

Stackable Credentials:

Enhancing Workforce Development



Values Statement:

Today’s young people hold our collective prosperity in their hands. To reach their full potential, we must ensure they have access to what they need — good jobs, living wages, and the ability to upskill or reskill — to achieve financial stability that allows them to thrive.

What is the Opportunity?

Since 2021, college-going rates have decreased significantly by 1.1 percent, and this decline has been consistent since 2019.¹ Despite our commendable overall educational attainment, Colorado’s college-going rates are approximately 10 percent lower than the national average. This is a pressing concern as in 2031, Colorado is projected to have the highest percentage of jobs requiring Bachelor’s degrees in all 50 states.²

Only half of Colorado high school graduates enroll in college.³ Nearly 74,000 young people between 16 and 24 are not in school or working. There is also a predicted upcoming enrollment cliff, which is projected to see a nationwide drop in enrollment of the college-age population beginning in 2025.⁴ **Current higher education pathways are not meeting our young learners’ needs.**

Stackable credentials programs are emerging as a potential opportunity to satisfy employers’ need for workers’ participation in the workforce and workers’ need for flexible educational attainment and living wages.⁵

What are “Stackable Credentials”?

Stackable credentials are part of a sequence of industry-recognized qualifications that students can earn over time to build their skills and advance their careers. They allow learners to take individual courses without enrolling in a full-time college program, making education more flexible and accessible. Students can complete these courses quickly, stacking them vertically to progress towards a degree or certificate or to earn multiple credentials at the same level horizontally.

¹ CDHE. (2023, May 1). Colorado college-going rates continue to decline but at a slower rate. Colorado Department of Higher Education. <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/news-article/colorado-college-going-rates-continue-to-decline-but-at-a-slower-rate>

² Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., & Quinn, M.C. (2023). After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/projections2031/>

³ Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023, May 1). Pathways to Prosperity [Postsecondary Access and Success for Colorado’s High School Graduations] [Report]. https://higher.ed.colorado.gov/publications/Reports/Legislative/PostSecondary/2023_CDHE_Postsecondary_Report.pdf

⁴ Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023, May 1). Pathways to Prosperity [Postsecondary Access and Success for Colorado’s High School Graduations] [Report].

⁵ Austin, J., Mellow, G., Rosin, M., & Seltzer, M. (2012). Portable, stackable credentials: a new education model for industry-specific career pathways. McGraw-Hill Research Foundation. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:59445>



How could stackable credentials address our young adults' educational and workforce needs?

For Individuals:

- **Career Advancement:** Enables individuals to build their qualifications incrementally, making career progression more attainable.
- **Flexibility:** Allows learners to balance education with work and personal responsibilities.
- **Affordability:** Offers a cost-effective approach to higher education by enabling students to pay for more minor, incremental courses.

For Employers:

- **Skilled Workforce:** Provides a steady pipeline of qualified workers with up-to-date skills.
- **Employee Retention:** Supports employee development and loyalty by facilitating continuous learning and career growth.
- **Competency Assurance:** Ensures employees meet industry standards and possess the necessary skills.

For the Economy:

- **Workforce Readiness:** Contributes to a workforce better prepared to meet the evolving demands of the job market.
- **Economic Growth:** Fosters economic development by aligning educational outcomes with industry needs.

Colorado NEEDS a stackable credentials program that meets the needs of its young adults by including the following components:

Industry Partnerships:

- Collaboration with businesses to ensure that credentials meet current market needs.
- Development of clear pathways that link education with employment opportunities.

Comprehensive Support Services:

- Academic advising, career counseling, child care services, and financial aid support to assist students in navigating their educational pathways.
- Employer partnerships that offer internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training.

Recognition and Portability:

- Credentials should be recognized by multiple employers and across different regions.
- Clear articulation agreements between educational institutions to ensure credits transfer seamlessly.

Accessible and Flexible Learning Formats:

- Online, hybrid, and evening/weekend classes to accommodate working learners.
- Modular course design that allows for short-term, intensive learning experiences.

Transparency

- A focus on financial mobility and financial resources for learners.
- Easily accessible information on potential earnings of each field for prospective program participants.



Take Action Now:

- Discover the power of stackable credentials for the workforce development of Colorado's learners—Access YI's comprehensive report on stackable credentials to understand their impact and potential benefits.
- Connect with experts and stakeholders who can provide further insights into stackable credential programs in your jurisdiction. If such programs still need to be established, share this fact sheet with relevant stakeholders to spark discussions and initiatives.
- Identify the groups most impacted by educational barriers and advocate for practices and policies that enhance access and affordability of education and training.

Together, we can create pathways to valuable credentials and empower individuals for career success.

