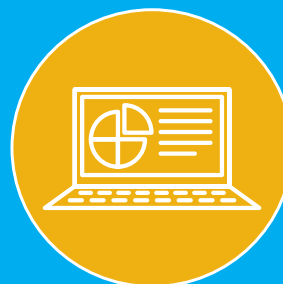# Building Credential Currency

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

2. Validate the Preliminary List of Priority Non-Degree Credentials

Validation Step 1: Process to Survey Employers

Your state has completed a lengthy, data-driven process to identify in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations within priority sectors and related non-degree credentials that are needed or highly recommended to secure jobs. While that process has created a strong preliminary list of priority non-degree credentials, your state should now work with employers to validate it, i.e., confirm that they do in fact rely upon those credentials in their hiring, promotion, and salary decision-making practices.

To accomplish this, your state should first survey employers within priority industries to get broad feedback from the field as described below. Once that has been done, your state should convene focus groups of select employers to further test and validate the preliminary list, which is described later in this toolkit.

Your state's online survey should be designed to reach a representative sample of employers within your priority industries. Survey questions or statements should solicit feedback that helps you confirm (or refute) that credentials on your state's preliminary list are high-quality and valued by employers. The following steps offer guidance on the process of designing, administering, and analyzing surveys of employers as a first step in the process of validating your state's preliminary cross-sector priority credential list.

I. Design and build your state's survey.

Survey design extends beyond crafting the right questions to ask—although this is a critical step—to identifying your target audience ahead of time. To yield reliable information and get the clearest sense of the economic landscape, your survey should target a representative sample of employers and direct questions to the appropriate point of contact within each organization. The steps below outline the process for identifying the right audience for your survey; and a complementary tool provides a sample survey structure that your team can use to get started.

1. Identify who will lead the development, administration, and analysis of surveys.

Just as your state took a cross-sector approach to developing its preliminary list of priority credentials, so too should you bring leaders from K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development together to validate, refine, and finalize that list. In selecting members to serve on this cross-sector team to survey employers, consider these questions:

- What capacity and resources will be needed to design, administer, and analyze results of an online survey?

- Who from the state's K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development agencies brings that capacity to the work? What role will each play?

● Are there considerable advantages to distributing responsibilities across state agencies rather than consolidate them in a single agency? For example, might one agency be especially well suited to design and develop the survey while another leads the administration and analysis of survey results?

2. Identify target industries for the survey.

The primary objective of the survey is to confidently determine that your state has identified the non-degree credentials that are required or preferred for employment in your in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations. It is imperative then that you direct your survey to the industries in which these occupations are found as described in the steps below.

● Your state should revisit its identification of priority industries that emerged from your analysis of labor market data. Those industries are your target markets for this survey.

● Determine the share each of these industries represents in your state economy. For example, Information Technology may represent 40% of workers in your state's economy while Advanced Manufacturing may only represent 10%.

● Make certain your statewide "priority industry map" reflects those size differences so that it can be used to first develop strategies to ensure your eventual survey sample is representative of your state's employer base; and second guide your outreach to companies within those priority industries.

3. Identify target employers/companies within those priority industries.

Using your statewide industry map, you should next identify employers/companies within those industries that represent your state's in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations. You might leverage your existing network to help you with this task, which may include consulting:

● State and local Chambers of Commerce

● State business and industry associations related to each priority industry

● State and local workforce development boards

● Industry Advisory Councils

Senior leaders within these groups should recommend specific employers (and a related point of contact) to participate in the survey. In addition, you might ask if the organizations above would be willing to send out the survey on behalf of your state since they have a personal relationship with target employers.

While those organizations will be helpful in identifying an initial set of target companies, you will need to consult an additional resource to build a more comprehensive group of respondents that represent your in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations in your state. A public resource like the CareerOneStop Business Finder may be helpful, which catalogs employers in your state by the type of business, the related industry, and the number of employees within specific companies. It can be filtered by these criteria as well as by zip code to identify businesses that meet your criteria.

4. Ensure that the identified employers form a representative sample for surveying.

Now that you have a list of target employers, your state should refer back to the industry map (created in step 2 above) to identify the number of employers you seek to survey in each priority industry to ensure that you are gathering feedback from a sample that is representative of your state's employer base. [Note: you will need to run a statistical test to confirm that the number of target employers by industry are not statistically different from each industry's overall representation as shown in your state's priority industry map.] Each industry sample size may vary depending upon the number of employers in your state. In addition, you should check your list to ensure that it includes large and small employers from all regions of your state.

5. Identify a contact person within each company to complete the survey.

For each employer on your state's list, identify a contact person who understands the education, skill, and credentialing requirements for positions in their company and is involved in recruiting and hiring prospective employees. (Remember the organizations listed in step 3 above that can help with this task.) This person will vary depending upon the size of the targeted company. For example:

- **Companies with 15 or more employees** will generally have a Human Resources department that handles recruiting and hiring candidates. Specialists within those departments who can serve as helpful points of contact include Human Resource Managers, Directors of Employment and Recruitment, Talent Acquisition Managers, Technical Recruiters, and Hiring Managers.

- **Companies with less than 15 employees** likely position the owner to handle hiring decisions since he or she best understands the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed to fill current or projected roles.

6. Design your survey to be completed by your identified employers.

Next, your cross-sector survey team should build a survey that presents the preliminary list of priority non-degree credentials to identified employers and solicits their feedback on the value of those credentials. Surveys should enable your state to collect a variety of data from respondents that you will later use in analysis to determine which credentials

NOTE: Your state may opt to modify the sample survey provided later in this toolkit for use within your survey practices.

remain on the list, and which should be excluded. Your state should ask questions about the size and location of the companies the employers represent; the professional role of the employer respondent; the extent to which he/she uses each of the credentials in hiring and promotion practices; and the extent to which each of the credentials demonstrates that individuals have the knowledge and skills to secure in-demand, high-skill, high-wage jobs.

II. Administer surveys.

There are a number of important details your state must consider and plan for when preparing to administer your survey on priority non-degree credentials. Your cross-sector team should answer each of the following questions together and build those responses into its survey administration plan.

1. Technical preparation

● Where will your state host the survey? What survey software will you use? Do you have an existing membership with a survey software provider, like Survey Monkey, that can be used for this administration?

2. Logistical preparation

● What is the ideal timeframe for administration? Is there a particular date by which the list of priority credentials needs to be finalized for use by school districts and/or higher education institutions in the next academic year? Is there a particular timeframe that is better or worse for employers to respond?

● When will your state open the survey window? How long will the survey remain open? (A two-week administration window is common.)

● Have you collected email addresses of target respondents and loaded them into your survey software?

● Have you contacted your target respondents to remind them that they will soon receive an email asking them to complete the survey and reminding them of the ways in which their participation will be helpful to students and to their own talent sourcing priorities?

3. Survey administration

● As your state prepares to launch the survey, how will you utilize organizations within your network, like those listed in Section I, Part 3, to help you push the survey out to target employers and increase response rates? If so, which groups will you enlist, and how will you leverage them?

● Once your survey has "gone live," in which industries are you getting good response rates, and in which industries might you need to remind target employers to respond to the survey? What outreach is needed to motivate employers to respond?

III. Analyze and summarize the results of the survey.

At the end of your state's survey window, you will close the survey and retrieve respondent data from your survey software. The goal of this stream of work is to analyze the feedback from employers to better understand their opinions regarding which of the non-degree credentials on the preliminary priority list should remain, and which (if any) should be removed.

The following guidance and questions are intended to help your analysis and decision-making by identifying the ways in which your state should review and consider the survey data.

1. First, identify the survey response rate by industry.

Check to determine whether you have you received an adequate number of responses from each industry such that the response rate is representative of your priority industry sectors. [Note: This will require running a test of significant difference to ensure that differences in response rates by industry are not statistically different from each industry's overall representation as shown in your state's priority industry map.]

● Have you collected survey responses from both small and large employers? Do the responses represent employers statewide?

● If the survey responses are not representative of your priority industries, which employers have not responded that need to do so? What additional outreach should you make to those employers to convince them to complete the survey?

2. Analyze the responses from your representative sample by industry to assess the value of the non-degree credentials included in the survey.

Your analysis should attempt to answer the following questions:

● Have the employers responded to questions on appropriate credentials? (For example, have healthcare employers responded to questions regarding non-degree healthcare-related credentials?)

  ◗ In the event that employers have responded regarding credentials out of their field, their responses should be pulled from the data set. At this time, you will need to confirm that you still have a representative sample.

● For every credential on the preliminary list, what percentage of respondents said that the credential is required for a job?

● For every credential on the preliminary list, what percentage of respondents said that the credential is preferred for a job?

● For every credential on the preliminary list, what percentage of respondents said that the credential is not important to a job?

● For every credential on the preliminary list, what percentage of respondents indicated that they were not familiar with a particular credential?

3. Determine whether responses vary according to the size or location of the employer.

- What percentage of small employers, medium employers, and large employers (your state may decide the threshold for these categories) agree that each credential is required for a job? Preferred for a job? Not important for a job?

- What percentage of employers in each of the regions of your state (as described in your survey) agreed that each credential is required for a job? Preferred for a job? Not important for a job?

4. As a cross-sector state team, determine a threshold to use in making decisions about which credentials remain on the list and which should be removed.

For example, do 50% of employers in any given industry need to agree that a credential is not important to a job in order for a credential to be removed? Would 35% suffice? What constitutes a "preponderance of the evidence"? Note that whatever threshold you decide upon should be uniform for decision-making across all industry and occupation areas.

5. Identify data/questions that will need to be investigated further through focus groups.

- Are there inconsistencies in responses that need to be investigated further?

- Can your state create graphs and/or charts that represent the results of your analyses that highlight trends, alignment of responses, and disagreement within responses?

- Is the threshold set by the cross-sector team to remove credentials from the priority list rigorous enough? (You want those employers to validate your state's decision on thresholds.)

6. Revise the preliminary list of non-degree credentials according to the thresholds that have been determined by your cross-sector team.

This is the list that you will vet with focus groups as described later in this toolkit.

Sample Employer Survey

This sample survey is included within the toolkit to give states a ready-made option for survey administration. Cross-sector state teams may adapt and adopt this survey and administer it as described in the guidelines above to determine the extent to which a representative sample of employers from in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations agrees each non-degree credential should be included on the state's priority list. ***To download a customizable version of this tool, visit*** *http://edstrategy.org/resource/building-credential-currency/*.

Introduction (Page 1)

{STATE NAME} has drafted a list of priority occupations and related non-degree credentials to send clear signals to K-12, higher education, and workforce development leaders about the credentials that matter most to good jobs in our state. We thank you in advance for responding to this survey, which is designed to take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

To be deemed "priority," occupations must have met or exceeded *each* of the following thresholds in a robust economic analysis of state labor market data:

- In-Demand: *{insert state definition for "in-demand" or threshold}*
- High-Skill: *{insert state threshold for "high-skill"}*
- High-Wage: *{insert state threshold for "high-wage"}*

For each priority occupation, we have identified existing non-degree credentials that individuals can earn to both access jobs and advance through a career field. Our next step is to validate these occupations and credentials with you, the employer community, and confirm that these are the right credentials to prioritize within your industry.

General Questions (Page 2)

1. In which region(s) are you located? Choose as many as applicable.

{List specific options from which to choose, corresponding your state's preference for regional/county/local terminology.}

2. What is the approximate size of your company? (Round to the nearest 10.)

{Short open-ended response; rounding up to the nearest 10 will provide better, more flexible data than arbitrary multiple choice tiers.}

3. For which of the following professional industries will you be providing feedback?

{List the state's priority industries. Respondents should be asked to provide feedback on priority occupations/credentials within the industry in which they work. This can vary from respondent to respondent. For example, healthcare professionals in hospitals could select "healthcare," while IT professionals in hospital settings could select "IT." If your target respondent is an HR leader, they may also have the option to complete the survey for multiple industries, e.g., healthcare and IT.}

Occupation Validation (Page 3)

4. The following occupations within the *{INDUSTRY NAME—populated based on response in #3}* industry have been identified as priority occupations based on job demand, skill requirements, and median wage. Based on your experience and knowledge, **please select any occupations you believe DO NOT meet the criteria for in-demand, high-skill, *and* high-wage occupations. For each occupation you believe should be removed, please provide your reasoning for removal.**

Occupation	**Should be Removed from Priority List**	**Rationale for Removal** *{dropdown: not in-demand, not high-skill, not high-wage, combination of factors, other}*	**Open-Ended Rationale for Removal:** Please expand on your selection in the previous column.
Occupation 1	○ Yes ○ No		
…			
Occupation n	○ Yes ○ No		

5. Are there any occupations in your industry that are *not* on the priority list above that you believe should be considered for inclusion in the next cycle, based on projected job demand, skill requirements, and employer earnings?

   ○ Yes

   ○ No

6. If you answered "Yes" to the question above, please list those occupations here.

Credential Validation (Page 4)

7. The following non-degree credentials within the *{INDUSTRY NAME}* industry correspond to identified priority occupations. **Based on your experience and knowledge, how important is each credential in deciding to hire or promote an individual?**

Credential	**Required:** This credential is *required* to hire/promote.	**Preferred:** This credential is preferred, but not required, when considering decisions to hire/promote.	**Not Important:** This credential is not relevant for decision-making.	**I am not familiar with this credential.**
Credential 1	●	●	●	●
…				
Credential n	●	●	●	●

8. Are there any non-degree credentials in your industry that are *not* on the priority list above that you believe should be considered for inclusion in the next cycle, based on alignment to in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations?

   ● Yes

   ● No

9. If you answered "Yes" to the question above, please list those non-degree credentials here (no abbreviations). Please do not include proprietary credentials specific to your organization.

10. Are there any occupations in your industry that are particularly difficult to fill because prospective employees lack the necessary non-degree credentials?

   ● Yes

   ● No

11. If you answered "Yes" to the question above, please explain which occupations you have noticed a shortage due to credentialing.

Validation Step 2: Process to Convene Employer Focus Groups

At this point, your state has accomplished two major steps: 1) Using labor market data to preliminarily identify priority credentials within in-demand, high-skill, high-wage occupations; and 2) Surveying employers within those priority industries to systematically collect broad feedback from the field to refine that list of priority non-degree credentials.

Those two steps have provided your state with invaluable yet incomplete information. To close those gaps, you should convene focus groups of select employers to further test and validate the preliminary list. Those personal conversations will allow you to investigate any remaining questions your state has about individual credentials and to test the threshold your cross-sector team set (see previous instrument) to retain or remove credentials from your priority list.

In designing your focus group protocols, there are several important steps your state will need to take, each of which is described below.

1. Define clear objectives for each of your industry-specific focus groups.

Employers, like other professionals, are very busy. Requests for them to travel to and participate in non-degree credential focus groups pull them away from other important work at hand. Developing and sharing clear, relatable objectives with employers will convey the importance of this work for students and the future workforce.

While your state will likely have objectives unique to its own context, all states will seek to use focus groups to analyze employer survey feedback to make recommendations for final approval of an employer-endorsed non-degree credential priority list that includes credentials that are valued by employers in their talent sourcing work and helpful in recruiting new employees. There are also several more narrow objectives that will hold true across states:

- Resolve any concerns and/or inconsistencies found within employers' survey responses;

- Validate the threshold that was used by your state's cross-sector team to determine which credentials make the list and which are removed; and

- Vet each proposed credential (and identify others that should be considered if applicable) to confirm whether or not it's a part of your priority list.

II. Determine how many and which focus groups you will convene.

Examine your preliminary list of non-degree credentials to determine the focus groups you need. Organize them by industry, e.g., healthcare, information technology, and manufacturing. You may discover that you need more than one focus group per industry depending on the range of credentials on your list.

III. Identify employers by industry to participate in each focus group.

The composition of your focus groups, which should each be industry specific, will in large part determine the overall reliability of your priority non-degree credentials list. Participants will serve as both content and hiring experts who act as the final step in your quality assurance process. The following list describes important guidelines and/or considerations for your state in forming focus groups.

- Each focus group should consist of about 10 industry-specific professionals that represent each region of your state and a range of small and large, rural and urban businesses. You might invite up to 15 per focus group anticipating that some may not be available to attend.

- Employer participants should be familiar enough with the proposed credentials to weigh in on their value, both from a content perspective and a hiring perspective, i.e., they should be able to answer the question, "Does this credential represent the knowledge and skills needed for a good job in this industry?" Employer survey respondents, Chamber of Commerce members, local and state workforce board members, and those within industry associations often make good targets for participation.

- A state leader from K-12, postsecondary, and workforce development should be included within each focus group to gain understanding of employers' perspectives. In addition, you may want to include a professor/instructor in each group from an institution of higher education that offers credit and/or non-credit programs related to the proposed credentials who can offer input into the credential's value from a postsecondary credit and/or attainment perspective.

IV. Develop a thorough protocol for each focus group.

A sample follows that your state can adapt as needed. The protocol should script all the questions you intend to pose in each focus group as well as identify which materials will be distributed and when. Some key questions to consider during development include:

- **Who will lead the focus group discussion?** It should ideally be someone who understands the industry, is knowledgeable about the proposed credentials and how they fit within K-12 and higher education programs, and is a strong facilitator.

- **Which materials need to be developed and shared with the focus group?** Commonly used resources include the preliminary list of priority non-degree credentials; charts and graphs that represent the trends, alignment of responses, and disagreement within survey responses; a description of the threshold set by your cross-sector team to retain or remove credentials from the list; and a brief overview of the steps within the credential evaluation process.

V. Develop criteria for focus group participants to make final recommendations on which credentials make your priority list.

You want the focus group to make evidence-based decisions to the extent possible when making decisions about the value of the credentials. Some criteria that you may include are:

- The credential is relied upon by employers within recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices.

- Employees who have attained the credential earn higher salaries/compensation than those who have not.

- The credential provides opportunities for career advancement.

- The credential reliably represents that an employee has the prerequisite knowledge and skills for a job within the industry that pays a family-sustaining wage (according to the living wage calculator used in the first tool in this kit).

- The credential "stacks" with other in-field credentials to help employees progressively move up a career ladder.

- The credential is portable and is recognized by employers across the industry.

VI. Develop thresholds that your state cross-sector team will use to retain or remove credentials from the list based on employer feedback.

In all likelihood, your focus group participants will not unanimously agree on answers to the questions above. Your state team will need to agree on thresholds for keeping or removing credentials from the list. Some questions you might consider ahead of the focus group include:

- What proportion of focus group participants must agree with keeping any individual credential on the list? For example, do at least three-fourths need to advocate for a credential or oppose a credential?

- What process will the state team use to take that tally?

- What evidence/explanation is required to accept a focus group participant's nay vote?

- What evidence is required to accept a focus group participant's vote to add a new credential to the list? (Note, this will likely be the same threshold set in the first question on the previous page.)

- Do you plan to implement a weighted credentialing list to show which credentials have greater employment value than others? If so, what process and threshold will your team use to identify which credentials fall into various tiers?

VII. Consolidate final recommendations from the focus groups.

Following the completion of each focus group, your cross-sector team will need to review all recommendations. There may be discrepancies in the views of participants on the value of some credentials. In those cases, your team may need to undertake additional research prior to moving the recommendations forward. Once that has been done, your team will refine the list and move it through your state's established process for approval and publication.

VIII. Synthesize findings with survey results and vet any changes with your established process.

Once you have reviewed the findings from your focus groups, consolidate those findings with the results of your survey. Updates from the employer validation process should be tested against your established process to identify priority occupations and credentials to ensure that all changes are held to the same rigorous standards as your initial list. Once all changes have been vetted and incorporated, you will have produced your finalized list of priority non-degree credentials!

IX. Create a timeline to review and update your state's priority credentials list.

Like the economy your finalized list seeks to reflect, the process to identify and validate priority non-degree credentials is cyclical—not static. Your team will need to review and update this list to keep pace with a constantly changing economic landscape. Ideally, refreshing this process—from identification through validation—occurs every two or three years to ensure your list is reflective of current economic realities.

Sample Focus Group Protocol

To download a customizable version of this tool, visit http://edstrategy.org/resource/building-credential-currency/.

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.}