

The current education system relies heavily on traditional degrees, limiting adult learners and disproportionately affecting people of color. Employers value 21st-century skills, but confusion persists due to the proliferation of diverse credentials. Guest Melissa Goldberg joins Episode 41 of Ready for Work to showcase [Credentials As You Go](#). This framework provides the redesign needed for economic realities, equity, and clarification, with implications for politics and workforce preparation.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 41



Melissa Goldberg,
Director of Competencies and Credentials
[Credentials As You Go](#)
[Corporation for a Skilled Workforce](#)
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Links and Resources

- [Episode 41 of Podcast](#)
- [Credentials As You Go](#)
- [ACT Center for Equity in Learning and Overview Video](#)
- [Credentialing Research on ACT WorkKeys](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 41

Jingle Open with Music: [Let's Get Ready for Work](#)

Melissa Goldberg: We have a mission to inform and facilitate the development of a nationally adopted incremental credentialing ecosystem that improves education and employment outcomes for all learners.

Jasen Jones: Melissa Goldberg from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce introduces us to Credentials As You Go coming up on Episode 41.

Podcast Open: [Ready for Work](#) is a podcast from ACT spotlighting excellence and innovation throughout the workforce ecosystem. Jasen Jones hosts this journey with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential. Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: In the field of workforce development, we put a high value on human capital and often refer to skills as currency. We can package skills into credentials and generate momentum for career pathway advancement, but nationally we still miss the mark and have numerous gaps to close.

Joining us on Episode 41, Melissa Goldberg is the Director of Competencies and Credentials at the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. She leads efforts to increase economic mobility for low-wage workers and address racial disparities by dramatically expanding the use of competencies and non-degree credentials.

To begin our discussion, Melissa, let's address some of the most prominent challenges our ecosystem faces in the current state of credentialing.

Melissa: Definitely. No, absolutely. And it's such an important question, Jasen, and so I would say that the differentials of education and outcome between those who do and don't have a college degree are significant, as we've seen in lots of research. And so, for too many learners, the only post-secondary credentials that count for employment are degrees. And our four-tiered system associates, bachelors, master's and doctorate is just becoming outdated and doesn't acknowledge the needs of adult learners who need to focus on work, family and other obligations. And this focus on degrees limits those who attend college but don't earn a degree as well. So, some required skills and knowledge through life and work experienced and often treating these folks as if they have no post-secondary level learning at all. And so, I'd argue we need to redesign our current system to reflect kind of the realities of our economy and the needs of these learners. It's also an equity issue. The 2020 Census tells us that 52% of the adults in the US have no college credential. And according to the National Student Clearinghouse, over 40 million Americans have some college but no credential. And that equates to one in six adults in the US. And of those with a college degree, 71% are white adults, which is a huge differential compared to black and Latino adults. And then if we dive deeper into the demographics a little bit there are clear differences between learners of color in their access to completing credentials in higher education compared to white students and the largest proportion of those with some college and no credential or black adults who also carry the highest debt load. And while 53% of white adults are degreed, only 39% of black adults and 30% of Latina adults are degreed as well. And then add to that the workforce is just changing. And so, while employers still certainly need industry specific knowledge and skills, they're increasingly valuing those 21st century skills as well. And so even despite the shortages in many sectors, some employers still struggle to find workers. And often it's because the knowledge and skills that are needed aren't well documented. And so that skill

dilemma about what skills are needed, which industry sectors, job levels and who provides them has really important implications for workforce preparation and credentialing and then of course, there's the explosion of all these different kinds of credentials. And it's creating so much confusion in the marketplace. Right? Credential engine found there are more than a million unique credentials awarded by all these different types of providers. And so, there's lots of misunderstanding as to what these new and different credentials are and what they stand for. And so, I'll just take it a little further and say that this new language, different terms, carry different meanings for different people. So, for example, at the Credential As you Go website, we feature a dictionary of terms related to incremental credentialing, and the dictionary contains six different definitions for the word micro credentials, five for the word certificate, and ten for the term badge, all from reputable and well recognized organizations. And so, because of this, learners, employers, educators often question the validity of these various credentials. And so, it's so important to clarify how they've been developed, who's been involved, what competencies are demonstrated and how. Yeah, how all of it is validated. And, you know, we're kind of up against a well-established, entrenched system. So, it takes work to make that change. And the only other point I'll make is just their implications for the political climate as well. With respect to the recent SCOTUS decision on affirmative action and state policy requirements. And they all have implications on these credentialing efforts that are really designed to address occupational segregation. And some of them are; and bring in members of minoritized populations. And so, we have to just rethink our whole approach to this work.

Jasen: That was incredibly helpful, Melissa. Your summary provided a clear snapshot of the environmental landscape. What direction should we be thinking about when it comes to rallying the resources to tackle these issues?

Melissa: yes, I definitely think there are things that we can be doing to address this. We need to rethink how we're approaching credentialing. Right. And so, as part of my work, I'm involved with this national movement called Credential As You Go, and we're working to address that. The challenges that I just laid out and the work is really centered around what we refer to as incremental credentials, which refer to all types of credentials that formally document learning and including things like certificates, badges, medical credentials, degrees, apprenticeships, licenses, all sorts of non-degree credentials and incremental credentials can be non-credit credit bearing undergraduate at graduate or at any level in industry and any size. And through this lens of incremental credentials, there are a number of ways that we're working to address the challenges. So, the first is and this is a big statement, but I'll just put it out there, is that we have to be mindful about ensuring equity in the learning work ecosystem. And so, considering all these

various different ways that people are acquiring, learning and be sure to validate that and credential that, the next is the policy environment. We need to develop policy and practice reforms that support incremental credentialing and support, putting those in place and so on. And there is we need there's a need for guidance on the infrastructure to support these kinds of credential and credentialing systems. And then I had mentioned before that people are confused and don't know what the credentials stand for. And so, we really need to focus in on trust and quality and integrity of incremental credentials and ensure that and ensure that it's well communicated.

The folks that are looking to build incremental credentials need to have access to professional development to know how to do it, and the implementation work needs to be supported and informed by research and they there is a national campaign to support increased awareness of and value placed upon incremental credentials. And it's just so important to get the word out and to use very clear language. And ultimately, I mean, it's my hope that the incremental credentialing of using all of these various tools in this framework become ubiquitous and available to all learners.

Jasen: To help us think holistically about a framework of recommendations, what is the backstory on the partnerships and progress to this point?

Melissa: Yeah. So, credentials, you'd go with a national movement and it's co-led by my colleague Dan Travers at SUNY Empire State University, Holly Danville, formerly of Lumina, and now with George Washington University. Me. And we have a mission to inform and facilitate the development of a nationally adopted incremental credentialing ecosystem that improves education and employment outcomes for all learners. And this idea that learners are at the center in incremental credentialing, as I mentioned, but it seals learning into qualifications that are recognizable, transferable and usable to gain sustained employment and continue education. And we need a post-secondary system that captures and validates all of that uncounted learning to enable all individuals to be recognized for what they know and can do. And so, we envision an incremental credentialing ecosystem in which all learners are recognized for what they know and can do as they acquire learning from multiple sources that the meaning of those credentials will be understood by learners, by employers and educational institutions, that learners will be able to earn credentials to fit their needs and inform their education, career planning and job transitions. And the credential will be used by employers in hiring and advancement and recognized within the post-secondary ecosystem as counting toward further learning. And so just a little bit more background here could actually go began in 2019 with the planning grant from Lumina to pilot

incremental credentialing work with public institutions in New York State and research the use of incremental credentialing nationally. And the result was the creation of a framework and incremental credentialing framework that involved six different approaches. And it's all about learning as you go and adding specialties or specializing as you go stacking, building and stackable credentials that add together to larger credentials. The idea of building. We refer to it as transfer as you go, but designed to transfer one from one institution to another partner. As you go to prepare for and embed field expenses and expected credentials for work and developed in partnership with business and industry and then get to award as you go. This whole notion that people have all this learning and going back and providing a credential for that. And so, building on that initial work and framework in 2021, we were awarded a three year grant from the US Department of Education to further prototype. And we're now in three states Colorado, New York and North Carolina, engaging and engaging in a research study. And the 20 plus institutions in these three states have designed over 100 new incremental credentials, and many of them have been launched already and have students in them. And the states Colorado, New York, North Carolina have all developed different policies working to enable this kind of a system. So, we're gathering information now about what it takes to build these, and what the outcomes look like for learners. And the last thing I'll say, is that last year we received a grant from Walmart, too, which has allowed us to expand and scale the work. And so, we have a network of over 60 members of state systems, public and private post-secondary institutions and other types of credentialing organizations, all working on designing, developing, rolling out incremental credentials. And the purpose of that work is to create this opportunity for people to learn from one another and just one more thing related to this. It's in addition to all this to get this message out. So, we have a network, but we also have a large advisory board of about 140 national experts who represent all aspects of the learning and work ecosystem. And they advise on everything that we're doing at Credential to go, including devising effective messaging and helping to disseminate. So getting back to your question, I think we all know that this is a new way of getting up, doing the work right. And so it can really it can really help to leverage and learn from the work that's already underway. And so part of what we've been trying to do is catalyze that work and make it available to policymakers or practitioners that are interested in creating a fairer learning work ecosystem. And so, one thing we've done is we've posted a series of case studies on various types of incremental credentials that have been created which describe not only what the credential is, but why they were developed, who the target learners are, who is involved in the development and some lessons learned. And those are all available for people to take a look at and read. We've also written and posted a series of playbooks, and so right now they're eight and

we have a number more that are on the way and they are on topics that deal with defining incremental credentialing, identifying policies, enabling incremental credentials, using the Framework, DEI issues associated with this technology, issues, and marketing communications. And these are really built kind of this how to guides. And so, they give some context. They give examples. They have a series of questions for, say, institutions to consider when they're building incremental credentials. They have examples of how others have done that as well. And in some cases, they have templates that can be deployed and used as well. And then we posted a set of a national topics related to incremental credentials and things like what we were talking about earlier, the use of language and all those different meanings, higher education inequality. We had one recently on embedding certifications in academic programs. And so all of this information is available for folks to use both on the developing the incremental credential side themselves, but also, we have information around different state policy arms that have been developed.

Jasen: The playbooks are fantastic, and I truly appreciate the how-to guides. And the valuable context for each of us playing in the sand box of the workforce ecosystems. The self-assessment reflection aspects are beneficial as well. I'm genuinely excited about the framework's practicality. We all recognize the value of credentialing, but how might we take it from good to great. For those in our audience eager to embrace this powerful work, Melissa, how might we connect and learn more?

Melissa: Oh, sure. So, I have a number of ways I would suggest. One is to go to the credential as you Go website, which is credential as you go dot org. Another is to sign up for the credential as you go on newsletter. When you're out there at the website, you'll see a newsletter sign up and to follow us on LinkedIn as well. I would also say going to the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce website, which is skilled workforce, and we have our own newsletter as well and we describe a number I spent a lot of time talking about credentials to go today, but we are working on a number of initiatives around credential being that we describe at the website. And of course, please feel free to send me an email at M Goldberg Skilled work dot org. We'd love to hear from you.

Jasen: I've long been a fan of CSW's work, especially the benchmarking networks. I learned so much by participating in the original Missouri pilot. It's truly fascinating to witness the evolution of this work over the past couple of decades. The value of these benchmarking resources is unmistakably evident in the ongoing work to establish a credible credentialing system.

Melissa: Yes. Yes. And I'll just say that just for those that don't aren't familiar with Corporation for Skilled Workforce or CSW, that we really work to catalyze different educational in and labor market policies and practices and then increase economic mobility, particularly for people of color and others who have historically been excluded from success. And so, I would encourage your listeners to come and check out, as you mentioned, the Workforce Benchmarking Network. We do work in lots of different states and regions around policy change. We have our newest area of work is really around addressing trauma and resilience at work. And of course, we have a very robust research and evaluation set of work as well so that all of our work is really informed by data.

Jasen: This integration is powerful, and it makes sense how the pieces come together to address the challenges of 2023 and beyond. Melissa, thank you so much for sharing your time and expertise on Ready for Work.

Melissa: Thank you for including me, Jasen. It was fun.

Jasen: Check out our show notes for Episode 41 for links to Credentials As You Go as well as the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce. You won't want to miss out on the tools and resources to assist in developing and implementing incremental credentials.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!