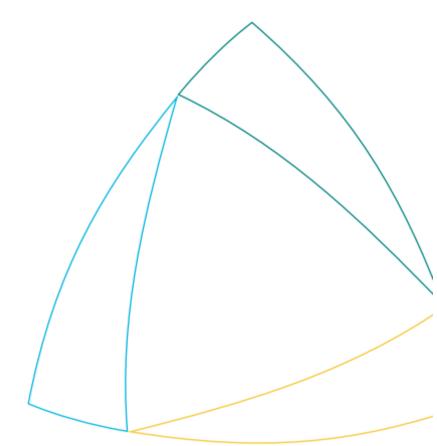# USING CREDENTIAL TRANSPARENCY TO ADVANCE STUDENT SUCCESS AND STATE OUTCOMES: SPOTLIGHT ON INDIANA

Credential Transparency Overview: Improving Individual and State Outcomes

In response to a growing demand for the use of data to support students through their education and into careers, state agencies and systems have paid increased attention to improving insight into postsecondary credentials. Insight into the various credentials available to students has been challenging. With around 1,000,000 postsecondary credentials available in the U.S.,[1] there has not been an easy or centralized way for states and their students to coherently define, track, or communicate credential participation and completion, until recently. To address this difficulty, the nonprofit organization Credential Engine created the Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL). This language allows postsecondary credential providers to describe the characteristics, quality, and accreditation associated with the credentials they provide in an online, open-source format—which can result in greater transparency for both states and students.

Credential transparency, through open data formats and registries like Credential Engine, is an important cornerstone for advancing equitable state and student outcomes. Credential registries, like Credential Engine, use CTDL to create insight into what credentials are available, what competencies comprise those credentials, and what associated educational and career pathways are connected to those credentials. This information can help states, students, and their stakeholders connect and compare credential information to labor market value and career interests. In the case of Credential Engine, because it uses open source CTDL, it allows for access to data and information associated with postsecondary credentials and competencies, allowing states, students, and other stakeholders to better ascertain the value of a specific credential to future goals.

To support equitable access to education and training and to support equitable outcomes from them as well, this year, Credential Engine established an Advisory Council on Credential Transparency and Equitable Pathways, Transfer, and Recognition of Learning. The work of this coalition is to define equitable pathways, recognition, and transfer to best represent them in open and transparent credential data. As Credential Engine states, "A key element of bridging the divide between people and their desired outcomes is access to reliable, current, and relevant information about opportunities and pathways. A clear gap in the information currently exists and is a clear signal about which pathways—including those that intentionally integrate transfer of credit and recognition of prior learning—actually improve equitable access and outcomes, and which do not."[2] Council members' shared experiences will result in evidence-based, data-

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[1] Credential Engine. (2021). **Counting U.S. postsecondary and secondary credentials.** (p. 5).

[2] Credential Engine. (2022). **Introducing the council on credential transparency & equitable pathways, transfer, and recognition of learning.** (p.1).

informed recommendations and guidance to support the development and persistence of policy and practice that improves equitable outcomes for students and workers.

As a result, credential transparency via CDTL is a key lever for improving individual outcomes and advancing state equity, student success, and workforce and economic development goals. Because the data is open and accessible, students can better articulate their prior learning experiences and make informed choices. In turn, postsecondary institutions, state agencies and systems, and employers can then use that information to identify and recruit students and workers, create stackable credits and pathways toward completion, and map credentials and those pathways to state, regional, and local labor market needs and state workforce goals.[3] By opening data and information for use by broader audiences via credential transparency, state agencies and systems can open up opportunity for their stakeholders.

State Spotlight: Using Credential Transparency to Improve Outcomes in Indiana

Given the advantages of credential transparency to improve equitable student and state outcomes, numerous state higher education executive officers (SHEEO) organizations and the institutions they work with have begun to implement credential transparency and registries in their states. To explain the value of these registries, SHEEO has highlighted Indiana's Commission for Higher Education (ICHE). As part of its effort to improve credential attainment and outcomes, ICHE has worked with Credential Engine to promote credential transparency and information use in Indiana. SHEEO asked Ken Sauer, ICHE's senior associate commissioner and chief academic officer, to tell us more about the value of credential transparency; how it is used specifically to advance access, equity, and other state goals; legislative support for this work; the conditions for implementing and developing a credential registry; and other partnerships, resources, and capacities needed to advance credential transparency.

Why is credential transparency important to your state populations and economic goals?

From the standpoint of the individual learner, credential transparency is critical to career mobility, as the more reliable and curated information we can publish about a credential, the more likely the individual learner can make decisions that align with their career and personal goals, which in turn, are more likely to lead to persistence and completion of the

desired credential. From the standpoint of the workforce needs of employers and the health of the state's economy, credential transparency can facilitate mobility, insofar as publishing information about the competencies that credential holders are supposed to have mastered can facilitate the search for and screening of viable applicants. From the standpoint of curricular design and currency, being transparent about competencies associated with a particular credential can lead to a dialog between educators and employers, with potential greater alignment between competencies taught by educators with those sought by employers.

With the advent of CTDL and credential registries, state agencies and systems can reaffirm what they have always known about credential attainment—that achievement of quality credentials can positively affect individual and state outcomes. Moreover, credential transparency allows states to better understand and strategically consider their current slate of credentials, their alignment with state workforce and economic goals, and student needs and ambitions.

How can improved credential transparency be used to improve access, equity, and outcomes?

In Indiana, an important aspect of our credential transparency work has focused on mapping out how credentials can stack to create pathways, so students can see not only how a short-term certificate can lead to a high-wage, in-demand entry-level position, but also how that initial credential can lead to a higher-level certificate or degree, enabling someone to climb a career ladder to an even better paying job and satisfying career. While we are totally committed to maximizing the amount of information that we publish to the Indiana Credential Registry and to developing tools to access that information so learners can make informed decisions about their educational choices, we also know career coaches and navigators are needed to ensure that first generation college students can fully benefit from our credential transparency efforts.

Indiana's focus on credential transparency is part of its larger effort to advance access, equity, and outcomes in their state. Credential transparency and registries are a way for state agencies and systems to better democratize data and information, allowing broader stakeholders to gain access to information that can support their goals. This is especially important for individuals from historically marginalized groups who have not had equitable access to postsecondary and workforce opportunities. Access to aligned credential information can also serve to remedy inequities by illuminating systemic and structural barriers and differentials related to credential attainment. As Associate Commissioner Sauer also notes in his response to this question, no data or information should be used in a vacuum. To ensure that students, especially those who have been historically underserved, are appropriately supported in their understanding and decision-making associated with credential attainment, college and career advisors are essential to helping translate and support students through their education to workforce journeys.

What is your state doing legislatively to advance credential transparency?

Thus far, all our credential transparency work has been done without legislation. Our success has resulted from advocacy and the collective realization that transparency about credentialing opportunities benefits students, workers, educational providers, and state government. That said, we are exploring legislation during the next session of the General Assembly (January-May 2023) to advance our credential transparency work even further.

SHEEO agencies and systems, like in Indiana, are leveraging opportunities and resources to advance credential registry work often without legislative mandates or recommendations to do so. Other states find that new legislative mandates or recommendations enable agencies, systems, and their partners to advance the work of credential registries in ways that can bring on board stakeholders and resources and provide for successful implementation and accountability. For example, **Florida's REACH Act** (2021) and **Texas House Bill 3767** (2021) promulgated the development of comprehensive state registries of all the credentials in their states. **Connecticut Senate Bill 1202** directs the creation of a database by the state's Office of Higher Education of all credentials offered in the state by 2023. Furthermore, it directs the state's Office of Workforce Strategy to assess credentials of value based on cost, workforce need, completion rate, and time to completion, among additional criteria. Legislative support, whether through policy mandates, resource allocation, or advisory council participation, can be a key lever for advancing credential transparency in the state and for improving state resources and partnerships to support this work. However, to do so requires effective messaging to stakeholders. By communicating the current return on investment and future potential that credential transparency efforts provide, Indiana is working to garner greater, more formal support of this endeavor.

What tools or resources (like credential transparency and registries) have you used to improve credential transparency in your state?

Five and one-half years ago, Indiana became the first state to scale up Credential Engine, and our now branded Indiana Credential Registry (a subset of the national Credential Engine Registry, which by means of a widget developed in partnership with Credential Engine only displays information about Indiana credentials) has been the principal means of connecting information about credentials across state agencies and educational and training programs in various sectors. For example, the Indiana Career Explorer tool, which is licensed statewide by our Department of Workforce Development for both schools and Work One offices, and which has user views in the hundreds of thousands, uses the Indiana Credential Registry for information about education programs that can advance student/client career goals. The Indiana School Finder tool, developed by the Commission for Higher Education, uses the Indiana Credential Registry to enable prospective students to access ROI data (earnings 1, 2, 3, 5, and 10 years after graduation) for degree programs in the public sector, something that could not be done previously. More recently, the

Commission, on behalf of a multi-agency state team, received a grant from the National Governors Association to work on skills-based learning and employment records, and our Credential Engine work Is central to this initiative.

In Indiana, the value of their credential registry and CTDL lies in its ability to connect credential information across agencies and tools in their state. The ability to customize registry data and share that information across sectors and tools not only improves broader credential-associated informational uptake and use, but also creates avenues for strong cross-sector collaboration. Importantly, it has also allowed Indiana to share targeted information to current and potential students seeking to gain insight into opportunities for economic return during and beyond their time in postsecondary education. Pursuing cross-sector partnerships and bolstering human and technological resources is an important part of credential registry work and impact.

Who have you partnered with in this work? What resources or capacity are needed?

The Commission for Higher Education, which has had lead responsibility for promoting credential transparency, has partnered with all key state agencies dealing with workforce preparation (Department of Education, Department of Workforce Development, Governor's Workforce Cabinet, Professional Licensing Agency, Indiana Economic Development Corporation, Office of the Governor) as well as all public and some independent postsecondary institutions, and high schools. Partnerships have also been developed with employer associations and the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. While staff resources have been reallocated to support the work of credential transparency, the biggest resource challenges are associated with changes that need to be made to data systems and software, along with the application program interfaces that need to be developed, to make it easier and more efficient to publish information to the Indiana Credential Registry and to maintain its currency.

Because credential transparency is a crucial part of improved outcomes across the P20W spectrum, associated cross-sector partnerships are vital to successful use of credential registries. With a goal of creating a holistic approach to information sharing, Indiana has purposefully created partnerships to improve uptake and usefulness of the information in their credential registry. However, to fully advance the work on Indiana's credential transparency partnerships requires an investment of resources. Indiana has worked to leverage existing human resources in support of its credential transparency initiative, and like many others working in this space, is seeking out opportunities to improve technological infrastructure and resources to keep pace with rapid advances in technologies, like credential registries.

Additional Resources

SHEEO is a member of Credential Engine's State Policy Partnership and its **Council on Credential Transparency & Equitable Pathways, Transfer, and Recognition of Learning.** As a part of that work, we share insight and information from Credential Engine and other partnership members for ways credential transparency and registries can support state agency and system goals equitably. Many of those resources are available on the **Credential Engine** website, on their **State Policy Briefs** page. The policy briefs focus on credential transparencies and how they can help improve attainment, equity and workforce goals and the ways that states can be involved in this work.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) serves the executives of statewide governing, policy, and coordinating boards of postsecondary education and their staffs. Founded in 1954, SHEEO promotes an environment that values higher education and its role in ensuring the equitable education of all Americans, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic factors. Together with its members, SHEEO aims to achieve this vision by equipping state higher education executive officers and their staffs with the tools to effectively advance the value of higher education, promoting public policies and academic practices that enable all Americans to achieve success in the 21st century, and serving as an advocate for state higher education leadership. For more information, visit **www.sheeo.org**.