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The value of microcredentials: The employer's perspective

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Abstract

Background: Competency-based hiring is beginning to catch on as employers insist on having a clearer understanding of an applicant's abilities before extending an offer of employment. Microcredentialing offers employees a mechanism to articulate their competency, and they offer employers a profound way to certify an applicant's abilities.

Purpose: To seek an understanding of the value of a microcredentialing structure through employer perspectives. The central research question is, *do employers see value in a postsecondary micro-credentialing structure?*

Method: This qualitative case study uses Skill Acquisition Theory and cultivated twenty-two industry professionals from various sectors, primarily from the early childhood education industry.

Results: Several themes emerged from the data: The industry is not satisfied with employee skills, competency is the new currency, seat time does not equal education, a policy for issuing and securing microcredentials is necessary.

Discussion: Employers were questioning the validity of a college transcript and suggested that applicants present microcredentials for key employment elements along with their transcript to certify further their ability to apply knowledge and skills.

Conclusions: It is concluded that microcredentials would be beneficial to the holder and employers. To increase the value of these credentials, the participants suggested using a registry to track and report microcredentials earned. It was further concluded that institutions need to develop governing rules for issuing a microcredential, rules similar to those governing transcripts to ascertain and protect the validity of the credential.

KEYWORDS

career and technical, community college, employability, higher education, microcredential

1 | INTRODUCTION

Contemporary employers are looking to employ recent graduates who have mastered employability skills upon graduation from their community college and expect recent graduates to exhibit those skills immediately upon hire. Employability skills are a combination of core discipline skills and soft skills used on a day-to-day basis (Stokes, 2015). Soft skills include critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, motivation, self-efficacy, metacognition, problem-solving, rational and organized thought process, communication, and contextual behavior (Eraut, 2002; Hora, Benbow, & Oleson, 2016). Core skills, sometimes referred to as hard skills, are

technical competencies that align with specific job functions (Hora et al., 2016). Consider, for example, the core skills required to be a police officer: defensive driving, discharging a firearm arcuately; or an electrician: ability to use hand tools safely and to know which tool to use in which situation; knowing how and when to apply the laws of electricity. Consider, for example, the core skills required to be a nurse, or a welder, a waitress or waiter, a teacher, or a machinist, to name a few. Developing an intergraded curriculum to include employability skills offers students, once they graduate and are working in the field, an opportunity for advancement within the employment structure as these skills train them to be forward thinkers supporting upward mobility (Crawford, 2011).

Recently, the employment market changed in terms of the employer's expectations of the skills of new hires. Employers are looking for quick ways to train a workforce to increase productivity. While students are looking for a quick way to learn a skill to get to work sooner, microcredentialing is one-way postsecondary institutions can offer students a mechanism to articulate the competencies they gained throughout a program. A microcredential is awarded to students who have completed a rigorous component of a more extensive program. For example, while a student is working on a postsecondary for credit certification, he or she can earn valuable industry-recognized credentials along the way. These subtextual industry certifications are an example of a microcredential. Consider employability skills; in this case, a student enrolled in a postsecondary program could earn employability skill microcredentials while working on completing a broader certification or degree.

This paper explores the employer's perspective of a microcredentialing structure. Recent research, within the past 2 years, seems to indicate that skilled workers employed with only industry-recognized credentials tend to leave their employer within 5 years of hire, and the first 2 years are the only ones that yield productivity. Years 3 and 4, employers report that employees with only an industry-recognized credential tend to experience attendance and productivity issues, and by their fifth year with the employer, the employee either leaves the employer on their terms or is terminated, and typically leaves the industry (Acree, 2016; Fishman, Teasley, & Cederquist, 2019; Hall-Ellis, 2016; Oliver, 2019; Rossiter & Tynan, 2019). Therefore, while this paper reports on employer perspectives of microcredentialing, the data seem to indicate that microcredentials alone will not prepare graduates for employment.

The purpose of this study was to explore employer perspectives of a microcredentialing structure within a postsecondary institution, and the following central research question was developed to help frame and guide this study. *Do employers see value in a postsecondary micro-credentialing structure?* To further refine and focus the study, the following subquestions were developed,

1. What benefits would microcredentials (including digital badging) bring to the participants' industry?
2. How do the participants see microcredentialing improving the professional development of the workforce?

2 | ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

This study is organized in the following manner. The researcher will discuss the theoretical framework that was used to frame and guide the study, including the interpretation of the findings. Next, the researcher will review the related literature used to draw upon and inform the study. Context and the limitations of the study are identified next, followed by a description of the research method used to conduct the study. Following the context and limitations of the study, the researcher reports the findings and offers a discussion about how the findings align to the study's framework; then, the researcher offers conclusions as well as implications and recommendations for practice. Finally, the researcher will offer opportunities for additional research derived from the study.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Skill acquisition theory accounts for skill-based behavior and practical knowledge. The theory stipulates how people learn in a variety of skill-based behaviors through the acquisition of practical knowledge to gain proficiency and competency in a domain that includes employability skills in a variety of industrial applications (Keyser, 2007; Eraut, 2002). While cognitive process increases with an understanding of a problem, it is negatively impacted by a lack of skill: As one practices a procedure, their understanding of the problem and skills needed to address the problem are refined, thereby increasing cognitive progress (Tenison, Fincham, & Anderson, 2016). For this study, skill acquisition theory accounts for a learning structure typically offered through career and technical education programs offered at postsecondary institutions. The theory suggests that microcredentials could be used to articulate skills gained as a result of the successful completion of a program or course. Microcredentials could be offered for skills gained associated with core or technical competencies, or hard skills associated with technical course work; day-to-day interaction skills could also be articulated via microcredentials and awarded for the successful completion of specific components or competencies of a course or program.

Community college career and technical programs facilitate skill-based behavior and practical knowledge through a combination of classroom and project-based learning pedagogy (Wyner, 2014). Therefore, the framework indicates that as students build their employability knowledge base, they should be earning microcredentials along the way to augment their college transcript to articulate their understanding of the cognitive process and practical knowledge acquisition.

4 | REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Community colleges offer a variety of career and technical programs. These programs cover industries and disciplines such as education, aeronautical technology, various engineering disciplines, transportation technology, welding, and electronics, to name a few, see Gauthier (2019) for a sample list of programs included within a

career and technical division. As the industry process becomes more technical in nature, career and technical programs must also become more technical in nature as well as more rigorous and project or competency-based.

Industry professionals indicated that while completing a college program indicates the grit and perseverance of a potential applicant, the college transcript lists courses completed and does not indicate actual skills gained during the degree process. Given rising tuition costs plaguing higher education, many people are turning to community colleges because of their relatively inexpensive tuition, but employers are questioning the authenticity of the education students receive (Gauthier, 2020). Microcredentialing would offer students a mechanism to articulate specific industry-recognized skills, which, when coupled with a transcript, would highlight necessary employability skills typically required for success in the workplace (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Bettinger & Soliz, 2016; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015).

Microcredentialing, of course, would be beneficial not only for articulating career and technical competencies but also for the competencies gained in the "hard subjects" (Claxton, 2015, p. 270). While college degrees in general yield higher incomes, students who graduate with a technical degree and stacked technical competencies yield even higher incomes (Compton, Laanan, & Starobin, 2010; Gallagher, 2016; Rose, 2005). Therefore, combining the value of a hands-on pedagogy and a civic-based academic pedagogy, augmented with structured and stacked microcredentials, appears to be in the best interest of students and employers in the long-term. Consider the following observations reported by Gallagher (2016):

> For many employers, degrees appear to be most valuable in the early part of a professional's career, when candidates lack a significant amount of professional experience and quantifiable results. In the middle and later stages of an individual's career, a candidate's potential value and productivity can be better assessed based on that person's track record, regardless of educational level.
>
> (p. 49)

Given this observation, it is essential to offer students hands-on experience as early as possible in an educational setting. Some scholars argue that this opportunity should come as early as junior high school and continue into high school (Fletcher, Edward, Warren, & Hernández-Gantes, 2018; Stone, 2017). In this case, a student's microcredentials could become transportable to various educational settings and into the workforce.

As students gain knowledge and then learn ways of applying their knowledge, the competencies they develop create foundational professional knowledge. Employers are most interested in a candidate's professional knowledge. However, during employment interviews, employers are left relying on a college transcript, which identifies how well a person did in college but does a poor job of identifying whether a person gained competency along the way. The term skill is associated with a wide variety of meanings (Eraut, 2002). Therefore, employers are left with a vague and ambiguous understanding of a candidate's authentic abilities, given the job functions identified. A record consisting of digital badges or other certification of microcredentials earned would offer employers a clearer understanding of a candidate's ability to apply knowledge rather than recite it (Claxton, 2015).

5 | CONTEXT AND LIMITATIONS

Microcredentialing offers a variety of benefits. The purpose of this study was to understand the value of a microcredential structure through the perspective of employers. The study identified professionals from a single industry, but from various job markets within the industry, and asked them to reflect on their current hiring practices and their relationship with their local community college concerning their involvement with the institution's program advisory committees and career services center. Then, they were asked for their view concerning how a microcredentialing structure could benefit their organizations.

Data collected for the current study represents a specific industry, and the researcher understands that the data collected from this study cannot be generally applied to all industries or employers. However, the findings of this study can contribute to the discussion of the importance of microcredentialing. Another limitation of the study is that the participants were not previously introduced to the microcredentialing concept and, therefore, may not have a complete understanding of how such a system would benefit them. Another limitation of the study is that the researcher engaged one postsecondary institution to cultivate participants. While this effort generated twenty-two participants, all of these participants have a connection to a single postsecondary institution, which could limit the range of perspectives as it relates to the benefits and drawbacks of microcredentialing.

6 | RESEARCH METHODS

The current study looks to understand the value of microcredentials from the employers' perspective. Within the context of Skill Acquisition Theory, the case study tradition allows the researcher to isolate the perspectives of early childhood education professionals as the perspectives of a small number of members of a single industry. Therefore, naming the participants, setting, and industry as a case (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). The case was framed by skill acquisition theory, in that humans learn best when they test their knowledge using authentic and practical measures. The structure of the study further bounded the case—problem, context, issues, recommendations, and the study's system, time (duration of the industry advisory meeting), and place (single campus and industry) (Creswell, 2012). Systematic content analysis was used to draw similarities between the participant responses and labor market data to discover employment trends that favor microcredentialing sustainability (Kandalec Holm, 2019).

A community college in Florida was identified by the researcher, which offered a variety of career and technical education programs and requested an invitation to an industry advisory committee meeting. The researcher was invited to attend an industry advisory meeting for the college's early education program. All the members of the committee consented to talk with the researcher as a group. The researcher prepared a semi-structured protocol, which was aimed at identifying the extent that the participants value a microcredentialing structure.

Participants represented a variety of professional positions in the early education discipline as well as two students enrolled in the college-level early education career and technical program (Table 1). Interviews with the participants were audio-recorded by the researcher and later transcribed. Using the transcription, the researcher searched for themes and patterns in the dialog. As themes became clear in the text, the researcher coded them and labeled them in priority order. Likewise, when patterns became apparent, the researcher coded them and labeled them in priority order. Eventually, patterns would become themes, and some patterns were reported as being insignificant.

TABLE 1 List of study participants, organization, and position (n = 22)

Participant's name	Organization	Position
Lisa	Daycare	Owner
Kevin	Community college	Curriculum specialist
Jason	Community college	Professor
Jessica	Community college	Professor
Jillian	Local Bank	Management
Allen	Elementary School	Teacher
Stephanie	Elementary School	Teacher
April	Elementary School	Teacher
Juana	Community college	Instructional Designer
Mark	Elementary School	Teacher
Patrick	Boys and Girls Club	Coach
Carol	–	Administrator
Grace	Community college	Student
Jay	Community college	Instructional Designer
Lynn	Community college	Student
George	University	Professor
Zach	University	Professor
Chris	Business	Owner
Elizabeth	University	Professor
Eric	Elementary School	Teacher
Stephen	Elementary School	Content Coordinator
Jess	Elementary/District	Special Education Coordinator

Note: –, missing data; names are pseudonyms.

7 | FINDINGS

Twenty-two early childhood education professionals discussed the value of a microcredentialing structure for their industry. This section of the paper will articulate the data collected from the participants in a thematic format.

7.1 | Industry is not satisfied with employee skills

The participants indicated that recent graduates of the postsecondary early childhood education program are not prepared for the day-to-day operations of the industry and do not seem to exhibit the competencies the employers value most. Further, applicants tend to interview well, but their ability to perform is later determined to be substandard. Microcredentials would help employers identify an applicant's authentic skills related to the job for which they applied.

7.2 | Competency is the new currency

Industry suggested that competency and experience were more valuable to the employer than a college degree. Participants reported that many recent graduates have mastered the knowledge required during their college programs but seem to have some difficulty applying that knowledge in the field. For example, the participants said that if they were looking to hire a curriculum specialist, they would expect applicants to hold a digital badge in curriculum competency. Thus, a microcredential would validate whether an applicant is a content expert in the area for which they applied. Many of the participants indicated that they would instead employ people who have validated experience, via digital badging or other credentials, and that the employer would be willing to offer tuition reimbursement, rather than hire directly form a college program.

7.3 | Seat time does not equal education

The participants said that education no longer equals seat time in a classroom listening to a professor lecture about the discipline or topic of the day. The participants in a collective voice indicated that internships and apprenticeships in the industry are valuable and beneficial to the student and the employer. Additionally, the participants said that project-based learning is the preferred method of training. Education can be facilitated in a variety of formats, and seat time just does not seem to be as effective in contemporary time.

7.4 | Policy for microcredentials

The participants are frustrated with the lack of skill and competency from recent early childhood graduates, and they overwhelmingly insist that community colleges create a microcredentialing structure

so that job applicants can clearly display authentic skills and employers can easily assess and align the skill level of the applicant to the job skills.

The participants suggested that the institution develop a policy for issuing microcredentials but noted that the criteria for issuance must be rigorous and holistic to ensure that the microcredential being awarded holds value in the industry. Participants further noted that the microcredentialing structure should be tiered in that several microcredentials for skills would result in competency attainment.

8 | DISCUSSION

Career and technical education cannot be productive unless the industry has a vested interest in assisting the college in developing and maintaining a contemporary curriculum and course content (Mann, 2017). Given this context, the findings of this study are not surprising, but the participants appeared to offer a sense of urgency during the discussion.

Employers reported that credentials carry inconsistent value (Buckwalter, 2017), which is why it is essential to remember that a microcredential must represent completion and mastery of project-based pedagogy resulting in fluid competency in a specific area or discipline. As the participants outlined their view of a microcredentialing structure, in an effort for the digital badge issued to certify competency attainment, the structure must be aligned with a rigorous curriculum and criteria for attainment (Acree, 2016). For example, one structure outlined by Buckwalter (2017) included subassociate as well as submasters microcredentials, and would require students to complete several levels of training before a credential would be awarded: for example, four competencies at level 1, four competencies at level 2 until competency is gained.

As the industry credential market changes to align with contemporary skills and knowledge, employers look to postsecondary institutions to update their programs to match industry requirements (Gauthier, 2020). As the participants proclaim, and as the theoretical framework dictates, knowledge does not make skilled workers, and skilled workers are not necessarily knowledgeable (Lim, Nair, Keppell, Hassan, & Ayub, 2018; Williams & Hodges, 2004). Therefore, offering recent graduates transportable microcredentials, coupled with a college transcript, creates a knowledge-skill dynamic that equates to a state-of-the-art career and technical program (Rojewski & Hill, 2014).

9 | CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community colleges could use the data presented in this study to develop a revised curriculum to include a mixture of competency or project-based education and assessment coupled with authentic field experience while issuing microcredentials as students complete competency milestones along the pathway to program completion. A prevalent implication of this study is that the data reveal strong support for microcredentials by the industry, and therefore implying that industry professionals measure career and technical program value by the productive nature of recent graduates (Lisa, 2016), which typically comes after an applicant is hired. Microcredentials offer merit to an applicant's transcript while highlighting skills gained in an authentic setting. This validation provides employers with a clear understanding of a candidate's abilities before extending an employment offer.

It is recommended that postsecondary institutions use this data to present their industry advisory committees with a potential microcredentialing structure for the institution. Further, this structure must include a layered strategy to conceptualize the reality of industry support for appropriate career and technical education. Additionally, this paper recommends that community colleges, in their effort to develop a microcredentialing structure, also work to better incorporate general education concepts into technical courses and curricula. Adhering to these recommendations could create stronger industry partnerships within the community as well as better preparing students for the practical application of knowledge and experience.

10 | ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Additional research could be conducted to examine the value of a microcredentialing structure through the perspective of a broader industry as well as postsecondary faculty and administrators (Mischewski, 2017). Research could also investigate the best way to layer microcredentials as well as the criteria included with each layer.

It seems that there could be a significant benefit to creating a registry for microcredentials, which would allow for these credentials to be transferable on a large scale (Sutton, 2019). It is challenging to collect college credentials for faculty beyond a transcript. Additional research could investigate the development of a microcredentialing registry and its limitations for both the consumer and the employer.

Finally, students and higher education institutions could benefit from allowing microcredentials to transfer into similar programs for credit (Fishman et al., 2019). Many institutions offer prior-learning credit already, but the analysis of microcredentials for credit could streamline that process as well as allow for college access, which would otherwise be unreachable for many individuals.

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