ESG | Education Strategy Group

DEVELOPING BRIDGE TOOLS TO AWARD CREDIT

APPROACH:
Bridge tools are used to award credit for learning in industry-focused non-credit programs when students transition into credit programs. Non-credit and credit departments may retain their organizational distinctions.

TOOLS:
Bridge tools include equivalency agreements, articulation agreements, competency-based education (CBE), credit by exam or other PLA, or credit matrices.

TIPS:
Select the bridge tool(s) that will make the transition process between non-credit and credit programs and credit awarding process as automatic as possible, without additional requirements placed on students.

CASE STUDY: CBE AND EQUIVALENCY AGREEMENTS AT SALT LAKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Location/ Type:
Salt Lake City, Utah; 10 campuses

Student Enrollment by Program:
SATTS*: 1,000
Other non-credit:** 13,000
Credit: 29,000

Student Age by Program:
SATTS average age: 33
Credit median age: 22

Student Ethnicity by Program:
SATTS: 4% African-American, 39% Latino, 8% Asian, 1% Native American, 40% White
Credit: 2% African-American, 20% Latino, 4% Asian, 1% Native American, 66% White

Accreditation:
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

From College Navigator and SLCC Factbook. http://performance.slcc.edu/Factbook/2019-20/G_non-credit/index.html
* SATTS: School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialities
** non-credit numbers include all non-credit offerings, not just industry-focused workforce programs

Background
In 2009, the state legislature mandated a merger between the Salt Lake portion of the Utah College of Applied Technology (UCAT), a non-credit state institution, with the Skills Center, the non-credit arm of Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), to form the new School of Applied Technology (SAT), in an effort to consolidate programs between UCAT and SLCC. However, additional duplication existed within SLCC between the credit-based School of Technological Studies (STS) and SAT. Despite nearly 90 percent programmatic duplication across the two schools, SAT and STS continued to function as separate entities within SLCC.

Structural Alignment
In 2016, SAT and STS were formally merged at the recommendation of a consultant to SLCC in response to the programmatic duplication. The merger brought a focus on alignment efforts.

"The more duplication you have, the more red tape you have," noted Eric Heiser, former dean at SLCC. Heiser and his team undertook substantial structural reorganization to create the new division of the School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialities (SATTS). Six associate deans were assigned to oversee both non-credit and credit programs, leading to "much more understanding and cooperation," shared Franz Feierbach, Associate Dean for Operations & Academic Readiness at SATTS. It took time for faculty to get used to working together. Programs continued to be offered in non-credit and credit formats, with students selecting their preferred approach.

Pathway Development

From 2014-16, SATTS moved 20 non-credit clock hour programs to a competency based education (CBE) model. This was done in response to funded legislation that required affordable and flexible open terms to better serve under-employed learners. As part of this effort, SATTS and SLCC made the development of pathways to credit programs a priority.

Leaders saw how barriers to transition between programs and the lack of pathways frustrated both students and employers. The president empowered the administration to meet with faculty to begin developing pathways. "We were no longer dead-ending our students," noted Heiser, who also wanted to ensure students who completed CBE programs would not be required to retake the same course in a credit program. Internal equivalency agreements would become the bridge tool to form pathways.

Credit Determination

The college developed internal equivalency agreements to grant credit for competencies, rather than courses. Equivalency agreements pertained to a full CBE program and required students to complete the CBE program in order to be eligible for credit. The initial process took more than a year. It required bringing the right stakeholders to the table, from deans and faculty to the registrar and advisers. A senior administrator who knew regulations served as the "myth buster" to speak to objections and concerns. In addition, they developed shared values, language, and guidelines to ensure equity. Release time was given to allow faculty to establish agreements.

Faculty and staff engaged in ongoing professional development and support activities to review, assess, and align learning outcomes. The level of trust and relationships between faculty determined how long it would take to finalize the agreement. "Where trust already exists, it is easier to do," shared Rachel Lewis, assistant provost of curriculum and academic systems. It took as little as one month for faculty in the same department who teach both types of courses to develop equivalency agreements, while faculty across different schools of the college took up to a year to reach agreement.

Barrier Removal

An institutional promise program covers any financial aid gap for students who transition from completing a non-credit credential into a degree program. At least one degree program, biotechnology, is switching over to a CBE model, as faculty and administrators in the degree program realized students want to accelerate their learning. This will also provide students transitioning in from non-credit CBE programs the same educational experience, which makes it easier for these students to continue. "Students like the flexibility of CBE," shared Verl Long, Assistant Director for Academic Advising in SATTS, reflecting on how adult learners need courses to better fit their lives and busy schedules.

Results and Next Steps

SLCC is continuing to expand the number of internal equivalency agreements it offers and update existing agreements to incorporate new curricular changes. While use of the agreements has been low due to being new or still in process, recent legislation may change that. In 2020, new state legislation required SLCC to remove all programmatic duplication between non-credit and credit-based workforce programs in SATTS. In response, SLCC has chosen to eliminate credit-based offerings in favor of CBE programs, which are more affordable, flexible, accelerated, and boast higher completion rates. With equivalency agreements in place, SLCC will simply award credit when students transition from CBE programs into to degree programs.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

GOLD-STANDARD ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS AT THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

More than 10 years ago, the Florida Department of Education recognized that industry certifications mapped closely to community college offerings and developed a process called gold-standard articulation agreements to award credit and link them to AS and AAS degrees. These agreements, created through state statute, are part of a career pathways effort to support postsecondary continuation for certification holders coming out of high schools, technical schools, and non-credit programs in community colleges.

The agreements establish clear minimum requirements for awarding credit, though colleges may choose to grant additional credit. Agreements indicate what evidence is needed to establish credit eligibility and demonstrate connection to industry and technical skills. Students have three years after receiving the certification to apply to the relevant credit program and receive credit for the certification. "This is a perfect pathway to go from a clock hour program to an AS program, reduce cost for students, and get them into the workforce sooner," shared Kathleen Taylor, Bureau Chief, Division of Career and Adult Education, Florida Department of Education.

The creation of statewide articulation agreements required approval from the state articulation coordinating committee and the State Board of Education. An infrastructure was built to review the agreements annually. Each year, the State Board of Education adopts a list of approved in-demand industry certifications, in collaboration with the State Department of Labor. The Department of Education then maps the certifications to AS and AAS degrees, some of which are transferable to bachelor's programs, and shares the list and mapping with colleges. Faculty curriculum committees at each college must affirm they will award credit for the certification and signify how much credit. "Sometimes there is a need for consensus-building across colleges," commented Taylor, "and if the faculty across colleges don't reach consensus, then we don't go further." However, with 150 gold-standard articulation agreements in place, consensus is reached more often than not.

CERTIFICATION CROSSWALK AND STACKABLE CREDENTIALS AT IVY TECH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Location/Type:
40 locations across Indiana, the largest postsecondary institution in the state, and the largest singly-accredited community college system in the country

Student Enrollment:
Non-credit*: 170,000 students annually
Credit: 72,600

Accreditation:
Higher Learning Commission

From About Ivy Tech Community College, website. https://www.ivytech.edu/about/index.html
From Indiana's Workforce Engine, Ivy Tech Community College. https://www.ivytech.edu/workforce-engine/index.html
From College Navigator, NCES. https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/?q=ivy+tech+community+college&s=all&id=150987#accred
* non-credit numbers include all non-credit offerings, not just industry-focused workforce programs

For over five years, Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana has been working to align non-credit and credit offerings. *"We saw that two sides of the house didn't communicate and were even at odds,"* said Chris Lowery, Senior Vice President of Workforce Alignment. In response, they developed a certification crosswalk, which lists the amount of credit awarded for industry-based certifications. Their crosswalk includes over 100 industry-based certifications and was created in consultation with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to be accessible and student-friendly.

Certifications are aligned to degree programs and are counted for credit once students continue toward a degree program. Certifications are also part of a stackable credentials structure. Certifications stack into 18-credit hour certificates, which stack into 30-credit hour technical certificates, and then to an associate's degree.

In 2019, Ivy Tech had 8,000 student completions in workforce programs, which would be added to 28,000 degree completions. Their next steps are to codify non-credit courses into specific pathways by region, create a definition of stackability, and build out a "one door" student services approach. They have added non-credit student completion into their strategic plan and aspire to produce 50,000 credentials of high value.

CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING AT VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

System:
23 public two-year institutions across Virginia

Student Enrollment:
Non-credit*: 53,000
Credit: 228,000

Accreditation:
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

From About VCCS, VCCS website. https://www.vccs.edu/about/#statistics
* non-credit numbers include all non-credit offerings, not just industry-focused workforce programs

The governor of Virginia invested $5 million of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds in 2019 to support capacity building at Virginia's Community Colleges in targeted pathways. Priorities included expanding credit for prior learning (CPL) strategies across the 23 colleges of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). In 2017, VCCS launched Credits2Careers, a CPL platform for veterans and military that housed all credit crosswalks.

With additional foundation funding, VCCS is expanding their web platform to become a CPL platform for all students. It can potentially provide students with advanced standing in a degree program. It is "filling the gap for workforce programs," shared Todd Estes, Director of Career Education Programs and Workforce Partnerships, as this model will apply to the many non-credit training programs in Virginia's FastForward initiative.

VCCS plans to develop a standardized way to record and report CPL metrics and to align procedures for awarding CPL across the system. They have set a goal to triple their credentials by 2021, which has driven much of the work. Having this as a system-level priority has been significant. "System leadership put it on the agenda, which helped garner buy-in from the colleges," commented Estes, *"it's all about growing a collective vision."*

THE ONE-YEAR OPTION AT OHIO TECHNICAL CENTERS

Location/Type:
53 centers across Ohio, which offer skill-based training leading to certificates, industry-based certifications, and state licensures.

Student Enrollment:
15,900

From Ohio Technical Colleges, Ohio Department of Higher Education. https://www.ohiohighered.org/otc

2014 legislation required the Ohio Department of Higher Education to establish the One-Year Option. This legislation called for the development of a process that created an opportunity for completers at the Ohio Technical Centers, which provide accredited non-credit training, to be awarded a block of technical credit upon completion to lead toward an associate's program. The Ohio Department of Higher Education created system-wide articulations by creating cross-sector faculty panels who reviewed the relevant certifications connected to the Ohio Technical Centers programs to determine alignment with analogous credit programs at community colleges. Graduates who completed a recognized program and have earned an industry recognized credential approved by the chancellor can gain up to 30 credits toward one of five associate of technical studies degrees. Fewer students than hoped have taken advantage of the One-Year Option, but it provides a pathway from non-credit to degrees for 49 different programs. "Most students go for a certificate to get a job. This is an option for them to take it further," stated Paula Compton, Associate Vice Chancellor & Executive Director, Articulation & Transfer at the Ohio Department of Higher Education.