

MAKING LEARNING VISIBLE BEFORE COMPLETION

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Across the United States, community colleges articulate a remarkably consistent set of institutional learning outcomes. These typically include critical and creative thinking, quantitative reasoning, written and oral communication, information literacy, civic responsibility, and cultural or intercultural competence. While phrased differently from campus to campus, these categories reflect a shared belief about what an educated person should be able to do, regardless of major or career pathway.

Yet these outcomes are usually treated as educational aspirations rather than certifiable skills. They appear in catalogs, accreditation documents, and assessment reports, but rarely function as credentials that students can carry into the labor market. This gap matters because most community college students do not complete their intended degree, and many leave without any formal recognition of the learning they have achieved. For adult learners age 35 and older, whose enrollment patterns are often intermittent and part time, this reality is especially acute.

The challenge facing American community colleges is not whether these learning outcomes matter to employers. It is whether colleges can design programs that translate learning into recognized, portable value, even when a student's educational journey is incomplete.

Community colleges define broad learning outcomes, but only formally recognize learning at degree completion.

The original promise of stackable credentials

The idea of stackable credentials emerged as a response to this challenge. At its core, the concept was meant to reimagine educational progress as cumulative rather than all-or-nothing. Instead of reserving formal recognition for the end of a long degree pathway, stackable models sought to award credentials at meaningful milestones along the way.

In this vision, short-term credentials are not secondary or lesser achievements. They are intentionally designed components of a larger pathway, each with standalone value in the labor market and clear applicability toward more advanced credentials. Micro-credentials and digital badges were introduced as tools to make learning outcomes more visible, particularly for skills that cut across disciplines and occupations.

This model aligns closely with the lived experience of many community college students. Adult learners frequently enroll with immediate employment goals, pause their studies due to life circumstances, and return later when conditions allow. Stackable pathways were intended to ensure that learning accumulated over time rather than being lost when students stop out.

How practice has drifted from purpose

In practice, however, many community college implementations of stackable credentials fall short of this original intent. Too often, institutions describe programs as stackable simply because certificates apply toward associate degrees within the same discipline. While technically accurate, this approach does little to address the needs of students who leave before completing the next formal credential threshold.

In practice, 'stackable' often describes credentials that are renamed, internally defined, and weakly connected to employers.

Similarly, many micro-credential initiatives rely primarily on internal academic judgments rather than external validation. Badges are frequently awarded based on course completion or faculty-defined criteria without systematic engagement with employers. As a result, these credentials may signal academic performance but lack clear labor market meaning.

Another persistent limitation is the separation between credit and non-credit education. Community colleges enroll large numbers of adults in short-term workforce training designed to meet immediate employer needs. Yet these experiences often do not articulate cleanly into credit-bearing programs or credential pathways. Without intentional alignment, students accumulate learning without accumulating credentials that advance them educationally or economically.

Advising and communication gaps further compound these challenges. Even when stackable options exist, students may not understand their value or how they connect to longer-term goals. Employers, meanwhile, may be unaware of new credentials or unsure what they represent.

Reframing learning outcomes as demonstrable skills

The learning outcomes that anchor most community college curricula are frequently described as “soft skills,” yet they are among the most durable and transferable competencies in the labor market. Employers across sectors consistently emphasize the importance of communication, problem solving, quantitative reasoning, and the ability to work effectively in diverse environments.

The issue is not relevance, but recognition. Colleges rarely certify proficiency in these outcomes in ways that are legible to employers. Course grades and transcripts offer indirect signals, but they do not clearly communicate what a student can actually do.

Core learning outcomes can be assessed for demonstrated proficiency and credentialed directly, creating standalone certifications that also stack toward higher credentials.

Reframing institutional learning outcomes as the basis for skill-based credentials would represent a meaningful shift. Rather than treating these outcomes as diffuse qualities developed over time, colleges could define explicit performance expectations, assess them using shared rubrics, and award credentials that certify demonstrated proficiency.

For students who complete substantial coursework but do not earn a degree, this approach offers a powerful alternative. Instead of leaving with only partial credit accumulation, students could earn formal recognition for skills they have demonstrably acquired. These credentials

could stand alone in the labor market while remaining stackable toward future academic goals.

The untapped potential of true stackability

When stackable programs are intentionally designed, evidence suggests they can improve both educational persistence and economic outcomes. Students who earn short-term credentials are more likely to continue their education, more likely to experience wage gains, and more likely to reengage after stopping out. For adult learners, the ability to see tangible returns from incremental progress is often decisive.

True stackability requires more than re-labeling existing programs. It demands alignment across curriculum design, assessment, advising, and employer engagement. Non-credit and credit programs must be integrated rather than parallel. Micro-credentials must be validated externally rather than symbolically. Pathways must be transparent, flexible, and designed around real student behavior rather than idealized trajectories.

When these conditions are met, stackable credentials can function as bridges rather than endpoints. They allow education to adapt to the rhythms of adult life while preserving academic integrity and long-term opportunity.

Conclusion

American community colleges serve a student population whose lives rarely conform to traditional educational timelines. Yet institutional structures often continue to assume linear progression toward a single credential endpoint. The result is a system that leaves too many learners without formal recognition of their learning.

Stackable credentials were intended to address this gap by acknowledging progress incrementally and connecting learning more directly to work. That promise remains largely unrealized, not because the idea is flawed, but because implementation has too often prioritized labeling over redesign.

The broadly shared learning outcomes that define community college education provide a strong foundation for rethinking credentialing. With deliberate design, employer engagement, and aligned assessment, these outcomes could become certifiable skills that carry real value for students who stop out, step away, or move in and out of education over time.

If community colleges can reclaim the original intent of stackable programs, they can ensure that learning always counts, progress is never invisible, and education remains responsive to the realities of adult learners' lives.

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