

The Playbook: 30 Solutions to Promote Faster Credentials



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America faces an opportunity crisis. The ability to earn a good life depends heavily on a person’s skills and educational attainment, and nearly two in three jobs now require some form of postsecondary education.¹ Yet only 40% of adults in the United States have that level of education.² Simply put, too few Americans have the skills and credentials that employers are seeking and that workers need to earn a good life.

Driving this crisis is the fact that our postsecondary education and training system doesn’t do enough to help people earn high-quality credentials quickly—both today and throughout a worker’s career. In an [earlier report](#), we examined six hurdles that Americans face in pursuing postsecondary credentials. These include:

1. Credentials don’t build on each other
2. Lack of opportunities to earn while you learn
3. Lack of credit for prior learning and work experience
4. Limited wrap-around supports for adult learners

5. Not enough employer-sponsored training
6. Burdensome occupational licensing requirements

In this report, we propose 30 federal and state policy solutions to address each of these hurdles.

4 Ideas to Promote Stackable Credentials

In our current postsecondary system, credentials often don't build on one another, or "stack." This makes it difficult for people to pursue their education in smaller, more manageable pieces over time and then stack those pieces—that is, combine multiple short-term credentials into a larger credential (like an associate's degree). When available, stacking is most commonly seen at the associate's degree level, but stackable credentials can affect a wide range of credentials and institutional types. Students who participate in short-term programs should not be dissuaded from going on to earn degrees, since degree-holders tend to have higher earnings growth over their lifetimes. And for people who prefer to complete a longer-term credential all at once, the traditional path would remain available. Still, stackable credentials could provide an alternative path to a degree. Here are four ways to encourage broader access to them:

Collect and publish data on stackable and short-term credentials: Workers and employers need far more insight into credential programs. The federal government should collect data on stackable credentials, short-term programs, and what institutions are already doing to offer them. This would include data on whether institutions are breaking their degree programs into smaller pieces and offering stackable credentials. The government can also measure whether institutions are embedding credentials for automatic graduation. Under this idea, a person in a longer-term credential program (such as an associate's degree program) automatically receives a shorter-term credential (like a certificate) once they complete a certain portion of their program. This way, if a person leaves the program before

earning their degree they at least have a certificate recognizing their skills developed up to that point.

On top of this, the U.S. Department of Education should make data on career training programs available through the College Scorecard, a user-friendly platform that allows people to research outcomes at different colleges. This data should include short-term certificate programs and non-credit career training programs, and the data should include cost, completion rate, credential attainment, earnings, and employment rate after exiting the program. To aid in this, Congress should pass the College Transparency Act, which would allow the federal government to collect outcome data for individual programs, such as employment and earnings. In May 2019, the Department for the first time added data to the College Scorecard on institutions that only award certificates, but more information on outcomes for specific programs and credentials would help people make informed choices about their postsecondary options.

Share best practices on stackable credentials: Educators can learn a lot from one another in this area. The U.S. Department of Education should collect and disseminate best practices on stackable credentials to help institutions offer them. The Department could compile these best practices and make a final report available on its Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) website. The report could scan the current landscape and answer questions like the following:

- What are institutions doing to design stackable credential programs, break up degree programs into shorter programs, and implement automatic graduation?
- What are the best innovations and success stories nationwide?

The U.S. Department of Education could also launch a Race to the Top grant competition to encourage states to adopt these best practices.

Require institutions to offer stackable credentials: States should require higher education systems to offer stackable credentials within a decade. To accomplish this, higher education systems should be required to develop plans to offer stackable credentials within two years. States should make planning grants available to higher education systems to help them design stackable credentials and break up longer-term programs into smaller pieces. As part of this, all institutions in a state should be required to break up longer-term programs in the same way to ensure portability across schools. The federal government could provide matching funds or other financial support. States should seek input from the higher education community as part of the process of creating requirements and standards for stackable credentials and designing planning grants.

In order to make sure workers have access to skills relevant for 21st century jobs, states should take three specific actions. First, they should require higher education systems to use labor market data to guide decisions about which short-term programs to offer and which long-term programs to break up into smaller pieces. Second, states should require every institution to have an advisory board or some form of partnership with employers and industry associations that can help them determine how to break up longer-term programs so that each short-term program leads to an in-demand, well-paying job. Third, states should also require institutions to work with employers and industry associations to align stackable, short-term programs to industry standards, ensuring students who complete these programs earn high-quality, industry-recognized credentials whenever possible. Short-term programs that are stackable and based on labor market demand should, in turn, be fast-tracked for approval by the state.

Provide grant funding to encourage states to collaborate on stackable credentials: By breaking up credential programs in the same way across institutions, states have a huge opportunity to ensure credentials are portable. But we could go a step further and promote this type of portability across

multiple states in a region. The federal government should provide competitive grant funding to encourage groups of states to work together on developing stackable credentials. To be eligible for this funding, regional higher education consortia such as the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education could be required to partner with workforce agencies in those states. These partnerships could pool labor market data to guide decisions about which short-term programs to offer at all institutions in a region and which longer-term programs to break up into smaller pieces.

5 Ideas to Bolster Supports for Adult Learners

The rise in adult learners means that a significant share of people in postsecondary programs are juggling responsibilities outside the classroom—from kids to jobs. Yet there are limited wraparound supports to help these learners complete their credential programs on time. Here are five ways to address that:

Expand federal child care subsidies and ensure parents in training programs have access: The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) provides child care subsidies to low-income families. In FY 2018, CCDF funding totaled \$8.1 billion.³ Despite recent federal funding increases, however, the program has traditionally served only a fraction of eligible children. For example, in 2015 the program served 1 in 7 eligible children.⁴ The federal government should expand funding for child care to ensure more parents—including those in training programs—can get assistance.

For parents in occupational training programs, access to affordable child care can depend on more than just funding, though. In particular, state decisions on who is eligible for child care subsidies and which parents should receive priority can impact whether parents in training programs can access child care assistance. States should examine whether their current rules for administering child care assistance allow enough access for parents in training programs. For example,

they should ensure eligibility rules are broad enough to allow these parents to participate and should give parents in training programs the same priority level as parents who are working.⁵

Expand child care access on campus: The Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program provides competitive grant funding to institutions of higher education to create child care programs on campus and help low-income parents pursue education. However, the vast majority of institutions with on-campus child care have waiting lists, even those with CCAMPIS funding.⁶ To address this, the federal government should increase appropriations for the CCAMPIS Program. Congress significantly increased funding for the CCAMPIS Program as part of the FY 2018 Omnibus Appropriations legislation, but the program still only reaches a fraction of student parents.⁷ The CCAMPIS Reauthorization Act and the Expanding On-Campus Child Care to Help Parents Succeed Act would expand the program and make improvements to it.^{8 9}

Bolster a diverse array of support services: Workforce development programs at community colleges are less likely than other types of workforce development programs to provide supportive services.¹⁰ This isn't surprising since state funding for public colleges and universities declined in the wake of the Great Recession.¹¹ The federal government should address that by providing competitive grant funding to community college systems for crucial support services adult learners need: child care, transportation, and/or housing assistance. For example, community colleges could use funding to create free shuttle systems between campuses and population centers or provide free bus passes for adult learners. A variation of this idea would be for the federal government to provide matching funds to states that boost funding to community colleges for child care, transportation, or housing assistance. The Gateway to Careers Act would provide grant funding to help community and technical colleges establish career pathway programs and provide support services for people in those programs.¹²

Create a one-stop office on campus for adult learners:

Returning to postsecondary education can be an intimidating and complicated experience for adult learners. States should require institutions that provide job-training programs to have a single office where adults can go to receive all the services available to them and to ensure their unique needs are being met. This office would have advisors who work specifically with adult learners and know how to get them connected to child care, ensure they get prior learning credit where possible, and provide assistance during evenings.

These one-stop offices could also provide physical spaces for adult learners to meet one another, giving adult learners a sense of community on campus. The one-stop offices could also coordinate peer-to-peer mentoring or support activities as well as social events for adult learners and their families.

Modernize American Job Centers to make career counseling more accessible for everyone:

Career counselors can help adult learners earn credentials by helping them navigate our complex postsecondary system. Counselors can provide tailored guidance on which jobs and skills are in-demand and which training programs would be a good fit. American Job Centers (AJCs) have career counselors, but jobseekers need to physically visit them in order to speak with one. Instead, AJCs should become more accessible. People should have the option to speak with AJC career counselors on the phone, through online chats via AJC websites, or through video chats and video conferencing. And career counseling should be readily available to everyone, including jobseekers as well as people who are employed but want to upgrade their skills. In this modernized system, AJC career counselors would have a broader role in promoting lifelong learning in addition to helping jobseekers find employment. Links to connect virtually with AJC career counselors could be available on AJC websites, job search sites, and websites for education and training providers.

3 Ideas to Encourage More Credit for Prior Learning

Workers get experience and skills through numerous avenues: on-the-job training, during service in the military, at various schools, while incarcerated, or in other programs. But they don't always get credit for prior learning when they enroll in postsecondary programs. Here are three ways to address that:

Standardize how training programs award prior learning credit: States should create statewide requirements for how training programs should assess and award credit for prior learning. As part of this, all institutions in a given state should award credit (and should award the same amount of credit) to students who have either 1) completed a registered apprenticeship program; or 2) earned an industry-recognized credential that aligns with a program at the institution. States should seek input from training providers and the higher education community when creating these requirements.

Help students navigate prior learning requirements: The federal government or state governments should create a program to fund either Prior Learning Credit Coordinators or increased advising staff at institutions and other training providers. These coordinators or advisors would work with adult learners, military veterans, and other students to help them navigate prior learning credit processes. Coordinators or advisors would also provide outreach to students or potential students about opportunities to receive prior learning credit.

Expand state financial aid for in-demand, well-paying programs: States should expand financial aid for low-income students in high-quality, non-credit programs that are tied to in-demand, well-paying jobs. This could include in-person and online classes. Many community colleges, for example, offer non-credit courses that prepare people for careers in information security, health information technology, and advanced manufacturing. Expanded state aid could be for people who aren't eligible for other forms of financial aid (for example, non-credit programs are not eligible for federal

financial aid). Recipients of this financial aid should be allowed to use it to pay for not only tuition but also things like prior learning assessments.

5 Ideas to Expand Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Earn-and-learn programs, like apprenticeships, allow people to continue upgrading their skills while providing for themselves and their families. They have massive potential to help people get credentials quickly, but they are currently an afterthought in the United States. Here are five ways to address that:

Establish an apprenticeship hub in each state: As Third Way has written, the United States has public K-12 education and public two- and four-year colleges in every state. Now, we must add the missing piece by making apprenticeships a ubiquitous and robust part of our education system. The federal government should provide funding for each state to set up an Apprenticeship Institute, similar to a state's public university system. These Institutes will launch new apprenticeship programs and guide apprentices to success by functioning as hubs—proactively engaging employers, workers, technical colleges, unions, and other organizations that make apprenticeships work. State governments can implement something similar if the federal government does not.

Encourage employers to hire apprentices: Employers, particularly small- and medium-sized businesses, may not be able to afford the costs that come with setting up and administering an apprenticeship program. To encourage them to do so, states (or the federal government) should make small businesses and employers in certain in-demand industries eligible for tax credits, wage subsidies, or grants if they hire apprentices.

Bolster pre-apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship programs: Pre-apprenticeship programs prepare people to participate in apprenticeship programs by providing things

like basic literacy and math instruction as well as soft skills training.¹³ Youth apprenticeship programs are different and serve high school students.¹⁴ States should provide funding to expand pre-apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship programs to help more Americans enter and succeed in apprenticeship programs. The federal government could provide matching funds to high-quality programs. For example, the federal government could provide matching funds to pre-apprenticeship programs that meet performance standards for outcomes like completion, enrollment in apprenticeship programs, and measurable gains in literacy and basic math. Matching funds could reward youth apprenticeship programs that meet standards for completion, credential attainment, and measurable skill gains.

Promote partnerships between training providers and local employers: For training providers, such as community and technical colleges, reaching out to local employers and establishing partnerships with them to develop career training programs can be labor-intensive and time-consuming. The federal government and states should provide funding to help training providers conduct this outreach, form partnerships with local employers, and develop career training programs. Only partnerships that meet certain benchmarks for employer engagement should be eligible for funding. For example, local employer partners should make commitments to help cover the costs of career training programs and give program graduates priority in hiring decisions. The Community College to Career Fund in Higher Education Act (CC2C), for example, would create a competitive grant program to support job-training partnerships between two-year colleges and businesses. These partnerships would promote work-based learning opportunities like registered apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and paid internships.¹⁵

Coordinate paid internships for secondary and postsecondary students: States should create programs that coordinate paid internships for high school students and

college students, with priority given to youth from low-income families. Employers could make tax-deductible contributions to the program. Interns would work at those companies but would be paid through the state's program. The program would also provide interns with soft skills training and other support services.

6 Ideas to Encourage More Employer-Provided Training

Enabling workers to get training and skills at work would help them upskill more quickly. However, the training opportunities that employers currently provide are not equally available to all employees. Training is more common at larger firms, for employees with higher levels of educational attainment, and for employees who are white.¹⁶ Here are six ways to address that:

Encourage small businesses to train their employees: The federal government should create a small business training tax credit that would encourage small businesses to sponsor training for their employees, particularly low- and middle-skill workers. This tax credit would allow small businesses to recoup a portion of their training expenditures. This could also be done at the state level.

Establish a Worker Training Tax Credit: The federal government should implement something similar to Aspen Institute's proposal for a Worker Training Tax Credit for businesses. This idea, which is similar to the R&D tax credit, would promote employer-sponsored training for low- and middle-skill workers. The tax credit would offset 20% of the cost of offering new training activities, like employer-provided training that leads to an industry-recognized credential. To ensure employers target low- and middle-skill workers, the tax credit would only cover training for workers who earn less than \$120,000 a year.¹⁷ This could also be done at the state level.

Promote partnerships between small businesses and training providers: The federal government and/or states

should provide grant funding to incentivize partnerships between small businesses and eligible training providers (this could include local community or technical colleges or online education providers). These partnerships would provide training to small business employees so they can upskill and access in-demand jobs at the company. Small businesses would help design and develop curricula so the training is relevant to company needs, but all training should lead to an industry-recognized credential where possible. Grant funds could be used to pay for instructors, equipment, tuition assistance, and assistance with curriculum development.

Help connect small businesses to education and training providers: Large companies often have access to third party companies that help them manage their tuition assistance programs and allow employees to earn degrees and credentials that are relevant to the company's skill needs. State workforce or economic development agencies should have dedicated staff members that perform a similar function. These state employees would help connect small businesses to local education and training providers that can provide customized training programs. These state agencies could also maintain clearinghouses on their websites where small business owners could go to learn about training programs in their area and points of contact for those programs.

Provide loans to small businesses for upskilling: The Small Business Administration currently offers loan guarantees that allow small businesses to buy things like equipment and real estate. Without this loan guarantee, many small businesses would not be able to access financing on favorable terms. The federal government should expand eligible Small Business Administration 7(a) loan purposes to include human capital—that is, training that would allow small businesses to upskill their employees to meet specific skill needs that would allow the business to grow. Small businesses could use the financing to provide up-front tuition assistance to their employees, an alternative to after-the-fact tuition

reimbursement that is currently available through the tax code.

Develop internal upskilling programs: Large employers (for example, those with 200 or more employees) should create internal upskilling programs that help employees upgrade their skills and/or transition into jobs that will be in demand at the company. Specifically, employers should create internal online platforms that allow existing employees to learn about:

- Jobs being created at the company that are in-demand;
- Which skills and credentials those new jobs require;
- Which training programs (internal or external) would provide the skills and credentials needed for those in-demand jobs; and
- Any tuition assistance/reimbursement the employer provides and how the employee can access it.

In addition, during annual performance reviews, employers could provide information to employees on available tuition assistance/reimbursement to help pay for training programs that lead to in-demand credentials. Finally, employment contracts could include a commitment that if employees earn in-demand credentials in their time working at the company they will receive guaranteed pay raises.

To encourage employers to build upskilling programs with these elements, states or the federal government should create digital badges for employers that do so. Employers would be able to display these badges on their websites and on sites like LinkedIn and Glassdoor. Companies with these badges could also be eligible for tax incentives (such as a payroll tax rebate) while their employees participate in training, in recognition of the fact that employees in upskilling programs may not be 100% productive in their old jobs during this time.

7 Ideas to Ease Occupational Licensing Barriers

As the economy shifts, jobs will shift with it, and so will workers looking to fill those jobs. However, licensing requirements differ dramatically from state to state, forcing people to go through time-consuming hurdles to relicense when they move to a new state. Here are seven ways to address that:

Adopt nationwide licensing standards for certain occupations: There are many occupations where licensing requirements simply don't need to vary by state, such as dentists or opticians (since the human body doesn't change from one state to another). The federal government should identify a target list of occupations that it recommends be licensed nationwide and should develop licensing standards for those occupations that states can choose to adopt. The federal government should make competitive grant funding available to states and groups of states looking to reform their occupational licensing rules using those national standards.

Encourage states to harmonize licensing requirements: States should voluntarily form interstate compacts and create common licensing standards for certain occupations that all participating states can adopt. The federal government should encourage this sort of interstate collaboration by providing funding to help states create those standards and transition to them. Under the Interstate Teaching Mobility Act, for example, states would voluntarily work together to create minimum standards for licensing teachers. Teachers would be free to teach in any participating state without having to start the licensing process over from scratch.¹⁸ Similarly, the Portable Certification of Spouses Act would encourage interstate collaboration to ease the relicensing burden for military spouses.¹⁹

Ease licensing requirements for military veterans: The federal government should implement Operation

Certification, a Third Way proposal meant to ease the impact of occupational licensing on military veterans. Under this proposal, a congressional commission would identify high-demand occupations that veterans could transition to after their military careers. The commission would then develop new, nationwide standards for those occupations that the military can align training to, and states that align their credentials with the federal standard would be recognized with a “Blue Star” designation.²⁰

Identify licensing requirements that can be relaxed or eliminated: States should perform regular cost-benefit analyses of their current and proposed licensing rules to determine where licensing rules can be relaxed or removed entirely. State departments such as Maryland’s Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation could perform these analyses, or states could create Licensing Commissions.

Relax licensing requirements for high-demand industries and occupations: In April 2019, Arizona became the first state to recognize all out-of-state licenses, allowing people who move to the state to start work right away without having to go through a burdensome relicensing process. More states should consider this option, but states that aren’t willing to recognize all out-of-state licenses can still ease barriers to work and improve industry shortages by recognizing out-of-state licenses for certain occupations. States should identify in-demand, high-growth occupations in their state—ones that are currently experiencing shortages or will in the future—and relax licensing requirements for those occupations, or even recognize out-of-state licenses for those occupations.

Allow people to continue working while they relicense: When you move to a new state you have to update your driver’s license within a certain time period, but you can still use your old one in the meantime. Occupational licenses should work the same way. States should implement temporary or provisional licensure so people can work and earn a living while they go through relicensing requirements in their new state.

Exempt certain categories of people from licensing requirements: Military families typically move every three years,²¹ ten times more frequently than civilian families.²² This means military families face relicensing hurdles more often. As a result, a third of military spouses are underemployed despite being highly educated.²³ States should exempt all active duty military personnel and their spouses from licensing requirements when they change bases, since it wasn't their choice to move.

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