



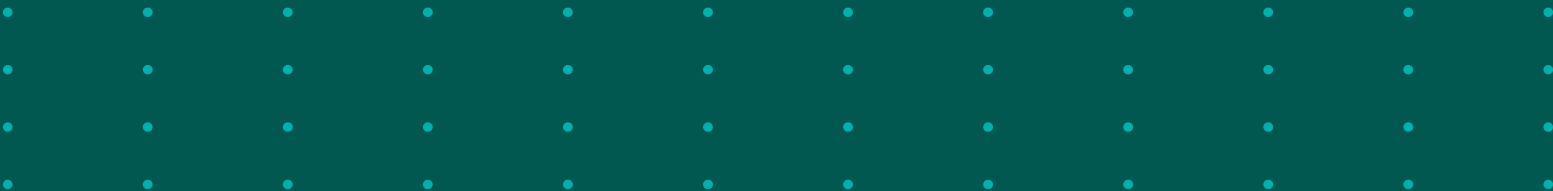
Partnering with Employers to Create Workforce-Relevant Credentials

A Field Guide



Contents

- 03 Foreword
- 04 Introduction
- 05 Executive Summary: Strategies for Engagement
- 06 Strategy 1 - Build a Team of Credential Champions
- 08 Strategy 1 Checklist
- 10 Strategy 2 - Target Industries or Employers
- 12 Strategy 2 Checklist
- 13 Case Study: Colorado Community College System
- 15 Strategy 3 - Create a Digital Credential System
- 17 Strategy 3 Checklist
- 18 Strategy 4 - Get the Word Out
- 20 Strategy 4 Checklist
- 21 Strategy 5 - Conduct After-Action Reviews
- 23 Strategy 5 Checklist



FOREWORD

Skills Gap or Communications Gap?



Brenda Perea

Director of Education and
Workforce Solutions, Credly

In May of 2017, seven U.S. states recorded all-time lows in unemployment. Colorado led the list, with an unemployment rate of just 2.3%. Unsurprisingly in today's tight labor market, employers share a common refrain: the jobs are there, but the skills aren't. Open positions sit unfilled as hiring managers struggle to find qualified candidates.

And that shortage of skilled workers is impacting the bottom line. A full 77% of global CEOs [now report](#) that skills gaps are limiting their company's growth. The Business Roundtable went so far as to [characterize](#) the skills gap as a "national crisis threatening our economic future." Today's hard-to-find skills range from technical competencies in high-growth fields like engineering and healthcare, to basic employability skills like teamwork, collaboration, adaptability, and effective communication.

Although the skills-gap is rooted in a lack of qualified workers, skills scarcity alone is not to blame. The challenge also stems from a communications gap between job-seekers eager to share what they know and employers that struggle to understand and parse the capabilities of would-be employees. Colleges and universities, in turn, must grapple with the difficulty of translating student outcomes into terms that employers can understand and trust.

To address this communications gap, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS)—made up of 13 colleges, 39 campuses and serving approximately 135,000 students—recognized they had a unique role to play in helping students not only obtain, but

share their skills with potential employers. At Colorado Community College System, I led a system-wide effort to engage employers and employment experts to identify and define the skills and competencies required for success within our region's advanced manufacturing industry. We discovered that minor reconfigurations of existing course content and delivery could create on-ramps to the sort of skills that our employers were looking for.

We then mapped those skills to stackable, digital badges in an effort to empower the students who earned them with transparent and portable evidence of their abilities.

The work of CCCS to create workforce-relevant credentials led to positive outcomes for both local employers and our students. One afternoon, I received an email from a Denver-based architecture firm looking to fill three positions which had been open for six months. They had heard about our engineering graphics digital badges, and wanted to learn more about the competencies, assessment, and evidence that went into earning that badge.

After examining the metadata included—and evaluating the competencies described within our badges—the firm was confident that students who had earned that credential had the necessary skills to fill their open positions. Less than 72 hours after identifying an initial list of badge earners, the company had filled all three positions. This paper is a field guide that reflects lessons learned from Colorado's pioneering efforts to create a competency-based labor market, along with

best practices from education institutions across the world. It reflects the belief that digital credentials and badges cannot be designed or delivered in a vacuum. It's about flipping the model to engage employers up-front: in order to create better outcomes when those very same employers come looking for employees with evidence of the skills they seek. It is about the process of engaging employers to develop digital credentials that can surface skills and abilities which are often hidden.

We found that digital credentials created with employer engagement can enable powerful results for credential earners articulating their skills and abilities, employers identifying and upskilling talent, and institutions putting students on a path to lifelong learning.

Introduction

Why now?

Rapid shifts in the world of work are pressuring college students and graduates to demonstrate mastery in a range of in-demand skills and competencies. At the same time, a growing number of employers are looking beyond the degree as a proxy for foundational skills like critical thinking or even domain expertise in areas like engineering or accounting. Hiring managers are seeking better data and more granular insights into the unique strengths and capabilities of individual graduates from similar fields of study, or academic programs.

Students, in turn, need better tools to market themselves effectively—to “show what they know,” and to differentiate themselves from peers within a technologically-driven hiring process.

Digital credentials and badges allow faculty and institutions to recognize individuals for technical skills like “Written Communication,” “Advanced JavaScript,” “Precision Welding,” or “Digital Literacy”; sought after soft skills like initiative, critical thinking and integrity;

or job-relevant experiences or roles such as “Project Team Leader.” Digital credentials carry metadata that describes the relevant skill or experience, including criteria for earning the credential, third-party endorsements, and specific evidence of achievement. Because digital credentials are owned and managed by the individual who earns them, they are shareable and usable across the web and through scores of applications, including popular social and professional networks and people management systems that organizations use to discover and manage talent.

Getting Started

Well-functioning digital credential ecosystems rely on an exchange between three key parties: the credential **issuer** (the group that recognizes achievement in an individual), the credential **earner** (the individual passing the test, demonstrating the skill or earning the certification), and credential **reviewer** (the group who will offer an opportunity to the individual on the basis of their earned credential). All three of these parties must understand and agree upon the value of the digital credential in order for the ecosystem to flourish. As a result, bringing all three parties to the table early while developing a new digital credentialing program is imperative.

To build a workforce-relevant system, institutional leaders should ask themselves three key questions:

- 01 WHY** award a digital credential for knowledge, skills and abilities?
- 02 HOW** does the credential benefit those who earn it?
- 03 WHAT** key information does the credential convey to employers and other critical stakeholders?

Executive Summary: Strategies for Engagement

This is a field guide that details how higher education institutions are partnering with employers to develop and utilize workforce-relevant, digital credentials that empower learners.

The guide is divided into five strategies, rooted in best practices of institutions of higher education around the world, including the experiences of the Colorado Community College System. Those strategies include:

01 Building a Team of Credential Champions:

Bringing together a core group of individuals both inside and outside the institution to focus on creating a new credential ecosystem that harmonizes work internally as well as with employers.

02 Identifying Priority Industries or Employers:

Identifying an actionable set of targets—a particular industry or a set of employers—and solve the specific workforce challenges by developing a responsive set of digital credentials.

03 Creating an Onboarding Program:

Presenting the new credentials to stakeholders and defining the value of those credentials—an approach which directly impacts the adoption of the new credentials.

04 Issuing Credentials: Documenting workforce-relevant achievements with transparency and evidence in a portable, learner-centered medium.

05 Conducting After-Action Reviews:

Analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how digital credential initiatives and associated processes can be improved to enable scalability within the institution.

Each section includes both an overview and a step-by-step checklist to guide implementation.

Want to learn more? Credly offers a full set of agendas, sample surveys, email templates and other relevant documents to accompany the various steps outlined in this guide. Credly also provides professional services, which draws upon a team of collaborative instructional design and workforce development experts who can support education institutions in crafting right-fit strategies to maximize impact, outcomes, and scale.

For more information visit [Credly.com/ContactUs](https://credly.com/contactus)



STRATEGY 1

Build a Team of Credential Champions

STRATEGY 1

Build a Team of Credential Champions

A critical first step for any institution seeking to make student skills visible through digital credentialing is to identify and engage an internal lead along with a team of digital credential champions.

The credential lead should understand the general concept of digital credentials as well as data-driven decision making—and have a passion for innovation.

“Organizing a core group of credential advocates—both within the university and among external partners—is one of the most impactful parts of our journey. These individuals are both points of contact and crucial sources of energy and expertise for our new initiative.”

Dr. Darien Rossiter

Project Lead, 21 CC Initiative

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

A blend of internal and external support for the credential lead is critical, as a functioning digital credential ecosystem requires both buy-in from within an institution and active engagement with employers. *“We quickly established a team that included individuals that had credibility within our target industries, as well as faculty and staff with the interest and capacity for building such relationships,”* said Brenda Perea, Instructional Design Project Manager at Colorado Community College System. *“Over time, the credential team served as the primary points of contact for employer engagement and the primary digital credential champion within the institution.”*

Not surprisingly, even innovative institutions often find that efforts to engage employers in helping to define workforce-relevant competencies and skills may overlap with existing institutional efforts. *“It is critical for the credential lead to coordinate with key decision makers at all levels of the institution to avoid political pitfalls, but more importantly to connect the dots and take advantage of existing initiatives or outreach efforts,”* said Perea.

Looking Outwards

Once an internal team is in place, institutions typically focus on building a core group of digital credential champions outside of the institution. Members should include employers who understand the value proposition and want to help define the set of skills that are most important to succeeding in their industry. But external validators need not be limited to industry-associated champions: participants can include first-line supervisors; city, county or regional workforce development professionals; public and private partners; and community-based organizations with a commitment to supporting an institution’s students and graduates. Business leaders can be tasked with identifying common concerns and targeting skills that deliver the greatest impact. Public sector partners can offer data expertise and information on current and future economic trends. Community groups can provide context and regional insights.

Developing a Common Lexicon and Shared Goals

By working with both internal and external champion teams, institutions are able to circulate and adopt a common lexicon and a set of facts. *“In Colorado, we focused on the shared goal of filling the 15,000 unfilled advanced manufacturing jobs which were impacting the state’s economy. With this focus, we created shared meaning of what is competency, what determines mastery, and what evidence or performance of the skill set is relevant to provide value to the credential,”* said Perea. Institutional leaders often find that terms that might be well understood on either side of the equation may not have a shared meaning.

Savvy institutions will quickly collaborate across roles and functions to define terms like “skills,” “competencies,” “assessment,” and “evidence,” as well as “mastery” or “expert level” for particular competencies. While this seems like a simple task, it is vitally important to ensure all parties are speaking the same language and therefore operating under the same assumptions throughout the process. Additionally, the development of shared meaning requires the digital credential champions to be intentional in the use of these terms from digital credential development through credential launch.

Establishing “Key Truths”

Establishing “key truths” is critical to speaking to the industries where credentials will ultimately be consumed. Successful institutions have emphasized key data points to help inform employers and industry about the need for a new approach to skill recognition. “Truths” may include major drivers of job growth now and in the future, specific to areas of skills identification. How will economic factors of the region impact the ability of employers to sustain or grow their workforce? What strategies are in place for creating a new industry workforce or expanding an existing industry? What companies are moving into or out of the region? A shared understanding of the truths that animate a credential ecosystem are critical to ensuring resonance of both internal and external messaging.

Value to Earners Is Your North Star

To provide an effective currency in the labor market, digital credentials need to demonstrate value as determined by the groups receiving the credential: students, graduates and employers. Digital credentials empower credential earners to better articulate their skills, and to promote themselves professionally, and to communicate the value of their credentials within the ecosystem of peers and employers. Earners have the ability to share information on social media platforms, email, resumes, and job applications. Since digital credentials are virtual, viewers of the digital credential

can instantly verify the authenticity of the credential and understand what was required in order to earn it. This not only provides value to your students but also highlights your programs where digital credentials are earned.

The Colorado Community College System “Key Truths”

- 01** Without a more agile way to identify skilled workers, the skills gap and the unfilled advanced manufacturing positions would continue to increase.
- 02** A key advanced manufacturing employer in southern Colorado was unable to meet production goals due to open positions, limiting their growth.
- 03** Predatory recruiting was creating workforce “churn,” as employees were recruited away from current employers, but did not increase the overall number of skilled workers.
- 04** Employers were less interested in another program, course, certificate or degree; what was needed was an easier, more transparent and efficient way to identify talent in applicants.
- 05** For CCCS, the solution required a system-wide approach to identify skills and abilities and to avoid potential credential confusion if each of the 13 colleges implanted its own solution.

STRATEGY 1**Checklist****□ Identify Available Team Members Internally**

- » Who makes the most sense to lead the interactions (who has the credibility with employers in the designated industry, as well as with other institutional leaders)?
- » Are you focusing on the employer-industry gaps and needs and not just your program needs?

□ Identify Internal Credential Champions

- » Who within your institution has credibility with employers in the designated industry?
- » Which faculty members are or can be credential champions?
- » Which faculty members have subject matter expertise to connect and translate current programs or course work into credentials that cover the skills employers want?

□ Identify Committed Industry Leaders Willing to Champion the Development of Digital Credentials

- » Who are the industry champions who will put in the time required to make the program a success?
- » Is your group the right size for getting useful feedback? A total of 10 to 15 employer voices from small, medium, and large businesses gives a wide spectrum of ideas, networks, and viewpoints.

□ Identify Non-Industry Representatives

- » Have you only identified CEOs and HR professionals? Have you invited participation from the labor market itself? First line supervisors? City, county, or regional workforce development professionals? State or county labor and employment boards? Hiring managers? Entrepreneurs? Start-ups?

- » Have you reached out to other organizations, economic development agencies, workforce boards, and labor organizations?
- » Have you tasked business leaders with the role of identifying common concerns and teasing out solutions which will have the greatest impact? Public partners can take on the role of data experts in supplying current and future economic trends. Community groups can give context to the localized needs.

□ Identify the “Key Truths” Relevant to Your Institution’s Interest in Digital Credentials

- » What do “Digital Credentials” represent in the organization?
- » What are the shared facts and different perspectives on what competencies and skills need to be transparent?
- » What is the driving force to develop digital credentials?

□ Analyze Potential Target Industry and Employers

- » Where is the greatest need?
- » Where can your institution make the biggest impact by better communicating student skills and competencies?
- » Are the industries examined of a manageable size? Or should you target a segment of the sector in question instead of the entire industry?

□ Set Parameters

- » Are the targeted industry skills so narrowly defined that they can only apply to a specific company? Or can they be applied to multiple employers?
- » How does the vision for digital credentials avoid duplicating existing documentation such as transcripts, degrees, or certificates?
- » How will collaboration with industry on workforce skills and competencies coordinate with existing institutional efforts?



STRATEGY 2

Target Industries or Employers

STRATEGY 2

Target Industries or Employers

Identifying a Priority Industry or Target Employers

Successful institutions have avoided the trap of taking on an overly large task (e.g. launching a digital credential program that seeks to meet the needs of ALL employers across several industries). *“In Colorado, we concentrated on Advanced Manufacturing, including metalworking, 3D printing skills, and 21st century skills,” explained Perea. “Ultimately, the goal was to establish discrete, quantitative profiles of the industry needs in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities.”*

“We found employers started sending their employees to our institution to earn very specific digital credentials to retain, reskill, or upskill their employees.”

Brenda Perea

Industry surveys are one device that can be used to identify workforce areas where credentials can help close a skills gap. Survey participation can also provide a useful tool to pre-identify active stakeholders who may participate in the crucial credential-definition process. As institutions identify employers that understand and value credentials, they are able to initiate and foster a more meaningful dialogue, ideally moving them into a lead or champion role.

Organizations who might encounter an institution’s digital credentials once they are issued represent critical stakeholders to engage at this stage of the process.

Convening Industry Representatives in a Sector Summit

An Industry or Sector Summit is an industry-led, collaborative process to identify common opportunities and challenges, and to better define the role

digital credentials can play in supporting industry goals. *“Our most surprising outcome from the summits were the number of businesses that told us ‘your students can’t do math,’”* recalled Perea. *“This was surprising since each of our advanced manufacturing programs required passing of at least one and sometimes two or three math courses. It was this finding which led to our first digital credentials in Technical Math for Industry digital badges. While developing 26 granular math competencies was not our first choice, we respected the employers’ participation in the credential development process to act upon their recommendations. This not only benefited CCCS students; we also found employers started sending their employees to our institution to earn very specific digital credentials to retain, reskill, or upskill their employees.”*

Key Goals for a Summit May Include:

- » Creating an environment where industry and employers collaborate to identify skills and competencies needed to meet existing or future workforce needs and trends.
- » Identifying industry leaders who will be willing to champion the development of digital credentials.
- » Engaging non-industry representatives to better understand the labor market needs of an industry or group of employers.
- » Identifying skills gaps, as well as emerging skills or existing skills for which enhanced transparency will help meet employment demands.

Key Attendees to the Summit Should Include:

- » Companies in the industry: At least five representatives; ensure representation from small, medium, and large employers.
- » Subject matter experts: Experts from your institution's faculty and external network.
- » Government representatives and reformers: Including elected officials, civil servants, and board members from workforce or employment agencies and representatives of economic development and labor organizations.
- » Outside educational providers: Including representatives from K-12 schools and specialized training programs who share your commitment to aligning workforce needs with educational opportunities.

“We framed the invitation as an opportunity for employers to identify specific skills and competencies that can be identified and illuminated to help target effective hiring and facilitate effective talent management.”

Brenda Perea

Key Questions to Ask at the Summit Include:

- » **Opportunities:** What are the identified opportunities for growth of targeted skills and competencies?
- » **Impact:** How will the identified skills and competencies lead to a highly skilled workforce and how will it enhance existing curriculum, training and credentialing programs?
- » **Priorities:** What are the priorities among the opportunities? Can the identified opportunities and priorities be separated into “needs” and “wants?”
- » **Sequencing:** Is there a hierarchy of skills that should be mastered in a series or progression? Should recognition of skills be stacked in levels of increasing mastery? Or are all skills identified equal in mastery and level of attainment?

A Word to the Wise

Remember: employers often detest having solutions pushed upon them. Like you, they prefer participating in designing a solution to an identified problem.

“Convening industry representatives in a true working session with faculty and experts in attendance demonstrated to employers that we were really listening and genuinely seeking their input. Once that listening stance was established, many were eager to take a leadership role.”

Dr. William Tammone

Chief Academic Officer and Senior Vice President
American Sentinel University

STRATEGY 2

Checklist

□ Create Industry Survey

- » Which skills, knowledge, and experiences are most important in the field?
- » What skills gaps exist?
- » Which skills are most ripe for transparent identification?

□ Check with Faculty and Experts

- » Have faculty previously identified skills and competencies needed by industry?
- » Are faculty using the information pulled from employer and industry surveys to evaluate how existing courses, certifications, degrees, and programs align with industry needs?
- » What “pinch points” prevent individuals from gaining desired skills and abilities?

□ Create an Industry or Employer Profile

- » Are known skills gaps a lack of knowledge, training, or experience? What are the projected critical skill needs in 6, 12, or 18 months?
- » What is the employment rate, the retention rate, and projected employment rate of the particular industry or employer?
- » Is there forecasting data from economic development boards, employment boards, or chambers of commerce that will shed light on trends or new expectations for workforce skills?

□ Organize & Host a Summit

- » Have you identified a host and location for the event, preferably a business or community partner?
- » Is the host an industry leader with the capacity and initiative to follow a project to completion?
- » Have you developed an agenda for the event that facilitates collaboration between attendees?

- » Does the host have credibility with employers in the designated industry? Can they be relied upon to provide impartial input when developing workable solutions and digital credentials?
- » Have you invited participants who are willing to coordinate across education, workforce, and economic development plans to address the needs of multiple companies in areas of infrastructure, skills gap, training of skilled workers, etc.?
- » Are the identified employers or industry professionals focused on the issues where your digital credentials can supply a solution?
- » Have you invited internal individuals who have credibility with employers within the designated industry or sector?
- » Have you developed an agenda that can generate the information needed to develop a “version 1” of a credentialing program?

□ Establish Working Groups

- » Have you established working groups within the institution and among employers?
- » Have you created sub-conversations with faculty to ensure employers have identified targets achievable by faculty?
- » Have faculty leads identified skills and competencies needed by industry that have been “pulled” from industry back into the institution?
- » Are the individuals engaged in the action groups focusing on the top requirements (skills) to capitalize on the identified workforce skills and competency opportunities?

□ Review the Basics

- » What is the key information to be communicated about learners to employers?
- » Has the group identified actual “needs” or only “wants”?
- » What is the target outcome? Is it two workforce credentials or ten stacked workforce credentials?
- » How do key skills relate to each other? Do the skills build upon each other, are they gained sequentially, or are the skills independent from other skills?

CASE STUDY

Colorado Community College System



In Colorado, 15,000 unfilled advanced manufacturing jobs were hindering the state's economic growth. The Colorado Community College System (CCCS), made up of 13 colleges across the state, convened local employers to learn more about the skills gaps that led to these long-term unfilled positions. The result was clear, but surprising: although CCCS graduates took courses in advanced manufacturing fields, employers reported frustration at the inability of graduates to apply particular skills once on the job.

To address this mismatch, CCCS used the techniques outlined in this field guide to define granular competencies evidencing actual acquisition of the technical skills required in an advanced manufacturing context.

Because industry had helped identify the particular definitions, criteria and assessments needed, the CCCS-issued badges became an in-demand currency across the region's advanced manufacturing industry. Students have earned more than 300 credentials in advanced manufacturing. Students report the credentials are highly valuable in their job search, and employers indicate the data contained in the credentials is highly informative in talent management.

A welcome positive side effect was CCCS students receiving job offers from industries outside of the advanced manufacturing space. Employers valued the ability to see the transparent description of relevant skills and recognized significant overlap with their own needs.

The program has garnered national media attention and significant support within the Colorado Community College System. As a result of this success, CCCS has since expanded its credentialing program to include faculty professional development and non-cognitive skills for healthcare professionals.

Read more about the CCCS program at cccs.edu/education-services/badges.



STRATEGY 3

Create a Digital Credential System

STRATEGY 3

Create a Digital Credential System

Once an institution has cultivated champions and identified industry targets, it is time to create a credential system. During this stage, the skills gaps and competencies identified by collaborative working groups become the backbone of the credential system.

Narrative descriptions of credentials form metadata that can be consumed by employers. Faculty rubrics or assessments establish the basis for authenticating skills and competencies.

“Deciding what skills and achievements to recognize with our digital credentials challenged us to carefully analyze the input we got from our industry partners and to make tough decisions about priorities and order of operations. We are seeing the impact in the ability of faculty and students to communicate to employers what our students know and can do.”

Dr. MJ Bishop

Director, Kirwan Center for Academic Innovation
University System of Maryland

Set Your Target:

The first step in building a credential system is to determine the most important skills and competencies to recognize.

Drawing a “Constellation”

Credentials rarely stand alone; they are typically one star in a constellation. The constellation provides an overall picture of a credential system, gives a sense of scale, and connects the parts. Further, a constellation allows an institution and the end user to see how elements of credential design fit together. It could be displayed as a series of related experiences (competencies, skills, modules, courses, etc.), including those that stack towards interim or overall goals.

Considering Granularity

How big or how small should each credential be? Will a credential represent one skill, a combination, cumulative experiences, or something different?

Map Meaning

For each credential, a short narrative must be drafted to describe the meaning of the credential and what it represents. At this stage, institutions often consider

the importance of “value added.” Why is it important for someone to have this competency? The words used within the narrative associated with each credential will eventually become metadata within the digital credential.

Determine Assessment & Criteria

How does an institution know when someone has achieved a particular competency? Was a credential earned through a work product or deliverable, review by experts, testing, demonstrated compliance with a particular standard, or another method of assessment?

The more detail provided, the better an outside viewer will understand the criteria and the associated value of the credential. The determination of assessment or criteria can also connect credentials to instructor standards or available rubrics for scoring and analysis. Will submissions of evidence be required? Will the credential ever expire? Each of these decisions will ultimately translate into metadata, contained within a credential.

STRATEGY 3**Checklist****□ Set Your Target**

- » What did we learn from our analysis?
- » What skills and competencies are lacking and need to be addressed?

□ Develop a Constellation

- » How do these smaller components fit together? Is there a hierarchy?
- » Can we visually represent a system to potential earners?
- » What is the scope and scale of our plan?

□ Decide Granularity

- » How small will the smallest piece in our system be?
- » What is the minimum level of performance expected of a skill or competency that would be of value to an employer?

□ Map Meaning

- » Of what value is this credential?
- » Why is it important that someone have this skill or competency?
- » In what way(s) does this competency address a need for employers?

□ Determine Assessment and Criteria

- » How will you know when someone has achieved this competency?
- » What assessment methods are available to you?
- » Is there evidence that you would consider attaching to the credential (e.g. a work product as proof)
- » What industry standards can you connect to this achievement?

□ Design the Visuals

- » What should be the look and feel of this credential?
- » In what ways does the visual support your institutional brand?
- » Who can you include from your marketing department to help with the graphic design?

□ Recognize Achievement

- » What action(s) will trigger the issuance of the credential?
- » Who will have authority to issue earned credentials?

A woman with glasses and a dark vest over a light-colored top is seated in a wheelchair. She is holding a pen in her right hand and looking towards the camera. She is sitting at a table with papers and a pen holder. The background is a blurred office or meeting room setting. The entire image has a teal overlay.

STRATEGY 4

Get the Word Out

STRATEGY 4

Get the Word Out

Digital credentials are valuable as a currency if there is a marketplace for exchange. For exchange to happen, employers must be aware a relevant credential exists. The better informed the community of credential consumers, the more value the credentials have in the marketplace. *“Engaging future industry participants is exponentially easier the second time around,”* said Perea. *“Over time, we established a virtuous cycle—but it started with the first wave of credentials.”*

Reaching Target Audiences

“In Colorado, before, during and after creating workforce-centered digital credentials, our focus was to include and inform the larger community where our credentials would be put to use,” said Perea. Employer partners and champions, as well as industry associations, community groups, economic development boards, chambers of commerce, workforce boards, civics groups, and the K-12, 2-year, and 4-year institutions who are now part of the credential ecosystem all play a role as credential consumers. These groups are the next wave of “credential involved”, and one for whom the new, industry-generated credentials were developed.

Successful credential ecosystems often start with engagement from employers that show a passion for the role of credentials and that can play a role in informing others about the progress in addressing employer and workforce needs. During this phase, it is critical to explain how credential competencies are “pulled from industry.” Effective communications reference facts about industry-specific job competencies, skills, and abilities such as: the application of centrifugal pump theory when lubricating and maintaining the line shaft turbines; interpreting block tolerances, line types/conventions, orthographic projection, and surface finish requirements; or describing how

communication affects health behaviors in healthcare delivery systems. *“We created two-minute animated videos explaining how digital credentials provide value for badge earners, badge issuers, and badge consumers,”* recalled Perea. “We made personal visits to the Colorado Advanced Manufacturing Association, the city and county of Denver, small, medium, and large businesses throughout the state from Trinidad to Steamboat, to Lamar to Eagle and Vail. We even held webinars for the state’s workforce development council liaisons to help them understand what we were doing.”

Getting Back to Basics

Institutions often find that distributing promotional material to key partners in government and non-industry groups is a basic but critical step. Successful materials will include information about industry partners, employer-industry endorsers, and the support of elected officials to bolster employer engagement efforts. The intentional outreach and distribution of these materials to a variety of groups helps share early success and allows the expansion of badging initiatives into other industry sectors.

Recognizing Institutional Constituencies

Maintaining support and sustaining engagement with a credential ecosystem also requires thoughtful recognition of the contributions of existing faculty and administration officials. *“We notified and engaged external stakeholder groups including philanthropists, journalists, and thought leaders,”* said Perea. “Our goal was to not only create awareness around our new credentials but almost demonstrate that we are a willing and active partner in aligning new credentials to workforce needs.”

STRATEGY 4**Checklist****□ Clarify the Benefit**

- » Highlight how is this initiative creating opportunities for employers to better recruit and manage talent?
- » What are digital credentials and how do they connect schools, learners, and employers?
- » What is the value of adopting a new, granular credential?
- » How do credentials make sense outside of the institution and inside the workforce?

□ Highlight the Collaboration

- » How has industry contributed to:
 - The prioritization of skills, knowledge, and abilities?
 - The definition of key skills and competencies?
 - The setting of minimum standards and assessment requirements?
 - The development of credential “constellations”?
- » What commitments have employers made to accepting the credentials in their hiring process?

□ Engage Strategically

- » Are stakeholders informed of progress in a timely manner?
- » Is the employer engagement connection prominently featured in the marketing material?
- » What is the schedule for roll out of promotional materials such as: email blast? Social media tweet? LinkedIn comment? Do you have tri-fold brochures? Infographics? Presentation slide decks? Media talking points?
- » Which stakeholders and journalists might be interested in the development of a currency for workforce relevant skills?

□ Expand the Network

- » Which employers who were NOT represented at the initial credential launch might be interested in consuming the credentials?
- » Which non-employee stakeholders who were NOT represented might be interested in learning about the digital credentials?
- » What other programs are presenting themselves for credentialing initiatives outreach (e.g. Non-credit training, Bootcamps, etc.)?



STRATEGY 5

Conduct After-Action Reviews

STRATEGY 5

Conduct After-Action Reviews

Review, Learn, Improve, Rededicate

After-action reviews are great ways to accelerate future projects, innovate new approaches to challenges, and overcome barriers to success. Taking the time to reflect on your project and share the results to help future teams learn from your successful strategies and avoid the pitfalls you have worked to overcome is a hallmark of successful teams.

“In reviewing our initial findings, it was clear that the credentials that had the greatest impact were those developed in partnership with local employers. Including employers from the very beginning allowed us to ensure the credentials prioritized the competencies employers required, and that we used workforce language—rather than academic language—to describe the skills indicated by the badge.” **Ken Lindblom, Dean, School of Professional Development, Stony Brook University**

“As we wrapped up the first phase of our workforce-centered micro-credentials, we created a summative assessment of where the project started, toward our success in filling some 15,000 advanced manufacturing jobs,” explained Perea. *“We concluded that digital badges were an excellent way for big, medium, and small companies to manage their talent resources.”*

With any after-action review, institutional leaders will consider a blend of expectations, process considerations, and outcomes including:

- » What was expected to happen?
- » What actually occurred?
- » What went well and why?
- » What can be improved and how?

Key Features of An Effective After-Action Review

Open and honest professional discussions with participation by everyone on the team are necessary for an effective after-action review. The review should focus on results of the credentialing project and employer adoption of digital credentials.

An after-action review is meant to provide insights into the digital credential project participants and provide guidance for future teams engaged in similar efforts. The review need not be a formal document (though it can be). Either way, it should include the following:

- » Chronological order of events.
- » Clear summary of concrete and actionable recommendations which will improve the next project.
- » Identified tasks and topics requiring additional attention of leadership.

Questions to ask yourself and your team of credential champions:

- » Are the meaning and value of the digital credential obvious to an employer? If not, why not?
- » Did the outcomes differ from the original objectives?
- » Do employers and industry representatives view themselves as a collaborative partner with your institution working to solve real problems?
- » How will this work sustain itself going forward?
- » What other industries are ripe for the introduction of digital credentials?

One last item to consider in an after-action review is whether everyone within an institution would benefit from a formal write-up of the project. Responses to the above questions will provide the bulk of the content. Tone and formatting will reflect target audiences and goals associated with developing and distributing the write-up.



About Credly

Credly is helping the world speak a common language about people's knowledge, skills, and abilities. Thousands of employers, training organizations, associations, certification programs, and workforce development initiatives use Credly to help individuals translate their learning experiences into professional opportunities using trusted, portable, digital credentials. Credly empowers organizations to attract, engage, develop, and retain talent with enterprise-class tools that generate data-driven insights to address skills gaps and highlight opportunities through an unmatched global network of credential issuers.