

Credential As You Go—What Have We Learned?

Nan L. Travers, Co-Lead, Credential As You Go, USA

Credential As You Go (CAYG, www.credentialasyougo.org) was a national, multi-year research and development initiative designed to transform the U.S. postsecondary credentialing system from a predominantly degree-centric model to an incremental credentialing system that recognizes learning in smaller, stackable, and meaningful units. The project combined system-level infrastructure development, institutional implementation, applied research, and national dissemination to assess the feasibility and potential impact of an incremental credentialing system.

Over seven years, CAYG established a robust national infrastructure to support incremental credentialing. This included formation of a 132-member National Advisory Board representing education, workforce, policy, industry, and research stakeholders; development of a 54-member Credential As You Go Network spanning eight state systems, 44 institutions, two credentialing organizations, and 22 states, and launch of a comprehensive public website housing the Incremental Credentialing Framework, Playbooks, research products, and tools.

CAYG invested heavily in capacity building and professional learning, providing ongoing technical assistance, steering committee meetings, cross-state convenings, webinars, virtual conferences, Playbooks, and learning communities. These activities supported institutions and systems in revising policies, developing articulation agreements, implementing technology solutions (e.g., student information system, degree audit, and auto-award functionality), and aligning incremental credentials with workforce and learner needs. Parallel efforts analyzed state and national policy landscapes, technology ecosystems, and related initiatives to situate incremental credentialing within broader education-to-work systems, including the initial development of the Learn and Work Ecosystem Library. Across the project period, institutions developed 183 incremental credentials (158 with enrollment data), spanning credit and noncredit offerings at undergraduate and graduate levels.

The research examined the feasibility of incremental credentialing and learner outcomes. Focus groups and interviews with institutional leaders and a learner survey provided insights into supports and constraints in implementing incremental credentials. Based on these findings, the Incremental Credentialing Self-Assessment and Planning Tool was developed (open-source on the website) to assist educational systems and institutions determine where they are and what still needs to be in place to sustain incremental credentials.

The learner outcomes research used a comparative interrupted time-series (CITS) analysis of learner outcomes (enrollment, persistence, progress, and completion) using multiple years of learner-level data. Findings indicated that while enrollment and completion numbers declined relative to baseline credentials, persistence and progress outcomes improved for learners enrolled in incremental credentials. These results suggest stronger learner engagement and momentum once enrolled, with completion expected to lag due to time-to-award. Because of matched data requirements of CITS analyses, only 10% of the credentials could be used; the remaining credentials were too variable in structure and enrollments. This highlighted the limitations of traditional linear analytics for capturing the multi-dimensional nature of incremental credentials, underscoring the need for more advanced analytic approaches.

Overall, CAYG demonstrates that systemic transformation toward incremental credentialing is feasible, requires coordinated policy, practice, and infrastructure changes, and yields early positive outcomes in learner persistence and progress. The project provides a scalable framework, evidence base, and set of tools to support continued national adoption and long-term improvements in education and workforce outcomes.

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