogies and observations.

I'll start with the flaws of badges as a credentialing solution. Early on, digital badges often used Boy and Girl Scout badges as an analogy, but the more direct precursor of the current generation of badge solutions is video games. Indeed, attaining badges for completing certain tasks or reaching certain milestones is such a core feature of video game design and experi-

ence that the whole practice of rewarding behavior within software is referred to as “gamification.” This approach became widespread (with the launch of Foursquare, Gowalla, GetGlue and dozens more) in the years just preceding the launch of digital badges.

Yet video game badges -- and the badges employed by gamification companies -- are not truly credentials, but behaviorist reward systems designed to keep people on task. As credentials, their only useful meaning was within the systems in which they were earned, specifically within a given video game or bar-hopping app. Scout badges have a similar limitation: whatever their value in motivating attainment toward a worthy skill or outcome, the meaning of those badges is difficult to assess for nonscouts, or those not trained in the visual language of scouting badges.

Badge adherents aim to address the “value” and portability of badges by attaching proof of skills to the badges themselves. This is the same idea behind e-portfolios: that evidence of each skill is not just demonstrable, verifiable and universally understood, but useful to employers. Yet outside of specific fields, [portfolios simply don't matter to employers](#). As Anthony Carnevale, director of Georgetown University's Center on Education and the

Workforce, [told](#) *The Chronicle of Higher Education* earlier this year about the New Transcript portfolio, “Employers don't want to take time to go through your portfolio -- they just don't.” Where evidence of skills is important and useful, solutions already exist: GitHub for software developers; Behance for designers; transcripts, essays and recommendations for graduate school.

The idea of replacing university “dialects” with a new language of skills and outcomes is less metaphorical when think tanks and ed-tech companies talk about al-

ways that everyone understands. In the undergraduate major, a student completes a series of related and escalating levels of mastery in a given subject area, assessed by experts in that field. Upon completion of those microcredentials -- i.e., classes -- the student is awarded a degree with a focus in that field and with an indication of attainment (honors). The same goes for hundreds of areas of expertise inside and outside higher education: in financial analysis (the extremely demanding and desirable CFA designation), entry-level and advanced manufacturing (the Na-

tional Association of Manufacturers MSCS system), specific IT areas of focus like [ISA-CA](#) and [\(ISC\)2](#), bar exams, medical boards, and more.

Credentials, in

and of themselves, are a solved problem. I know this because my own company, Merit, launched the biggest, most comprehensive badge experiment that no one has heard of. Between 2011 and 2014 we tested a variation of the scout model -- a badge-based visual language of college milestones and credentials analogous to a military officer's dress uniform -- that could be quickly read to convey a person's skills, accomplishments and level of achievement. Nearly 500 colleges granted more than three million students almost 10 million badges that included academic honors, notable cocurriculars, experiential learning,

“ To maximize our collective potential as a society, we need a revamped system of postsecondary credentials -- a fully integrated system that is learning based, student centered, universally understood and specifically designed to ensure quality at every level. ”

ternative credentials as a category. There, advocates propose an entirely new vocabulary: microcredentials, nanodegrees, stackable badges and more, all meant to convey (to employers primarily) the body of skills and knowledge that a student possesses. But they are redefining concepts that already exist, and that exist productively for the marketplace of students, educators and employers.

Consider the stackable badge, the idea that learning competencies should be assessed and verified in a progression that comprises and leads to a certified credential. But stackable credentials already exist in



internships and more. We tested interest by employers, educators and students (and continue to). What's clear is this: it's far, far more important to simply document existing credentials than to invent new ones, or a new language to describe them. Stakeholders in the high-school-to-college-to-career pipeline understand and value credentials as they exist now, and rarely need or want a new way to understand them. They just want to see them.

Connecting students' skills and ambitions to the pathways to a career is a big deal, but it doesn't re-

quire a new language that's based on techno-solutionist fantasies. LinkedIn, the "economic graph" that many hold up as a model, needed more than \$100 million of private capital for something as simple as convincing managers and a certain professional class to keep updated résumés online. Doing something similar for every single student is both more valuable and more difficult -- and doesn't need to reinvent the entire language of credentials to complicate the effort.

My biggest frustration with badges and alternative credentials isn't

that they are an ivory tower solution to a real world problem. It's that helping students succeed means more than figuring out a new language. Higher education is a demanding, high-stakes endeavor for the vast majority of students. Proposing that they -- and the institutions educating them and the employers who might hire them -- learn a new lingua franca for conveying the value of that learning, every year, over the very short time that they're mastering the skills and knowledge that they need isn't just impractical. It's unfair. ■

### Bio

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/22/essay-flawed-assumptions-behind-digital-badging-and-alternative-credentialing>

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