CLASP Releases Paper on Strategies to Create Stackable Credentials

The Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) recently released the paper Scaling "Stackable Credentials": Implications for Implementation and Policy by Evelyn Ganzglass. For the purpose of her study, the author uses the Department of Labor’s definition of "stackable credentials as "part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs."

In today’s unstable economy, there has been a focus on stackable credits, and their effects on workers’ and students’ economic viability and mobility. Workers with higher levels of education and credentials are generally positioned to rebound more quickly during economic downturns. Ganzglass sees stackable credits as “potentially transferable currency that can help people progress in our multi-layered education, training, and credentialing system without having to start over as their needs and interests change.” She explored reforms in policies and practices to address some of the barriers to attaining educational and occupational credentials. Ganzglass also discusses the strategies being used to create stackable credentials, a principal feature of career pathways, in the states where data was gathered—Kentucky, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Career pathways systems, as the report indicates, “connect progressive levels of education, training, and supportive services in specific sectors or cross-sector occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals ... in securing marketable credentials, family-supporting employment, and further education and employment opportunities.” The report underscores the increased importance that policymakers, such as National Governors Association members, place on stackable credentialing in response to the president’s challenge that all Americans complete some postsecondary schooling as a requisite for entering and staying in the middle class.

The paper reveals that the four states and their local area colleges studied are increasing credential attainment in a variety of ways. The findings are not intended to be representative of all efforts, but rather to serve as a kind of window into the diverse developments and emerging approaches to stacking credentials and their associated implementation challenges. Ganzglass describes five strategies to help students, workers, and job seekers overcome obstacles to attaining stackable credentials:

1. ”Modularize existing applied associate degree and technical diploma programs;”
2. “Embed existing industry and professional certifications in career and technical programs;”
3. “Streamline and scale processes for awarding credit for learning represented by non-collegiate credentials;”
4. “Create ‘lattice credentials’ that allow students to move both up to a career ladder within an occupational field or across multiple pathways in a career lattice; and
5. Create dual enrollment options that enable students to work concurrently toward a high school diploma or its equivalency, marketable postsecondary credentials and industry certifications.”

While stackable credentials as a best practice is still in the early stages of development, it appears to be worth pursuing as potentially “transferable currency” that will allow
The Importance of Early Learning for College and Career Readiness

In last week’s OCTAE Connection, we featured ACT’s efforts to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college and a career. Further in its focus on the effect of readiness on degree completion, ACT has investigated the relationship between readiness and early childhood learning. The results were published in its 2013 study College and Career Readiness: The Importance of Early Learning, which concludes that we as a nation “are far from achieving this goal” of universal readiness.

This lack of readiness is more prevalent among economically disadvantaged students. In 2012, in states where all 11th-graders took the ACT assessment, only 45 percent of low-income students met the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in English. For reading, 30 percent met the benchmark, while in mathematics, 21 percent did, and in science, 13 percent did.

The gaps between disadvantaged students and their more-advantaged counterparts “appear early in childhood,” with large numbers of disadvantaged students entering kindergarten behind their more-advantaged peers. These findings pose a challenge for intervention models that assume that only approximately 5 percent of students need long-term remedial assistance and approximately 15 percent need shorter-term intervention. In situations where the “great majority of students are academically behind and need major assistance, the regular academic program must be upgraded to deliver a richer curriculum to all students.”

This intensive assistance is imperative because, without a good start, students will not succeed to their potential as they continue through school. Students need a good start because: (1) learning takes time, (2) learning is cumulative, (3) their interests often begin to develop in kindergarten and the early elementary grades, and (4) remediating them in middle and high school is difficult. A good start in reading and mathematics, a curriculum rich in content, and activities that foster good academic and social behaviors are key components of a strong early learning program, according to ACT.

After discussing barriers to strengthening early learning, the report maintains that in the early grades it involves “not a flurry of disconnected initiatives, but a sustained, coherent, coordinated effort” to improve practices in the classroom. Implementing the components of an early learning program adequate to meeting the needs of disadvantaged students is arduous. It requires sustained district-wide effort to promote public opinion on behalf of its importance for the long term. Therefore, the report argues, school leaders and policymakers must strive to ensure that the public (1) recognizes the vital importance of early learning, (2) has a general knowledge of and is prepared to insist on the teaching of knowledge and skills that enhance early learning, (3) is aware of and does not support policies that are barriers to early learning, and (4) to the contrary, supports a robust “system” that focuses on sound early learning policies and practices.
Remember to check out the OCTAE Blog: http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/ovae/