

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 23: THE PUSH FOR A LEARNER RECORD SYSTEM

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 23: THE PUSH FOR A LEARNER RECORD SYSTEM

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PAUL FAIN: Hello, welcome to The Key with IHE, the podcast from Inside Higher Ed focused on how the pandemic is affecting vulnerable students. I'm Paul Fain, a contributing editor at Insider Higher Ed and the host of this podcast.

The disruption the crisis is wreaking on students' lives and education is bringing new urgency to a topic that seemed somewhat obscure-- the Learner Record System. But it's really about student transfer and hoping to make sure more students don't lose money and time in moving between institutions and looking for a job. I spoke with two experts to get their thoughts on the potential for interoperable record system.

Scott Cheney is CEO of Credential Engine, which is seeking to bring transparency to credentials, while also revealing a marketplace for them.

SCOTT CHENEY: So really what we're doing is bringing the ability for anyone, anytime, anywhere to be

able to search and compare every option in front of them in education and training to make their best decision about their pathway to their best outcome.

PAUL FAIN: I also spoke with Kendall Bailey, who leads SEI Labs, a venture of Strategic Education Inc. Bailey talked about the role of learner record systems in helping students bridge the gap between education and work.

KENDALL BAILEY: And we also think it would lead to more equitable hiring, because, in the absence of quality dashboards, during the absence of that, we are all human, we all kind of rely on our own shortcuts, or ISEs, unfortunately. And I think this is about giving employers the tools to be able to do that hiring in, again, a more equitable and more efficient way.

PAUL FAIN: Let's get to the conversation.

I'm looking at Scott Cheney... Good to see you, Scott. How you doing?

SCOTT CHENEY: I'm well, thank you. How are you doing today?

PAUL FAIN: Doing well. Thanks for doing this. I figured we could start with what Credential Engine is and where things stand. You know, having written about it, it's complex stuff, so can you listeners an idea of what you all are doing?

SCOTT CHENEY: Sure, happy to... And, you know, you're right. It can be complex, but at its core what Credential Engine is, is really a pretty simple concept. Let me put in terms that most people understand. So if you're looking to take a trip, and, hopefully, post COVID, we'll all be traveling again soon, and you want to figure out how to get to, say, Hawaii. And you're looking at airlines and then you're looking at hotels, and then you're looking at places to visit and restaurants to eat in, you're going to use probably a service, whether it's KAYAK, or Expedia, or Travelocity. And that's going to be able to give you right information about all of those options, and to think about how you bundle, and how if you stay at one hotel or you get a deal at this resort, and an airline is giving some specials, if you think about what the kind of information is that the average person can get just on their mobile phone across all of these different options.

And then you think about, can you do the same thing if you're looking at helping a high school student map their pathway into, say, an IT career. And they're looking at badges and boot camps, and two-year degrees, and certifications and certificates, and four-year degrees, and apprenticeships now, there has been, before we came along, no ability to have that same kind of common search and comparison across all of those options that you have in hotels, and buying a car, and getting directions across town.

So really what we're doing is bringing the ability for anyone, anytime, anywhere to be able to search and compare every option in front of them in education and training to make their best decision about their pathway to their best outcome. And at its core, that's what we're doing. We're a nonprofit. We believe in this information as a public benefit for everyone. We want this to be open to everybody. And so we're working with states, and federal and state agencies, and partners in the vendor space to try and move this entire vision forward. And in three years, we've made quite of bit of progress.

PAUL FAIN: There's debate about the extent of the skills gap, or at least there was before this all happened, but I've always been a believer that there's a big information gap. And some of the reporting I've done even this week shows, for a lot of obvious reasons, working adults are interested in short-term pathways to a credential, but lack the information and confidence in what they might they buying to pull the trigger. So, you know, I wonder as you look forward or as things stand now for Credential Engine, it seems like the need to kind of make a more clear, like you say, a KAYAK guide to a credential seems like it's going to get more pressing amid all the swirl.

SCOTT CHENEY: If anything, we're seeing the urgency around this just picking up. You know, we've had calls from states who are asking if their data is in our system so they can be getting it in front of workers. And, you know, 18, 19 states now, the answer is yes, you're getting your data in and we're working with other states to bring it in. But they realize that with millions of people out of work, and unfortunately, a lot of those people are in the kind of jobs and professions where they're dependent on having really good information to overcome historic gaps in what they can see and what their shared with about where their opportunities are. What we're doing is trying to level that playing field and to make sure that everybody can have better information about the options in front of them.

The history in our country of not treating everybody equally in terms of making sure they know how their best talents can be moved forward more efficiently and most equitably is really coming to the fore right now. And we're seeing it in ways that is really disheartening and unjust and economically damaging for them and the economy and for employers. So more transparency, more equitable information available to everybody we think is not going to help just those low-income, low-skill people who have

not had this opportunity in the past, it's going to help everybody. As we know, these kind of movements do. They really lift the boat for everybody.

PAUL FAIN: Can you give us an idea of kind of the scope of the work that you all do in a state when a state opts in and shares data? How does it work? What sort of data do you look for, etc.?

SCOTT CHENEY: Sure, and I'll actually give you a couple of specific examples. So we have, our schema, our descriptive language is the better term for it, is the richest available anywhere in the world. And it was designed to be the richest. So we have over 500 terms that can be used to describe the credential itself --is it an apprenticeship, is it a badge, is it a degree, is it a certificate? Who offers it? Who owns that credential? In some cases, it may be Microsoft that owns it, but a community college that delivers it. Who's providing kind of quality assurance, accreditation, or ANSI or ISO? And what are the outcomes of those credentials, what are the employment earnings outcomes? What are the competencies, the skills and knowledge and abilities that are contained in that credential? What are the pathways that that credential's part of? What's the transfer value? All of those kind of pieces of information we're looking to have published into this public domain.

So in Washington state, they have one of the richest central databases about credentials of any state in the country. They've got about 6800 credentials that are in what they call Career Bridge. And they're working with us right now to publish all of that information and more, because our language is richer than what they've been using. So they're publishing all of that into this linked open data format. And just we heard today, they're just about to start publishing all of their earnings and employment outcome data associated with those credentials, so people will be able to see what's available, who's offering it, what's its cost, what are the outcomes, what are the pathways. And all of that information is good and that'll be in tools that can be easily brought into online services, whether it's Google, or MC, EMSI, or LinkedIn, or any other vendor that wants to be able to share this information with learners.

New Jersey is actually doing the same thing, and they're building on top of that a tool that is going to help learners and workers be able to make informed decisions based on their current set of credentials and competencies, and then look and see what's available in front of them and make decisions about pathways based on their own current ownership of credentials and what the economy around them looks like.

PAUL FAIN: I feel like the challenge that we've all been hearing about for a long time, the Tower of Babel issue. We're not anywhere close, it doesn't seem to me still, to a national system where credentials,

credits, classes, gen-ed core curricula, are broken into competencies, and therefore easier to kind of match up, or as Kevin Carey wrote in the Washington Monthly recently, at least have information about why a course doesn't transfer across institutions lines. I mean, how much of that piece... I want to get to the learner control and learner information, but the Tower of Babel challenge itself, you know, where these systems just don't line up yet. How much to that is what you all are hoping to deal with with your work?

SCOTT CHENEY: Yeah, so what we do is really try to tackle that problem head-on. Now, what we've not tried to do is to sit down and say to one organization that defines leadership in one way, have them come to agreement about what leadership really means when you talk to a different organization that has a different definition, right? We're not trying to get everyone to say, this is what leadership has to be. What we are trying to say is, if you define leadership as being made up of these competencies, and someone else defines leadership as a different set of competencies, let's have both of you publish that information, have all of that information about what your competencies and leadership are be available to be seen in this open-link data system, and have people be aware of that. And you could then have a richer conversation about why you think leadership is one thing versus another.

But a student could say, I know that employer I'm looking at wants me to have the leadership competencies in this credential as opposed to that credential, so I'm going over here, because I can see both of them. And an employer can say, what you're teaching in leadership and what you think leadership is in that credential lines up with what I need in my company, and that's the credential I'm going to value more than a different credential.

So the Tower of Babel, let's not kid ourselves, it's not going away anytime soon, but we can have a clean Rosetta Stone to be able to help translations across one language of leadership and another, and that's what we do, is we're that common, neutral, comparative, description language. It lets everyone say this is what we define leadership to be. These are the different outcomes. By the way, we defined outcomes as earnings over six months, and someone else defines earnings over a year. Okay, let's make that available and let's make that transparent, and let people see it and be able to use it in their own way. We're not trying to break down these two towers of Babel and have one big one, we're just trying to make sure they can communicate, because, you know, we've got a big task ahead of us anyway. We don't need to make it more complex than it already is.

PAUL FAIN: I get the Credential Engine's neutrality and why that exists. It totally makes sense to me, but it does feel like the idea of a central learner record system, a big one, is gaining some steam. And obviously, Kevin Carey wrote about that as I mentioned, Arizona State is working on an idea related to

that with funding from Koch and others, you know, a centralized learner record system. Do you see that happening in the next few years where some entity can really pull off that scale, and potentially be even more prescriptive about what fits into a box than what you all are at this point?

SCOTT CHENEY: You know, what we're doing is helping to have a common, open, central, yes, repository of information about credentials. What is it that Purdue offers? What is it that MIT offers? What is it that ASU offers? And have that information be openly accessible.

I think what you're seeing in the learning and employment records space, or the LERs, CLRs, however you choose to refer to it, I'm not sure you're going to see a central repository or a central database of those records. I think the different systems that come into play around offering learner employment records should all be interoperable. So if ASU has a system, and IBM and Wal-Mart have a system, and then Greenlight Credentials has a system that they use, the data about the learner that's using a Greenlight credential needs to be able to transfer to a system that has been built using the ASU system, so that the learner is not hindered by having their information be able to flow.

What I'm not sure you're going to see a single, centralized system of the learner records with one entity overseeing all of them. I don't think that's the way the US market works. I'm not sure we know what the learner record system and the learner functionality needs to actually have to know which is one is going to be better. I think we need to let the market play that out some. But across all of them, they all need to be able to have reliable information about the credentials and the competencies and skills that a learner has earned regardless of where they earn it. And that, again, comes back to what we do, is we're that central, trusted repository of information about the credentials and the competencies that should ride with record regardless of the organization that's offering the record so that that information travels with the student cleanly to new educators or new employers or whoever else that chose to use it.

PAUL FAIN: Let's talk a little bit about employers. You've mentioned them a couple of times, obviously an important piece of this puzzle. More interested in this sort of work, and if so, you know, where do you see it heading. I mean, there's a lot of discussion about skills-based hiring and moving more to alternative credential pathways than the conventional degree. IT, a couple of other fields seem to be headed that way with a bit more momentum, but what are you hearing?

SCOTT CHENEY: You're obviously hearing the same things we're hearing, that there are a lot of large companies who are very invested in this move to skills-based hiring. And we think that's great. I think it's important to remember that a credential as we've traditionally thought about it, whether it's a degree

or a certification, or an apprenticeship, is really just a collection of competencies, right? It's a master's degree is a longer term credential that has more competencies embedded in it than a six-week badge. But they're both just different bundlings of credentials that tell a worker and an employer and an educator what this person has earned and learned and is bringing with them. So we've always had credentials that are made up of competencies. And the ability to break those down and to signal them as discrete entities within a credential has tremendous value, and we've actually got several hundred, almost 400 different competency and skill frameworks that are part of our registry. Just the same way we have credentials, we've got skills and competency frameworks, all of which are linked to open data.

We think that we should be seeing more focus on the kind of skills that people have, because we think it's more efficient, but we also think it's more equitable. We think it's going to help individual learners that have for one reason or another not been able to complete that two- or four-year degree, to finish out that longer-term credential, but have a lot of knowledge. They've got a lot of skills and abilities, whether they've earned it as part-time in a community college or on the job, they should be able to convey that as meaningful indicators of their talent to that next employer. So the more we can see skills-based hiring move from just the large companies into the small and medium-size companies where the vast majority of Americans work, they're inside small and medium-size companies, we've got to see this develop quickly enough so that those employers are able to understand the value and use it quickly in day-to-day hiring and development decisions to really have this have any meaning. I applaud the big companies that are moving this ball forward. The real litmus test is going to be can we get small or medium-size employers to be to derive value out of this the same way that the big companies do, because that's what's going to help the vast majority of workers in the country.

PAUL FAIN: You know, you've touched on this a little bit already. I get the value of transparency to learners, particularly now, but right now we're all worrying about whether or not there's going to be exodus from post-secondary education of some of the most vulnerable students. And some early indicators, FAFSA renewals, some clearinghouse data from the summer shows, yeah, it may already be happening. If we can assume it's safe bet you're going to see more swirl here, students leaving, coming back in, transferring, you know, it's not really just transparency, is it? I mean, I think it's also about making sure that they don't lose their effort, their learning as they move around the system. I mean, can you just talk a little bit about the benefit of getting to that sort of a system where you don't just know about the credits, but they can more seamlessly move around with learners?

SCOTT CHENEY: Absolutely. If we can't be able to provide individuals the ability to move not just their credits, but their dollars that they've invested, right? This is an enormous investment that they're out of pocket and they're now possibly out of a job, and, you know, they can't get back into a good job unless you can complete that training piece to a credential that an employer really values, we're going to set a whole generation of workers and learners back even further in their ability to take advantage of this

American dream. So it's not just a matter of the transparency. You're right. We've never said that the transparency is the silver bullet. Transparency is an essential part of making the system more fair and more efficient.

We've got to have meaningful policy that at the state and federal level, at the institutional and system level, that ensures that people are able to move their earned credentials, their earned skills and competencies efficiently into new opportunities. So that they know that I can quickly take what I've done on the job and as a one year experience in a community college and move it into a four-year program or certification program, or something else, and get the benefit of the already invested dollars, those sunk dollars into their future shouldn't be lost. They can't be lost. Because if we do that, we are really going to get this entire country back even further. We can't afford to do that right now. And there's millions of workers can't afford to have that happen to them.

So we've got to have really thoughtful policy that ensures that equitable response to this moment, and it's not just going to benefit the moment, it's going to benefit the entire economy and our entire education and training system going forward for years to come.

PAUL FAIN: Absolutely. Well, it's important work and it's an interesting time for it, so I appreciate you indulging this wide range of questions here. I know it's really hard to get into enough detail here, but that's for doing this, Scott. Appreciate it.

SCOTT CHENEY: My pleasure. I thank you for the time.

PAUL FAIN: Catch you soon. Thanks.

SCOTT CHENEY: Okay, bye.

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So I'm speaking with Kendall Bailey. So Kendall, how are you?

KENDALL BAILEY: I'm great. Thanks for having me on.

PAUL FAIN: So it feels like given all the disruption to students' educations and lives, there's enhanced urgency around making for smoother movement between institutions and, frankly, jobs, with what looks like a lot of student transfer coming down the pipeline. I wanted to talk to you about what you see there in terms of the need for better learner record systems. Are we having a moment here?

KENDALL BAILEY: Oh my gosh, right, I think urgency is such a good word there, right? We just think about the tens of millions of unemployed individuals we have right now that we need to get back to work, and students whose education experiences have been so disrupted in the last year. I think a moment around students records and learner systems, this is shining a really bright light on the need and identifying the real opportunity there for better systems to advance equity, which is, I think, always so important and top of mind for us.

But also better systems that can really advance efficiency in clearing this labor market. We need systems that help individuals get back to work as quickly as possible, and we understand how much friction there is in the system today now at a level that I think was easy to overlook when we had such low unemployment, unemployment rates. But now the urgency for better system design and communication across our education employment systems is more apparent now than ever.

PAUL FAIN: Can you talk a little bit about where you see the most friction or the friction that clear, more efficient learner record systems could help students get passed?

KENDALL BAILEY: Yeah, I think there's so many areas where better learner record systems could do that kind of clear the market that we're talking about here. I often find... you know, this is a tough topic to wrap your head around, so I often find two anecdotes that I like to use that really bring this to life for people. And when you're trying to explain the potential of better records systems, it's often helpful to describe a specific problem that they could solve that helps bring that to light for people.

And so bear with me for a minute and I'll kind of take you down a little bit of a history story here, which is in 1904. So it's over a hundred years ago, there was a huge fire in Baltimore, over 1500 buildings burnt to the ground. The fire raged for two days, quite devastating. Nearby towns tried to send in supports. I think it was like Philadelphia and DC, New York City. They all sent pump wagons and supplies to Baltimore to help fight this fire, but they couldn't help because the hoses from those cities didn't fit the fire hydrants in Baltimore.

And so I love that example, because it's such a tangible illustration of lack of interoperable systems and the real problems you can have, the need for the aha! moment. Why do we need these things, what opportunities will it open up, and what problems will it solve?

I think almost more compelling is flash forward to today. We're living in the COVID crisis. An example I've seen is that New York City put out a call for volunteers at the height of the pandemic. Over 90,000 volunteers registered as medical workers to fight COVID in New York City, in New York State, but I've heard that the intake form for those volunteers, it had like a free text field to describe your qualifications. So you think about matching those volunteers who want to help out with the deep need and critical time-sensitive need that was going on in those hospitals, but really there's no system there to help match those qualifications with the need, and so many of those volunteers sat idle, and I think over 100 individuals had to be hired just to sort through those records and try to verify credentials and verify background information, and put those pieces together.

So I love to envision a world where less than 100, fewer than 100 years from now, we'll look back on this moment in time and say, oh my gosh, why didn't we have those systems in place to make those connections more efficient?

PAUL FAIN: I like both of those examples, in part because they're very American. And we all know the hodge-podge of American higher education, its kind of organic thousand points of light development has a lot of virtue, but when you need more centralized systems, it can be a real challenge. So we jumped right into it without me asking about SEI Labs and your work that relates to this, so I gather a pretty new venture as well.

KENDALL BAILEY: SEI Labs as established in February. We are the R&D innovation center within Strategic Education. Strategic Education is the parent company to Strayer and Capella Universities. We also have

SOPHIA, which is an online gen-ed provider and a couple of coding boot camps. All in, we serve over 100,000 adult learners each year, almost entirely online. The adult learner population is a group that we care deeply about, and very mission-driven, focused on economic mobility for those learners. So within our innovation center, we're thinking about ways to improve equity and opportunity within the education to employment sphere.

PAUL FAIN: How does SEI Labs look at the potential for interoperable learner record systems? What are some of the areas that you see the most potential and how it could actually help the student and help for that pathway to careers?

KENDALL BAILEY: Our lab is focused in three areas. You know, we talk about them as three distinct areas, but they're quite interrelated as you'll appreciate.

The first area we're exploring is way-finding and navigation tools for career exploration and also job search. The second area is around rapid skill building and improved assessments in order to support drawing kind of the shortest line between where someone is today and getting someone into a job with upward mobility. And then the third area we're interested in is around the open data systems and interoperable learner records. And again, these three areas are highly interconnected as you think about the infrastructure needed to support that full pathway.

Within interoperable learner records, we are funding research. We have our white paper due out this year, and then we're also taking on some internal pilot projects to look at ways that you can kind of turn the need for interoperable learner records from this...how do you turn it from just this big high-level idea into something that's really tangible that employers can interact with? How do they make sense of data that these big data systems we envision for the future that they'll spit out? We still need to have something that employers will be able to interact with that is digestible at the human level. That's an area we're interested in exploring.

PAUL FAIN: Many of these challenges, as you know well, are not new. I've written a lot about competency-based education, and obviously talked with Capella folks over many years about that. You all went to a competency-based structure early and completely. And yet we're still using the credit hour, we're still using old school transcripts. And most HR departments, I believe, still look at the signal of which institution issued which credential. Do you think that the turmoil that we're going through really does change the potential to do a more skills-based, as you say, assessment-based way of knowing what people can do and what they can bring to jobs?

KENDALL BAILEY: As we all care about advancing equity and improving efficiency in clearing our labor market, I, I think we all see a move toward skills as something that should be able to advance both of those things. And given the deep expertise of Capella in competency-based education, that's an area that we feel like we're ready to double down on and think about how do we continue on the existing work and further that work that we already have in place about helping employers understand their learners' skills at that competency level, you know. Being able to double click on the degree and create more visibility for employers on what is the full skill and competency package that a graduate or, you know, a course completer would be bringing to the table.

And I think that in a world where it's very hard to manage long lists of skills or every confusing taxonomies of skills, just an abundance of information, it's hard for employers, hiring managers to make sense of that overwhelming amount of information. And that's where I think we're at a critical point here, where technology can mediate that, right? Like I like to think about it as, we want to be able to verify someone's skills and think about each individual carrying their own record of skills, almost at like an atomic level of what skills someone carries.

But that's too much information for any human to make sense of, so we need, we still need to figure out, I think, that whole crosswalk between being able to have an individual carry that rich data of the atomic level skills, and translate that into something that is as easy or easier to read than a one-page resume. You know, that's an area that we're really interested in thinking more about and working with employers on designing those, I think this might be kind of dashboards that would be a best fit for hiring and sourcing needs.

And again, doing that in a way that would improve efficiency--we think, you know, if you can get to the right dashboard that probably is easier to read than some various resume versions that you see out there in the field today. And we also think it would lead to more equitable hiring, because in the absence of quality dashboards, or in the absence of that, we're all human. We all kind on our own shortcuts or biases, unfortunately, and I think this is about giving employers the tools to be able to do that hiring, again, in a more equitable and more efficient way.

PAUL FAIN: I wonder about... This is also not a new challenge, but interoperability is tough when you have, you know, I used this term with Scott Cheney, the Tower of Babel, where everyone defines a skill differently. You know, how centralized do we need to be to make progress here? Credential Engine is doing a kind of neural centralized repository. Arizona State is working on one now. There's several efforts afoot. Is it something like that that can really crack through or can it grow in an industry, you

know, big industry that takes this on and develops a language that works across employers, across institutions. I mean, where do you see that breakthrough happening?

KENDALL BAILEY: I think it's going to have to be a mix, right? As you think about, you know, as a global community, even as a national community, we're richer for having more than one language that we speak, right? I think there's a need here for the toolkit to be able to do the crosswalk across multiple systems, right? You do need to have those keys to be able to translate from one taxonomy to the other, and to be able to do it in a way that carries enough validity across the various taxonomies.

But I also think that we are in a space where we shouldn't wait to have the one single, perfect taxonomy that everyone signed up to in order to advance the work in this space. So I think it's going to be a bit of a mix. I think that work the Credential Engine is doing is mission-critical to this space, and we have to be able to make those crosswalks in order for us, in this space, to be able to get out of such a siloed approach and, again, making those connections across the silos.

PAUL FAIN: Well, Kendall, I appreciate you indulging my very broad questions about some really complex topics, but it's an important one, and I definitely learned something here, so I appreciate you doing this.

KENDALL BAILEY: Thanks so much for having be on. I really appreciate it.

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