



MEASURING SECONDARY CTE PROGRAM QUALITY RECOGNIZED POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT

When the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 (Perkins IV) was reauthorized in July 2018 as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), it was with an intentional push toward data-driven decisionmaking at both the state and local levels. One of the major changes in Perkins V is that states can now select from among three options for the indicator to measure secondary Career Technical Education (CTE) program quality in their accountability systems:



- The percentage of CTE concentrators graduating from high school **having attained a recognized postsecondary credential.**¹



- The percentage of CTE concentrators graduating from high school having **attained postsecondary credits in the relevant CTE program or program of study** earned through a dual or concurrent enrollment program or another credit transfer agreement.



- The percentage of CTE concentrators graduating from high school **having participated in work-based learning.**

This series of briefs draws on data from a 2018 national survey of State CTE Directors to help states adopt robust methods for measuring secondary CTE program quality. It explores the pros and cons of each of the three options and examines different ways states are measuring and validating them. This brief is the second in the series and explores strategies for measuring recognized postsecondary credential attainment.

Key Considerations for Measuring Recognized Postsecondary Credential Attainment

States that select recognized postsecondary credential attainment as their secondary CTE program quality indicator should think about:

- Setting parameters around what does and does not count as a recognized postsecondary credential and structuring criteria to encourage industry alignment and positive wage outcomes;
- Identifying opportunities to align this indicator with other accountability measures for related programs;
- Aligning state policy and funding — in addition to accountability — to encourage learners to earn credentials that are valued in the labor market; and
- Adopting new methods of collecting data that leverage administrative data from state agencies and credential providers rather than self-reported information from learners and schools.

Why Measure Recognized Postsecondary Credential Attainment?

Credentials are often called the currency of the labor market because they signal to employers what a worker knows and can do. But not all credentials are created equal. The universe of credentials is vast — by some estimates there are more than 340,000 on the market in the United States alone — and many are not recognized by employers or worth the effort to earn them.² Navigating the credential ecosystem to give learners the clarity and information they need to make informed decisions is a critical responsibility of state leaders.

The term “recognized postsecondary credential” comes from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and includes the following categories of credentials:

- **Industry-Recognized Certifications:** Credentials awarded by a certification body based on an individual demonstrating through an examination process that he or she has acquired the designated knowledge, skills and abilities to perform a specific job. The examination can be written, oral or performance based. Certification is a time-limited credential that is renewed through a re-certification process.³
- **Educational Certificates:** Credentials awarded by a training provider or an educational institution based on completion of all requirements for a program of study, including coursework and a test or other performance evaluation. Certificates are typically awarded for life (like degrees). Certificates of attendance or participation in a short-term training (e.g., one day) are not in the definitional scope for educational certificates.⁴
- **Licenses:** Credentials awarded by a licensing agency based on pre-determined criteria. The criteria may include some combination of degree attainment, certifications, certificates, assessment, apprenticeship programs or work experience. Licenses are time limited and must be renewed periodically.⁵
- **Educational Degrees:** Credentials awarded by accredited postsecondary institutions to recognize the completion of a pre-determined amount of coursework.
- **Certificates of Completion of an Apprenticeship:** Nationally recognized, industry-issued credentials awarded to individuals upon completion of a Registered Apprenticeship.

Depending on the type of credential they earn, workers can get a significant wage premium. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, full-time workers with a certification or license earn a median weekly wage that is \$268 higher than workers without a certification or license.⁶ And new research from ExcellEd and Burning Glass finds that in certain states earning a credential in high school is associated with higher graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment rates and wages.⁷

As the U.S. economy advances and as new technologies replace rote tasks and low-skill jobs, the need for highly skilled workers — and credentials to recognize those skills — is growing.⁸ To encourage higher credential attainment, 43 states have set statewide goals,⁹ and 24 states have added credentials or certifications to their state or federal accountability systems for high schools as of 2019.¹⁰ In states such as **Virginia** — where former Gov. Terry McAuliffe established a cross-sector Governor’s Workforce Cabinet to oversee a statewide goal of 50,000 credentials, licenses, apprenticeships and associate degrees attained in high-priority industry sectors — these goals have

provided a unifying objective for coordinating activities across the secondary, postsecondary and workforce sectors.¹¹

Further, recognized postsecondary credential attainment is already a required accountability indicator in Perkins V for postsecondary CTE students. Aligning these indicators is one way state leaders could encourage alignment of goals, program design and delivery across secondary and postsecondary education.

4 out of 5

states publish state-identified lists of recognized postsecondary credentials



Identifying Recognized Postsecondary Credentials

With so many credentials in the market, sifting through and identifying those with value can be challenging. According to a recent survey of State Directors, four out of five states publish a state-determined list of recognized postsecondary credentials.¹² But few states have rigorous processes for vetting and endorsing credentials of value that involve employers and the use of labor market data. To set learners up for success, states should establish state-approved credential lists and ensure that these listed

credentials are vetted and approved by industry, are attainable through a CTE program, and are informed by labor market needs.

Florida's Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act is one example of a state-led process for identifying credentials of value.¹³ The CAPE Act was passed in 2007 and provides a financial incentive for school districts and teachers whose students earn state-approved credentials. The Florida Department of Education partners with CareerSource Florida, which functions as the state's workforce development board, to develop the credential list. To be approved, credentials must be:

- Endorsed by an employer or other organization representing an industry in which the certification is of value;
- Aligned to in-demand occupations in the state;
- Achievable at the secondary level with a minimum of 150 hours of instruction; and
- Offered through a proctored examination.

Florida uses a tiered weighting structure, providing a higher financial incentive for credentials that articulate with postsecondary education.

Collecting and Validating Recognized Postsecondary Credential Attainment Data

Measuring credential attainment is not always easy. Students earn certificates, certifications, licenses and degrees through third-party organizations, associations or institutions, which can make capturing these data challenging. States can request self-reported information from the learner's high school or work to gather administrative data directly from the credential providers themselves. Each method comes with its own associated challenges.

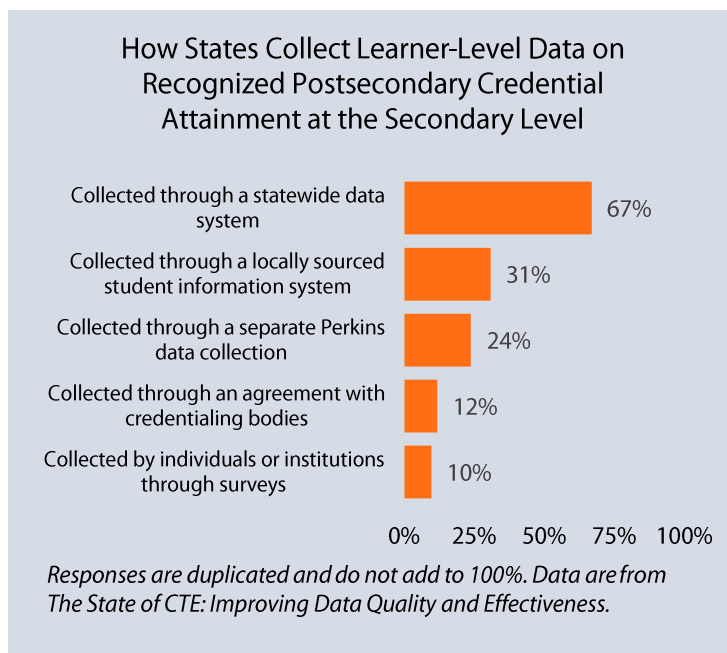
By and large, most states rely on self-reported information from schools and districts to capture learner-level data on credential attainment. While two-thirds of states report that this information is available through a statewide data system (including longitudinal data systems or student information systems), only 12 percent say it is collected or validated by credential providers.

The challenge with relying on self-reported credential attainment data is that state leaders cannot access the full picture. Without protocols to validate the accuracy of the data, states are left to rely on only the information provided by schools and institutions. States that use this approach should establish protocols and processes to validate, to the extent possible, that the information is accurate. For example, they can require local institutions to have records on file from the credential provider or regularly audit local schools and institutions to verify their data.

Some states have been successful in partnering with credential providers such as third-party vendors, certificate- and degree-granting institutions, licensing agencies and apprenticeship agencies to access administrative data on recognized postsecondary credential attainment. This method allows state leaders to have stronger confidence in their data.

This approach presents some challenges, however. States often need to set up individual data sharing agreements with each agency, institution or association awarding the credential to capture the full spectrum of recognized postsecondary credential attainment. Additionally, credential providers do not always have sufficient information about participating learners to conduct a reliable match with secondary student records. And states still must have clear protocols in place to clean and validate the data to ensure that they are accurate and reliable.

North Carolina has begun collecting industry certification data directly from credentialing bodies. In 2016, the state launched an incentive program to reward teachers for each student who successfully earns a state-recognized certification.¹⁴ To accurately identify these individuals, the Department of Public Instruction set up data sharing agreements to gather data directly from credential providers



Critical Resources

Education Strategy Group developed two resources to help states identify which credentials have labor market value and improve credential attainment and reporting.

[Credential Currency](#) draws on the knowledge of state and national experts to provide state policy recommendations for improving credential currency.¹⁵

[Building Credential Currency](#) provides a set of resources and tools to help states set thresholds for high-quality credentials and access appropriate data on student outcomes.¹⁶

and has managed to successfully obtain data for more than half of certifications earned by high school students in the state. To securely match learner data between the secondary data system and the credential provider's database, North Carolina uses the learner's name, location, date of birth and other unique information.

The same approach can work for accessing data on licenses, degrees, educational certificates and apprenticeship certificates attained across the state. State leaders should leverage partnerships with key agencies and vendors to access learner-level data on recognized postsecondary credential attainment. Starting with the low-hanging fruit — the credentials that are most sought after, are of highest value in the state, and for which there are already strong partnerships and connections with the providers — is also helpful. By approaching a few of the major providers, states can begin to access data incrementally.

Parting Thoughts

Choosing a secondary CTE program quality indicator is a decision state leaders should not take lightly. This choice will send a clear signal to the field about state priorities for CTE and create an incentive structure that will be in place for years to come. States that choose to measure recognized postsecondary credential attainment should use this decision as a forcing event to establish guidelines around which credentials count and improve the quality of their data. States should adopt robust processes to ensure that promoted credentials are vetted and approved by industry and are informed by labor market needs. They should also improve the way they collect and validate recognized postsecondary credential attainment data to ensure that this information is reliable.

Critical Resource

In 2017, the Association for Career and Technical Education published a guide for capturing certification attainment data from providers. The report outlines a five-step process:

1. Establish the data sharing agreement;
2. Estimate bandwidth and allocate resources;
3. Facilitate the transfer of data;
4. Perform the analysis; and
5. Present the results using common templates.¹⁷

¹ Perkins V defines a CTE concentrator as:

- At the secondary school level, a student served by an eligible recipient who has completed at least two courses in a single CTE program or program of study; and
- At the postsecondary level, a student enrolled in an eligible recipient who has earned at least 12 credits within a career and technical education program or program of study or has completed such a program if the program encompasses fewer than 12 credits or the equivalent in total (Sec 3[12]).

² Credential Engine. (2018). *Counting U.S. secondary and postsecondary credentials*. Retrieved from <https://credentialengine.org/2018/04/05/counting-u-s-secondary-and-postsecondary-credentials-april-2018-report/>

³ This definition was taken from Ewert, S., & Kominski, R. (2014). *Measuring alternative educational credentials: 2012*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p70-138.pdf>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Revised 2018, February 8). Labor force statistics from the current population: Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat54.htm>

⁷ ExcelinEd & Burning Glass. (2019). *Where credentials meet the market: State case studies on the effect of high school industry credentials on educational and labor market outcomes*. Retrieved from <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ExcelinEdBurningGlassTechnologies.CredentialsMatter.WhereCredentialsMeetTheMarket.June2019.pdf>

⁸ World Economic Forum. (2018). *The future of jobs report*. Retrieved from http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf

⁹ Lumina Foundation. Tracking America's progress toward 2025. Retrieved from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#nation&n-goals=1>

¹⁰ Advance CTE, Education Strategy Group, Achieve & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2019). *Making career readiness count 3.0*. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/making-career-readiness-count-2019>

¹¹ McAuliffe, T. (2014). *Executive order 23: Establishing the New Virginia Economy Workforce Initiative*. Retrieved from https://sgr.virginia.edu/sites/sgr.virginia.edu/files/EO23_2014.pdf

¹² Advance CTE, Council of Chief State School Officers, Education Strategy Group, Data Quality Campaign & Workforce Data Quality Campaign. (2019). *The state of Career Technical Education: Improving data quality and effectiveness*. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/state-cte-improving-data-quality-effectiveness>

¹³ Florida Department of Education. CAPE — secondary. Retrieved from <http://www.fldoe.org/academics/career-adult-edu/cape-secondary/>

¹⁴ North Carolina State Board of Education & North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2017). *Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: Industry certifications and credentials teacher bonus pilot program*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncleg.gov/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2017%20Reports%20Received/Industry%20Certifications-Credentials%20Teacher%20Bonus%20Pilot%20Program.pdf>

¹⁵ Education Strategy Group. (2018). *Credential currency: How states can identify and promote credentials of value*. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/credential-currency>

¹⁶ Education Strategy Group. (2019). *Building credential currency: Resources to drive attainment across K-12, higher education, and workforce development*. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/building-credential-currency>

¹⁷ Association for Career and Technical Education. (2017). *Connecting industry-recognized certification data to education and workforce outcomes: Measuring the value added to skills, employment and wages*. Retrieved from <https://careertech.org/resource/connecting-industry-recognized-credential-data-education-workforce-outcomes>