

REACH
collaborative

RACIAL
EQUITY for
ADULT
CREDENTIALS in
HIGHER ED

CREDENTIALS TO DEGREES PATHWAYS

REACH Collaborative Brief One





WHAT IS THE REACH COLLABORATIVE?

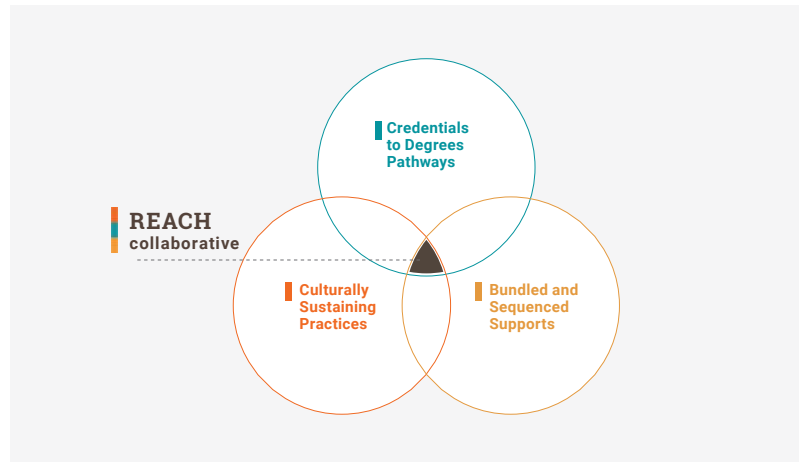
The REACH Collaborative is focused on creating clear paths for more Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults to grow their skills and advance their careers.

Nearly 140 community colleges in states including California, Colorado, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia are developing academic pathways of credentials in sequences that align with associate degree programs, making it possible for adult students of color to pursue better job opportunities in the short term and work toward higher aspirations in the future.

Supported by Lumina Foundation, the REACH Collaborative is set the goal of a 2% increase in credential attainment for enrolled Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults, ages 25-64, at participating community colleges by 2023.

REACH’s three main components—Credentials to Degrees Pathways, Bundled and Sequenced Supports, and Culturally Sustaining Practices—are intentionally designed to work together to support adult students of color, addressing their specific needs and experiences.

This brief focuses on **Credentials to Degrees Pathways** and the factors that should be considered when prioritizing adult learners of color.



It will look at:

- **Determining Credential Value**
- **Using Data in Pathway Selection**
- **Engaging External Partners**
- **Recognizing Prior Learning**

REACH Key Terms and Definitions

These definitions were collected from multiple postsecondary education, workforce, and government sources.

Non-degree Credential: Credentials for which the coursework, validated by employers within the in-demand, high-wage occupations, signal the necessary skills and expertise for hiring and can be demonstrated through an industry-recognized non-credit or credit credential.

Micro-credentials: Micro-credentials are shorter programs of study that are narrowly focused on specific skills in a chosen field. Micro-credentials that connect to industry-recognized credentials are relevant for REACH Collaborative pathways.

Stackable Credential Programs: Credentials that can be mapped in a sequence that allows students to build their qualifications and move on a career pathway toward higher-paying jobs. Each credential is shorter in duration than an associate degree, has labor market value, and is part of a clear progression to completion of a degree.

In-demand Industries: Industries where the occupations display high rates of projected growth, have a frequency of job postings, have a high concentration of job postings, have a high concentration of jobs in the local region, and are aligned with emerging technologies.

Living Wage Occupations: Occupations in which workers can earn enough to meet their basic needs (food, shelter, transportation, healthcare).

High Wage Occupations: Occupations paying at least 50% more than the overall average wage.

CIP Code: Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes developed by the US Department of Education which colleges and universities across the country assign to their academic courses, programs, certificates, and degrees.

SOC Code: Standard Occupations Classifications (SOC) codes used by federal agencies to classify workers into occupational categories for the purpose of collecting, calculating, or disseminating data.

Learning Recognition: The process of awarding value to experiential learning that occurred outside of an educational environment, assessed through various methods, to count toward credentials or degrees.

REACH COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS:





CREDENTIALS TO DEGREES PATHWAYS

UNLOCKING THE VALUE OF CREDENTIALS

While most high-level professional occupations still require degrees, there is a growing movement in many fields toward recognizing non-degree credentials as proof of learning and skill development. This represents a promising trend, particularly for adults whose employment was impacted by the pandemic and who want to start pursuing better opportunities as soon as possible.

According to a 2020 survey by Strada Education Network, one in five American adults surveyed said they planned to enroll in an education program in the next six months. More adults said they would prefer to pursue a non-degree credential than an associate or bachelor's degree, emphasizing value or benefit to job or career advancement as the main reason (Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey, 2020).

Unfortunately, there is no clear, consistent way to be sure credentials actually have value across the board. As Lumina Foundation highlighted in a report on credentialing, there are more than 4,000 certification bodies in the United States and less than 10% are accredited or reviewed by a third party (Untitled, n.d.). By aligning short-term credentials with established associate degree programs and the skills which are developed in those programs, however, there is a greater assurance of quality. It is also important to engage employers in the process to verify that skills developed in these Credentials to Degrees Pathways meet skill demands and are preparing students for their desired jobs.

PATHWAYS SELECTION

Community colleges in the REACH Collaborative will create between four and eight Credentials to Degrees Pathways, leveraging existing associate degree programs and, where appropriate, any industry-

recognized, non-degree credentials they may already offer. With an overarching goal of achieving greater economic mobility for adults of color, the process for selecting these academic pathways must be data-informed, taking into account factors of demand, growth, and wage.

Labor Market Data

How educational offerings align with the labor market is a story only data can tell. Once a list of possible credentials is created, digging into the latest numbers through data sources like EMSI or going directly to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website will help to rank and narrow down the options. A Cost of Living Calculator, like the one developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), is also a useful tool for determining the most viable Credentials to Degrees Pathways that lead to jobs offering a family-thriving wage.

Guiding Questions for Labor Market Analysis:

DEMAND

- What are the **largest industry sectors** in your state or region?
- What are the **in-demand occupations** within those industries?
- What are the **highest level occupations** within those industries that require some college?
- What **21st century and technical skills** are employers seeking in your region?

WAGE

- Do occupations within those industries **provide a living wage**?
- Do they create a path to occupations that **provide a high wage**?

GROWTH

- Which **high wage jobs are projected to grow** over the next five years?
- Which living wage jobs that require a bachelor's degree **align with associate degree programs**?



Demographic Data

In addition to supporting adults of color in entering or advancing their careers in growth industries, the REACH Collaborative aims to address the underrepresentation that is inherent in many professional fields. Demographic data should be collected to supplement labor market data, identify racial inequities within a specific state or region, and select the optimal pathways to offer adult students of color in that location. It will also help to inform decisions about focusing efforts on specific adult populations within the context of local demographics.

Guiding Questions for Exploring Demographic Data

- What are the **unemployment rates** disaggregated by race in the region? If cross-referenced with overall unemployment, are any of them disproportional?
- What are the **education attainment rates** in the region disaggregated by race and separated by finished high school, some college, associate degree, and bachelor's degree?
- What are the **college's enrollment rates** disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and age? Who is currently being served at the institution?
- What is enrollment by race, ethnicity, and age for **academic programs** at the college that map to the list of occupations for potential credential pathways?*

*Occupations can be mapped to academic programs with a CIP SOC Crosswalk. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) offers a crosswalk tool that matches 6-digit CIP Codes from the 2020 Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) with 6-digit detailed descriptions from the 2018 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC).

CONSIDERING CONTEXT

Data is crucial to the pathways selection process, but it is only part of the equation. Institution and region-specific contextual factors should also be considered as they could impact the success of Credentials to Degrees Pathways.

- What kinds of **space, equipment, or other resource needs** will there be for these pathways?
- What are the **delivery methods** for this instruction?
- Are there **enough available faculty** to teach the courses in the pathways?

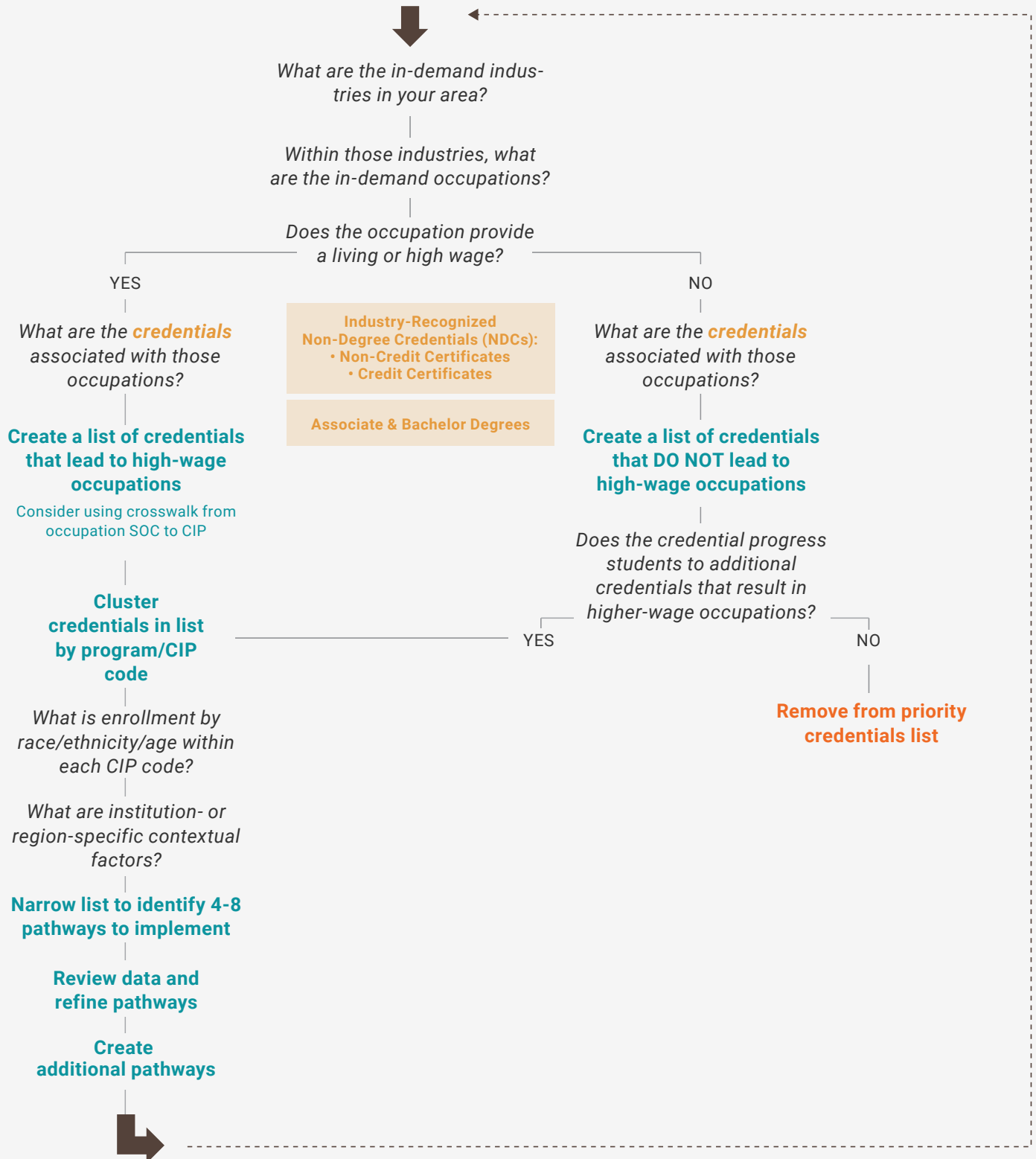
IN PERFECT ALIGNMENT

It is not uncommon for colleges to have an associate degree and stackable credential programs that correspond to the same career path with the same development of skills—but with courses sequenced in very different orders.

For the Credentials to Degrees Pathways, it is important to ensure that not only are credentials placed in the right sequence for skill-building but that the skills acquired line up with the associate degree program and job roles with progressively higher wages.

Credential Pathways

IDENTIFY, SELECT, IMPLEMENT, REFINE, SCALE





RECOGNIZING PRIOR LEARNING

Adult students of color bring a wealth of knowledge and prior learning with them to college, from their previous experiences in the classroom, in the workplace, and in their communities. Not only will recognizing that learning in the Credential to Degrees Pathways shorten the time it will take them to earn credentials, but it will also make them more likely to stay on the path to an associate degree. A 2020 report by the Center for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) found that the likelihood of an adult student's credential completion increased by more than 17% when prior learning assessment or Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) was offered. This impact was significant and, in some cases, even greater for Hispanic students (24%), Black students (14%), and community college students (25%) (Klein et al., n.d.).

Learning recognition can be assessed in multiple ways and by campus staff or external evaluators. Among these methods are standardized exams like the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), credit for military service, and individualized assessments, where students present a portfolio or other demonstration of their work to be evaluated by faculty. Depending on which of these methods institutions choose to adopt, implementation can look different, but there are some uniform actions that should be taken to help ensure success, particularly within the creation of Credentials to Degrees Pathways.

The Credentials to Degrees Pathways steps include:

- ➔ Developing **clearly defined agreements and processes** for how learning will be assessed and recognition awarded from the point of enrollment and within the sequence of credentials.
- ➔ Ensuring **messaging about learning recognition is incorporated in advertisement of the pathways** so prospective students know the option exists.
- ➔ Providing **professional development to advisors and pathway navigators** on how the institution will offer learning recognition to students in these pathways, so they make students aware of it.

ENGAGING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Community colleges are leading the work of the REACH Collaborative, identifying and developing the Credentials to Degrees Pathways. Employer, workforce, and community partnerships will play an important role in ensuring these efforts are successful.

EMPLOYERS

Employers know best what skills are necessary for specific occupations. Once pathways are selected, local employers in aligned industries should be contacted to verify that the knowledge acquired in the sequence of credentials meets job requirements. Once employers understand how the pathways will benefit their needs—providing a more diverse, skilled talent pool—there is an opportunity to further engage them in developing job and internship pipelines for adult students of color who enroll in the pathways.

WORKFORCE LEADERS

State and regional workforce development agencies and chambers of commerce can offer deeper, more localized labor market information to supplement national data that be valuable in the final selection of Credential to Associates Pathways. They can also help spread the word to employers and encourage them to engage with participating colleges.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Once Credentials to Associates Pathways are in place, the focus will shift to marketing the pathways to adults of color in the area. Community-based organizations, particularly ones with roots in the Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities, can help to promote the opportunity to individuals who are looking to grow their skills and improve their access to better professional opportunities.



SET UP FOR SUCCESS

Context is key for creating effective Credentials to Degrees Pathways. Efforts should be customized to work for your college and community with a clear understanding of what is possible and what is already being done. In addition to the guiding questions throughout this brief that focus on exploring demographic data, analyzing labor market data, and identifying factors specific to pathways and region, here are some key considerations for assessing your institution's current efforts and overall capacity to do this work.

- How does your institution define **non-degree credentials**? What types of non-degree credential programs are currently being offered to students?
- How does your institution define **credit for prior learning**? Is it something that is currently being offered to students? Where are there opportunities to expand or systematize credit for prior learning?
- Does your institution currently collect **demographic data for students** in credit and non-credit programs? Does your institution currently disaggregate student data by age and race? If so, how is it used? If not, which partners at your institution would need to be part of an effort to develop these data systems?
- Who **at your institution** should be involved in designing and implementing Credentials to Associates Pathways?
- Who would you need to engage **outside of your institution**? Are there existing relationships or partnerships in the community that could be leveraged?
- How would these **pathways align** with other efforts that are underway at your institution? Is there potential synergy that could be harnessed? Conversely, are there possible barriers that can be proactively addressed?

STATE HIGHLIGHTS



North Carolina NC Workforce Credentials

In developing their credential pathways, REACH Collaborative colleges are focusing on credentials that are both high-value and industry-recognized. For participating institutions in North Carolina, there is already a research-based process in place that can be leveraged to support these efforts.

The NC Workforce Credentials initiative—a joint partnership of myFutureNC, the governor’s office, the community college system, and commerce and workforce development entities—was created to address a growing disparity in talent needs and level of education. Currently, two-thirds of jobs across the state require a high-quality credential or degree while roughly half of all North Carolinians, ages 25 to 44, have earned one. More than 50% of NC employers reported having difficulty hiring qualified staff, citing employability skills, technical skills, and overall education.

Community colleges, workforce boards, and career and technical education (CTE) directors at high schools can submit non-degree credentials to be evaluated. An advisory board comprised of 21 employers, educators, and state agency representatives then review them, assessing a number of factors including average wage, growth rate, and total number of job openings. Credentials associated with occupations in 10 in-demand sectors that lead to sustainable wage careers and that employers identified as a hiring preference are added to a priority credential list. Another six sectors are currently being analyzed for addition to the list, a valuable resource for the state’s REACH colleges that are including the identified credentials in their pathways.

The focus of REACH is to increase adult credentialing to meet the need to close the achievement gap. This work is directly connected because, by having a validated list, students, schools, and employers are better prepared to understand the value attached to credentials.

Cynthia Liston, MyFutureNC

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