Building Credential Currency

Resources to Drive Attainment across K-12,   
Higher Education, and Workforce Development

Sample Focus Group Protocol

*This sample focus group protocol is included within the toolkit to give states a ready-made option for conducting focus groups. Cross-sector state teams may adapt and adopt this protocol and use it as described in the guidelines in the toolkit.*

**Introduction**

Thank you for participating in today’s focus group. Your feedback is very important, and we appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

[STATE TEAM NAME] has convened this group of workforce leaders because together you represent [STATE]’s priority [INDUSTRY NAME] occupations. It is in companies like yours that we find jobs that are not only the most demanded within [STATE]—they are also jobs that afford the greatest opportunity for employees in terms of skill level and associated wages.

Creating clear pathways to these jobs is a significant priority for our state, which is what brings us here today. [STATE] has identified a preliminary list of non-degree credentials that, based on our labor market data analysis and feedback from employers like you, are either required or strongly preferred for employment within the occupations you represent. Our job today is to validate that these non-degree credentials hold real value in employment decisions within your sector and confirm that [STATE] should prioritize and support the attainment of these credentials among potential employees.

At the same time, we recognize that hiring is a far more complicated undertaking than simply confirming whether applicants hold a certain credential. We hope to confirm that these non-degree credentials in combination with other standard hiring priorities—such as postsecondary degrees, technical skills, and professional readiness—indicate that a prospective candidate is right for a job within your industry.

The information you share in this focus group will not be attributed to you, so you should feel comfortable providing candid, honest, and straightforward responses to the questions posed.

Please remember that you received and signed a consent form to participate in this group, which means your participation is voluntary.

We’ll try to keep our time here together to one hour. Are there any questions before we begin?

**Focus Group Questions**

First, let’s get a sense for who is in the room. Let’s quickly go around the room and get everyone’s first name, company name, and region(s) of [STATE]in which your company operates.

*[Quick round of introductions]*

Great, thanks. Now, I’d like to discuss any critical needs and/or gaps you perceive within your business and field.

1. From your perspective, what are the most pressing current and future employment needs within the field?

a. To your knowledge, are these also jobs that provide family-sustaining wages *[define]* and opportunities for advancement?

2. Do you feel that your businesses are able to successfully identify and hire the right talent from within [STATE]?

a. If not, what is missing from the talent pool?

i. Are potential workers not equipped with the right skills, training, or credentials? If so, could you elaborate on what those skills, training, or credentials are?

ii. Are there not enough workers to meet demand for open positions?

b. If yes, where do you find talent? For instance, do you have partnerships with colleges and universities (perhaps even high schools), industry associations, etc. that help you identify talent?

*[Next, share with focus group members the draft list of priority non-degree credentials resulting from your state’s labor market analysis and employer survey. At the same time, distribute any graphs or charts that your state team has made that represent the results of your survey analyses that highlight trends, alignment of responses, and disagreement within responses.]*

3. We received helpful feedback from employers across the state regarding these non-degree credentials that we’ve tentatively identified as high-value. *[Share list of credentials.]*

a. In your opinion and experience, are these non-degree credentials required or strongly preferred in order to secure employment or advance in these areas?

b. Are these credentials portable? Do they hold value across the industry, regardless of business or specific job title?

c. Are these credentials required/preferred in addition to a traditional 2- or 4-year college degree (or higher), or does the credential alone satisfy hiring needs?

d. Are these credentials stackable? Are there opportunities to become further specialized?

e. If these are credentials typically earned in workforce training programs or at the community college level, do you know of any “building block” credentials/exams that can help high school students better prepare for these opportunities? What are they?

4. Survey feedback from employers also revealed some inconsistencies that we would like to raise with you to get clarification.

*[Draft and insert 2-3 questions here regarding concerning inconsistencies you found through the employer survey about particular non-degree credentials.]*

*[Review each credential relevant to that industry focus group and ask participants to vote on whether to retain or remove the credential from the list. Use the criteria you developed in preparation for focus groups (described in the previous tool) to make final determinations about each credential.]*

5. Our [STATE TEAM NAME] reviewed the survey data and set a threshold of [X]to determine which credentials should remain or be removed from the priority list.

a. Do you agree with that threshold value?

b. Are there any credentials that were eliminated using that threshold that you think you should be added back into the list? Why?

c. Are there any credentials that passed the “threshold test” that you feel are not essential to hiring and therefore should be removed? Why?

6. Are there any non-degree credentials on which you rely in your recruiting and hiring that do not appear on the list? What evidence exists to support their addition to the list?

Thank you very much for your time today. We appreciate your candid feedback that will help us finalize this list of priority non-degree credentials. Districts, institutions, and job training programs across the state will prioritize student attainment of these credentials to help more learners prepare for jobs that provide a solid career path with family-sustaining wages while also helping you as employers with your talent sourcing efforts.

*[Conclude focus group.]*