

# Stackable Credentials Executive Bulleted Research Brief (EBRB)



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### What is a stackable credential?

- A way to recognize incremental completion via credentials for certain skills or levels of a full certification program
- As the name implies, these credentials signify competency in discrete skill or knowledge areas within the full “stack” of credentials that comprise a whole certification
- The “stacking” of credentials allows for a certification program to break up its full scope of training into sections or levels – credentials higher in the “stack” represent more complex knowledge that builds on credentials lower in the “stack”

### How is a stackable credential used?

- Utilizing stacked credentials can help professionals to grow their career in a more accessible way or earn more for their skills
- Employers can look to employees’ stacked credentials when deciding how to train, place, or promote o Currently, stackable credentials are most often offered via colleges/universities; not much
- information on professional organizations that are implementing stackable credentials

### How is a stackable credential developed?

The most commonly cited way is to base each stackable credential on competencies that are utilized for specific job roles.

### Executive bulleted research findings

- “There is not yet strong evidence that stackable credentials increase student earning potential or chances for completion. However, there are reasons to be hopeful. A [recent study](#) by the Census Bureau found that people with certifications and licenses **earn more** than those without those credentials. Additional [research](#) on student progression and completion has shown that awards can help **build momentum towards completion.**”
- Recent [research has shown](#) that, while there is a lot of variation across states and field of study, **many short-term certificates lack labor market returns.** These certificates can become an “accounting gimmick” to make it seem like the system is producing more credentials with no substantive change. And with **no formal guidance the pathways can also be even more confusing** for students who don’t understand the sequencing.”
- “Include intrusive advising: While stackable credentials are meant to be intuitive for students, this is not always the case. **Institutions need to ensure that students are aware of the opportunities and benefits of additional education** along the pathway.”



**Key Take-Away:** While there are benefits to earning certifications, creating stackable credentials presents the challenges of how to add value to each incremental step and how to advise stackable credential earners.

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- “Stackable credential is particularly suitable for [non-traditional students](#) **balancing their education with other responsibilities** like full-time jobs.”
- “Employers are showing trends of [paying more attention](#) to those levels of education and completion.”



**Key Take-Away:** Stackable credentials can be beneficial to both students and employers.

- “In one [recent survey](#) of 114 human resources managers across various industries, only 5 percent said they weren't interested in digital badges at all... **Sixty-two percent of the respondents said they were interested in badges but also needed to learn more about them.**”
- “**Ability to demonstrate extra learning beyond the classroom**”: employers rated this ability as 4.60 out of 5.00 (very important)
- “Most significant result from this test is that the ability to demonstrate **extra learning beyond the classroom** was grouped with college courses as the most important collegiate experiences. This indicates there is **value to students for earning digital badges beyond their college courses**”



**Key Take-Away:** Current trends point to the value of credentials, although more research must be done on how stackable credentials will add value beyond a full certification.

- “Recent data indicates that professional certifications, licenses, and educational certificates **have labor market value**, especially for people without a bachelor’s degree and **people with professional degrees.**”
- “This growing number of “**non-traditional students**”—including returning veterans; dislocated workers; and youth and adults with limited education, English, skills, or work experience—often have family and work responsibilities that cause them to stop out of school and **fail to return to complete credentials.**”
- “States and colleges are creating **foundational “lattice” certificates** that students can use as **launch pads for multiple pathways in related occupational fields.**”
- “Some of these foundational certificate programs are designed to help high school students and others exploring career options get an exposure to a career field before committing to an extended course of study in that field.”



**Key Take-Away:** Stackable credentials can be of particular help to professionals who face certain challenges, such as other responsibilities or lack of information about a field.

- “**Vertical Stacking**... credentials in a hierarchy -- with one level building on another, enabling the learner to progress toward a higher degree.”
- “**Horizontal Stacking**... learners expand their subject matter expertise by earning credentials in related fields that, collectively, prepare each person for a specific type of job.”
- “**Value-Added Stacking**. Combining the concepts of vertical and horizontal credential stacking... a learner adds an area of expertise to an existing two- or four-year degree with shorter-term credentials to prepare for a specific type of job.”



**Key Take-Away:** There are different ways to stack credentials to accommodate various depths and breadths of knowledge.

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- “The power of the stackable credential approach is that in re-starting their education **students aren’t required to make a huge commitment from the outset**. Minimal effort is required to get the ball rolling.”
- “In today’s volatile global economy, where ebbs and flows of regional economies are unpredictable and reverberate globally, where entire industries or regional economies can disappear in a decade, and where emerging economic powerhouses can appear seemingly overnight, there are **real advantages to choosing a short-term certificate program.**”



**Key Take-Away:** The fast pace of our modern world may create a need for stackable credentials.

## Points of reference

- <https://evollution.com/opinions/remember-building-stackable-credentials/>
- <http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2016-04-12/stackable-credential-options-rise-in-online-education>
- <http://crl.acrl.org/content/early/2015/05/11/crl15-712.full.pdf+html>
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