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On Credit, Noncredit, Competency-Based Learning, and the Need for a New Postsecondary System

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By George Lorenzo

Every now and then, I have a conversation with a professional in the field of workforce development as it relates to postsecondary education who is so extraordinarily knowledgeable and more than willing to share copious amounts of information with me that my personal knowledge bank gets a big deposit and I basically come away with an entirely new level of understanding about what's really going on in the field. I had one of those conversations recently with Keith Bird.

Keith is a Senior Policy Fellow for Workforce and Postsecondary Education at the [Corporation for A Skilled Workforce](#) located in Ann Arbor, MI. He served as chancellor of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System for ten years and has been president of two community colleges during his illustrious career to date. He serves on a variety of advisory boards and councils and is a frequent speaker at conferences on the involvement of community colleges in economic and workforce development.

Devising a Competency-based Framework

While Keith and I talked for more than an hour about many issues and trends, the most interesting topic we discussed was related to how there is a strong need for the creation of what he calls a set of "rigorous" methodologies that can guarantee that both credit and non-credit community college courses and programs be more closely aligned to the labor market. In addition, and more importantly, these methodologies should form the basis of a new postsecondary system that awards students valid credentials that employers can trust. Such credentials would be based on a student's demonstration of competencies that have been established by industry, as opposed to awarding only degrees and certificates based solely on the historic credit hour.

To further elaborate and clarify this topic, Keith pointed me to a highly informative and eye-opening report he coauthored titled "[Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: Creating a Competency-Based Qualifications Framework for Postsecondary Education and Training](#)." Coincidentally, like many reports I run across on a daily basis, I filed it in my favorites folder back in April of last year when it was published, with every good intention of reading it, but I did not get to it until Keith strongly suggested that I do.

To put it succinctly, the premise of this paper is that the U.S. needs to "devise a competency-based framework within which states and institutions can award educational credit for academic-equivalent competencies mastered through formal and informal occupational education and training. Educational credit based on competence, rather than on time (i.e., the credit hour), would result in a postsecondary credential that is portable, accepted by postsecondary institutions, and recognized across industry sectors."

There are a good number of organizations with substantial efforts and policies that address this issue, such as the American National Standards Institute, which accredits educational certificate programs, among many additional efforts; the American Council on Education, which evaluates and validates noncredit instruction to assist students with the prospect of obtaining credit for workplace learning; the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, which awards credits for prior learning assessment; and many others. However, as noted in the Giving Credit report, even combined "they are insufficient compared to the scale of need." Plus, they "vary widely in methodology and cost."

The Great Disconnect Between Credit and Noncredit

It was also cited in the Giving Credit paper that our nation's two-year colleges, in 2009, served more than 6.5 million students in credit-bearing programs and about 5 million students in noncredit education and training. The noncredit

offerings included customized employee training courses and programs, incumbent worker programs for employee advancement in their existing jobs, English as a Second language instruction, and courses in a variety of employability skills and personal enrichment. Historically, however, such noncredit offerings have typically been given a low status at community colleges, resulting in less funding and less attention overall by institutional curriculum approval administrators. In short, “the disconnect between the credit and noncredit sides of community colleges hinders the sharing of best practices and takes pressure off the credit side to be responsive to diverse employer and student needs.”

Solving the Challenge

In the end, Keith had a good number of recommendations – too long to completely list here – for solving his call for a set of methodologies that would ultimately get credit and non-credit community college courses and programs more closely aligned to the labor market, as well as for the creation of a postsecondary education system with a stronger emphasis on a competency-based framework. Some of the recommendations that stuck out more prominently with me than others include:

- Raise the bar for business engagement by promoting the joint establishment of rigorous competency/standards/curricula/credentials and quality assurance mechanisms between businesses and community colleges.
- Create a national competency-based framework for postsecondary education modeled on Lumina Foundation’s [Degree Qualifications Profile](#) to establish learning outcomes for multiple levels of academic credentials, including one- year certificates. It should be constructed with input from multiple participants, including education, workforce, and employer stakeholders.
- Develop a national clearinghouse for credentials with standard terminology and methodologies to document the development and documentation of standards for competency- based qualifications and curricula. Include a central database to count numbers and ensure proper categorization of programs. Get recognized by federal and state governments and industry, accredited by a third party and based on national/international standards and regulatory standards.

Finally, today’s college-aged 21st century learners are highly mobile and increasingly gaining the knowledge and skills they need from the availability of a growing number and wider variety of informal learning experiences (that are frequently less expensive than the tuition rates at public institutions), including more options for noncredit courses and programs that are based around employee-desired competencies that have increasingly sophisticated assessments (through advanced technologies) that clearly demonstrate proficiencies.

As stated in the Giving Credit report: “With the ability to earn postsecondary educational credit by demonstrating competencies, it becomes irrelevant whether a student obtains competence through a noncredit or credit-bearing path.” As that line of thinking becomes more prevalent, it becomes easy to see that the facilitation of truly granting valid credit where valid credit is truly due is changing the entire landscape of community colleges, corporate training and workforce development in ways we have yet to truly see.

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George Lorenzo is president of Lorenzo Associates, Inc., and writer, editor and publisher of The SOURCE on Community College Issues, Trends & Strategies, a rich information resource dedicated to the postsecondary education sector. He has more than 25 years experience as a professional education writer, editor, researcher and publisher.

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