MAKING COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEARNING LEGIBLE TO EMPLOYERS

Toward a stronger public language for skill, performance, and economic mobility

From the Office of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness
Cuyahoga Community College

When employers speak in skills and colleges speak in proxies

Across much of the labor market, especially in hiring for entry-level and early-career roles, employers are now speaking more explicitly in the language of skills. Job postings, hiring platforms, workforce intermediaries, and human resources literature increasingly describe candidates in terms of what they can do rather than only what degree they hold. Employers want people who can troubleshoot, communicate clearly, work with data, document accurately, solve practical problems, adapt to changing conditions, and exercise sound judgment in everyday work. In that environment, the central hiring question is increasingly tied to performance. What matters is whether a candidate can carry out the kinds of tasks and judgments that the role will require.

Higher education, however, still does not speak fluently in that language. Colleges produce transcripts, course grades, credit hours, certificates, and degrees. Those signals matter, and they often matter a great deal, because they indicate persistence, exposure to a body of knowledge, and formal completion of an academic pathway. Even so, they remain indirect measures of capability. A course grade is a composite judgment that may reflect some combination of exams, papers, attendance, participation, lab work, improvement over time, and local faculty expectations. A credential indicates that a student has completed an organized course of study, though it does not by itself tell an outside audience enough about what the student can actually do, under what conditions that capability was demonstrated, or how independently it can be carried into a workplace.

This is part of what makes learning outcomes so important. In principle, they bring higher education much closer to the language employers are trying to use. Unlike grades and credentials, learning outcomes attempt to name enduring forms of performance and judgment. They describe capacities that are meant to remain with students after specific assignments, textbooks, and course titles have faded from memory. Written communication, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, critical and creative thinking, cultural awareness, civic responsibility, and ethical reasoning all point toward something more substantive than seat time or course completion alone. They suggest that college learning can be expressed as capability rather than merely recorded as accumulation.

For community colleges, that creates an important opportunity. If employers are asking for clearer signals about skill, and if colleges already possess a language partly aimed at describing what students know and can do, then learning outcomes could serve as a more

credible bridge between education and work than transcripts and credentials can serve on their own. Yet that bridge remains weaker than it should be because the terms colleges use are still broad, internally oriented, and often too abstract to carry much public force. They sound closer to employer needs than grades do, though they still leave students, advisors, and hiring managers with limited clarity about what kind of performance actually stands behind the words.

That difficulty is especially visible in community colleges because a single outcome label may gather together many very different forms of demonstration. Written communication may include a lab report, a technical memo, a case summary, a client email, an incident report, or a reflective essay. Quantitative reasoning may involve dosage calculation, budgeting, spreadsheet interpretation, process measurement, or the use of numerical evidence in operational decisions. Critical and creative thinking may refer to source evaluation, troubleshooting, pattern recognition, root-cause analysis, comparison of alternatives, or the exercise of judgment under constraint. These are all real and valuable forms of learning, though the broad institutional label does not yet tell an outside audience enough about which of these performances a student can carry out, in what setting, and at what level of independence.

For community colleges and other broad-access institutions, this is a design question with practical consequences for economic mobility, employer confidence, and the public value of credentials. The sector already has a language that points toward durable capability, which is no small thing. What remains underdeveloped is a more disciplined public account of what those learning outcomes actually contain, how they appear in different fields, which sub-skills they represent, and which forms of performance carry recognizable labor market value.

Why broad outcome language weakens outside the institution

Community college learning outcomes are often quite similar across institutions. They are also, in many respects, typical of the outcome language used throughout higher education to support curriculum, assessment, and accreditation. The challenge arises from the fact that this inherited vocabulary serves important educational purposes inside the institution while losing force when it is asked to function as a public signal of capability beyond the campus.

A collegewide outcome must travel across disciplines, course formats, and programs with very different purposes. Once those same terms are brought into employer-facing conversations, however, their limitations become easier to see because employers make judgments in the language of performance under conditions. They are trying to determine whether someone can handle tasks, interpret information, communicate appropriately, make sound decisions, and contribute reliably in settings where time, risk, responsibility, and consequence all matter.

Critical and creative thinking offers a good example. In institutional terms, it usually refers to analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information in order to address problems and generate sound or innovative responses. That language is educationally serious, and it names

something real. Even so, an employer in health care, advanced manufacturing, business operations, logistics, information technology, or legal services will still want greater specificity. The practical concern is whether the student can distinguish a symptom from a root cause, gather relevant evidence before acting, recognize patterns in incomplete information, compare plausible responses, and explain a recommendation clearly enough that a supervisor, coworker, or client can use it. Those are the forms in which judgment is encountered in working life, and the distance between that vocabulary and the institutional label remains considerable.

The same issue appears in information literacy. Within the college, the term appropriately points to credibility, authority, fit for purpose, and ethical use of information. In many work settings, however, the corresponding concern is expressed more concretely. The question may be whether an employee can verify a source before relying on it, check evidence before making a recommendation, document information accurately, distinguish trustworthy information from weak information, or handle sensitive information responsibly in settings shaped by compliance, confidentiality, and operational risk. The institutional language and the workplace language are related, though they are rarely aligned closely enough to function as interchangeable signals.

Communication reveals the same pattern with particular force because it stretches across such a wide range of forms. Written communication and oral communication are meaningful categories inside the curriculum, though they are far too expansive to serve as precise employer-facing claims on their own. An employer may want to know whether a student can write concise incident reports, prepare clear technical documentation, draft professional workplace emails, explain a process to a client, summarize a case accurately, brief a team, or speak persuasively in a meeting where decisions have to be made. Until colleges give those categories more context and structure, the signal remains weaker than it could be.

For community colleges, that common sector challenge carries particular weight because their mission, student population, and public value proposition place economic mobility, meaningful credentials, and employer-aligned learning near the center of institutional purpose. The issue is not that community colleges use unusually weak language. The issue is that the sector's shared language of learning has not yet been translated strongly enough into public evidence of capability.

What community college curricula already suggest

One of the encouraging features of this issue is that community colleges already show, in parts of their own curricula, how learning can be described in ways that are more legible outside the institution. The contrast between broad institutional learning outcomes and many program learning outcomes is especially instructive because it shows that colleges already possess much of the raw material needed for a stronger public account of learning.

In an industrial maintenance program, students may be expected to select and operate appropriate test equipment, interpret results in order to solve problems, apply math and science to installation and troubleshooting, communicate solutions to supervisors and team members, diagnose equipment problems through logical analysis and documentation, and work with a safety-focused mindset. In a paralegal studies program, students may be expected to communicate professionally with varied audiences, prepare and summarize interviews, use legal technology, conduct legal research, analyze fact patterns, identify legal issues, and perform substantive legal work under supervision while maintaining a client service orientation.

These program outcomes are easier for employers to understand because they place capability inside a recognizable setting, connect that capability to observable action, and imply something about the kind of judgment and responsibility involved. A statement about communication becomes easier to interpret when it is attached to interviews, legal research, documentation, or coordination with supervisors and team members. A statement about problem solving becomes more credible when it is attached to diagnosis, troubleshooting, evidence, and safety. The shift is subtle, though important. The outcome becomes less like a general educational category and more like a description of situated performance.

That distinction matters because it suggests that community colleges do not need a wholly new philosophy of learning in order to move forward. Nor do they need to abandon the broader educational vocabulary they use for good reason. What they need is a stronger architecture for translation, one that connects broad outcomes to the more concrete performance language that already appears within programs and that employers can recognize more readily.

What the skills literature helps clarify

Recent work on durable skills and skills-first hiring helps clarify what such an architecture would require. One of the most useful contributions of that literature is that it does not stop with vague labels. Instead, it breaks those labels into sub-competencies and observable behaviors that make the skill more legible to people outside the institution.

This is one reason the durable skills work associated with Education Design Lab has been useful. It treats skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration as clusters of more specific performances. Critical thinking, for example, can be described through gathering and assessing relevant information, identifying patterns, questioning assumptions, comparing alternatives, and drawing conclusions on the basis of evidence. Oral communication can be described through clarity, tone, listening, audience awareness, and the ability to express ideas in an organized way that others can use. This kind of decomposition begins to narrow the gap between the college's language of learning and the employer's language of capability.

More recent work adds another point that is especially important for community colleges. Skills are often better understood through context, autonomy, complexity, and influence than through generic proficiency labels alone. Communication in a first-semester classroom is not the same as communication in a clinical setting, a machine shop, an office, a lab, a courtroom support role, or a front-line supervisory context. The underlying capability may overlap, though the stakes, speed, audience, medium, and consequences differ substantially. A stronger framework would therefore need to avoid treating skills as free-floating traits and would instead describe them through the settings in which they are demonstrated and the level of responsibility attached to them.

The skills-first hiring literature reinforces the point from the employer side. Employers increasingly say they want to move beyond degrees alone, though many still struggle to identify, trust, and operationalize other signals of capability. That helps explain why degree requirements remain more durable than many advocates expected. When alternative signals are vague, inconsistent, or weakly evidenced, organizations tend to fall back on what is familiar. They use degrees, years of experience, and institutional brand because those proxies are imperfect yet legible. For colleges trying to make learning more visible in the labor market, the implication is straightforward. Learning outcomes become more valuable when the institution can show what they mean in practice, how students demonstrate them, and why an employer should trust the signal.

How AI intensifies the need for clearer public signals of capability

The spread of artificial intelligence in the workplace sharpens this larger issue because it is making employers more attentive to concrete capability and less patient with ill-defined institutional proxies. Across many entry-level roles, AI is entering writing, research, customer communication, documentation, analysis, scheduling, information handling, and routine decision support. A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* report notes that the share of online job postings requiring at least one AI skill rose from 0.5 percent in 2010 to 9.7 percent in 2024, which does not suggest that every graduate now needs advanced technical expertise, though it does suggest that AI-related expectations are diffusing steadily into the wider labor market.

In that environment, the weakness of broad outcome language becomes easier to see. When a college says that a student has achieved critical and creative thinking or information literacy, the claim may still be educationally serious, though employers operating in AI-shaped settings are often listening for more specific capacities. They want to know whether a student can use digital tools productively, inspect an output for error or distortion, recognize when additional evidence is needed, distinguish between speed and accuracy, document a process responsibly, and exercise judgment about when human review remains essential. AI therefore functions less as a wholly separate skills agenda than as a force that intensifies the older problem of translation by increasing the premium on performance that can be described, demonstrated, and trusted.

The Chronicle report is especially useful because it suggests that higher education has often spent more time worrying about AI as a threat to academic integrity than treating it as a dimension of workforce preparation, even as employers increasingly expect baseline AI literacy and stronger judgment in the use of these tools. Community colleges may be especially well positioned to respond because sustained employer relationships and program-level dialogue already provide a structure for translating changing workplace expectations into curriculum and credentials. The central lesson is that AI does not displace the project of making learning outcomes legible to employers. It reveals why that project has become more urgent, since generic claims about communication, critical thinking, and information literacy will carry less force in a labor market that is asking more pointedly what a graduate can do, how well, and under what conditions.

What a stronger employer-facing framework would require

A stronger approach would need to begin with a translation layer between institutional learning outcomes and the language of skill used in hiring and advancement. That would not require abandoning the wider educational vocabulary of higher education, because community college missions properly extend beyond narrow job preparation. These outcomes still matter because colleges are trying to cultivate judgment, communication, numeracy, inquiry, ethical reasoning, and civic capacity in students whose lives and goals are varied. The translation layer would serve a different purpose by preserving the educational integrity of the outcomes while making their practical meaning more visible to students, employers, advisors, and the wider public.

That translation would need to move each outcome closer to recognizable forms of practice. Written communication, for example, might remain a collegewide category, though it would need field-specific expressions that show how writing appears under real constraints. In one program that may involve concise technical documentation. In another it may involve client correspondence, case notes, or incident reports. In another it may involve project summaries, procedural explanations, or records shaped by safety and compliance expectations. The collegewide outcome would remain in place, though it would be accompanied by clearer demonstrations of what effective performance looks like in the kinds of settings where students are likely to use it.

The same pattern would apply across other outcomes. Critical and creative thinking becomes more intelligible when expressed through sub-skills such as diagnosing problems, gathering relevant evidence, identifying patterns, weighing alternatives, recognizing tradeoffs, and making reasoned recommendations. Information literacy becomes more legible when expressed through source validation, evidence selection, fit-for-purpose use of information, ethical attribution, and disciplined handling of information in role-specific settings. Quantitative reasoning becomes more useful when it refers not simply to numerical concepts in the abstract but to capacities such as interpreting data displays, using measurement

accurately, comparing scenarios, estimating risk, applying formulas appropriately, and using numerical evidence in operational decisions.

A stronger framework would also require a more observable performance language. Labels such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving gain credibility when they are attached to actions that others can recognize. Teamwork becomes clearer when it is described through listening, coordination of responsibilities, constructive response to disagreement, and follow-through on shared work. Communication becomes more meaningful when it is attached to audience awareness, precision, organization, tone, and clarity in settings where misunderstanding carries consequences. The more colleges can identify these behaviors in public-facing language, the less their claims about learning will depend on the audience already knowing how to interpret academic terminology.

Over time, this would also require a more convincing way of describing levels of performance. Traditional rubric terms such as 'developing', 'competent', and 'proficient' often carry limited meaning outside education because they say little about what a student can actually be trusted to do. Employers are often trying to determine whether a person can perform only with close guidance, contribute reliably to routine work as part of a team, handle common variation independently, or respond effectively when complexity increases. A framework shaped by autonomy, complexity, and influence would therefore travel more naturally into the language of work than a generic proficiency scale does.

The evidentiary base matters as well. A public claim about student capability becomes more believable when it rests on authentic demonstrations rather than on broad impressions that an outcome has been met somewhere in the curriculum. Applied projects, simulations, case analyses, presentations, labs, practicums, portfolios, and structured performance tasks all provide stronger evidence because they allow the institution to point to work that resembles the conditions in which the capability will matter. The exact form should vary by discipline, though the larger principle should remain steady. Learning becomes more legible when it can be seen in action.

This would also make employer validation more substantive. Advisory structures often affirm program direction in broad terms, though the more important question is whether employers recognize themselves in the language the college is using. The relevant inquiry is whether the college's descriptions sound like the capabilities employers actually hire for, whether the implied level of independence is credible for an early-career completer, and what kinds of evidence would make the signal trustworthy. The more disciplined that feedback becomes, the more useful it is likely to be.

A stronger framework would also make learning visible before the very end of a long pathway. Learners acquire meaningful capability before they complete a final degree or longer certificate. When the institution waits until the end of a long sequence to make learning legible, much real achievement remains difficult for students to use. A more developed system

would allow milestone credentials, validated skill bundles, transcript supplements, or portfolio-backed recognitions to signal demonstrated capability at meaningful points along the way.

How this connects to credentials of value

This discussion connects directly to the growing credentials of value agenda in community colleges because that agenda has pressed institutions to ask harder questions about what a credential actually signals. A credential has limited public value when it is short but weak, when it aligns loosely to labor market demand, or when it says very little about the capabilities a completer can bring into work. The more seriously colleges take the question of value, the more important the language of skill becomes.

A credential becomes more valuable when the market can understand what it represents. If community colleges strengthen the relationship among learning outcomes, employer-facing skill language, authentic demonstrations, and milestone recognitions, they will be doing more than refining description. They will be improving the public intelligibility of the credential itself. Students, employers, and advisors would be able to see more clearly what a short-term certificate, an embedded milestone, or a degree reflects in terms of demonstrated capability. That kind of clarity would help colleges distinguish more convincingly between credentials that are merely short and those that carry real labor market meaning.

This is where a stackable skills credentialing strategy could become strategically important. Many colleges pursuing credentials of value are already trying to build pathways in which shorter credentials connect clearly to larger ones. That work becomes much stronger when the intermediate steps are tied to clearly defined capability rather than to course accumulation alone. If colleges can define skill bundles more precisely, assess them through authentic performance, and validate them in language employers recognize, they may be able to create additional credentials of value.

That possibility matters especially in programs where students acquire economically useful capability before final completion. Under a weaker signaling system, that learning often remains hidden until the end of a long pathway or is described in language too broad to carry much value in hiring. Under a stronger system, colleges could recognize partial progress more deliberately through stackable milestones that carry both educational integrity and labor market meaning. Some of those milestones could, with careful design and validation, become new credentials of value in their own right.

Why this matters for adult learners

Adult learners often move through college in interrupted, part-time, and highly pragmatic ways. They enroll because they want advancement, stronger wages, a better job, a career shift, or a return path after an earlier stop-out. They respond strongly to visible relevance, shorter usable milestones, and confidence that even a limited period of study will yield

something they can explain and use. When the college's language of learning remains too abstract, it becomes harder for these students to describe what they have gained, harder for employers to recognize it, and harder for the institution to convert partial progress into a meaningful public signal.

That concern aligns closely with the broader community college emphasis on economic and social mobility, meaningful credentials, employer-aligned skills, and pathways that support continued advancement across longer working lives. Many colleges have already named the larger direction. The next phase of the work involves building a more precise and trustworthy system for expressing what students know and can do in forms that hold value both inside education and beyond it.

Toward a more public language for college learning

Community colleges do not need a cosmetic rewrite of their learning outcomes. They need a stronger public account of how educational aims become demonstrated capability in settings that matter to students, employers, and communities. The outcomes should remain because they express something important about education at its best. They reflect a commitment to forms of learning that exceed narrow job tasks and that should endure across work, community life, and further study. At the same time, those outcomes need companions that make their practical meaning more visible.

That means clearer employer-facing translations, sharper sub-skills, more observable behaviors, more authentic demonstrations, more intelligible levels of performance, and more visible forms of recognition before the final credential is reached. The question is how to build a language and evidentiary structure strong enough to connect educational breadth with labor market intelligibility in a way that remains faithful to the larger purposes of community college education.

If community colleges can do that well, the gains will extend well beyond better wording. Learners will be better equipped to describe their progress with real-world significance. Faculty will have stronger ways to make learning visible beyond the classroom while preserving the depth and breadth of their educational aims. Employers will have stronger grounds for trusting what a milestone or credential represents. The sector, in turn, will be better positioned to show how community college learning connects to opportunity, mobility, and lasting value over time.

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