

Building a Vision of Opportunity for All Tennesseans: Measuring Credential and Degree Outcomes

Tennesseans want an education that prepares them for a career. In fact, a 2023 poll conducted by the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) revealed that Tennesseans believe the primary purpose of an education is to prepare students for career success. However, the same polling data reveal a majority of young Tennesseans question whether the education system adequately prepares them with the skills, knowledge and credentialing to succeed in the job market.

At the same time, Tennessee has seen persistent and significant economic development and job growth — creating more career opportunities for students. But to seize these opportunities, students must be prepared. **We must do more to ensure all Tennessee students receive the education experiences needed for careers that enable economic independence and also meet the growing workforce demands and economic dynamics of our state.**

Today, Tennessee lacks a common set of expectations for the outcomes students have after completing education and workforce training. **Correcting the misalignment between education and career success starts by establishing what success looks like.** By closely examining outcomes like earnings, job outlook and more, we can better understand which degrees and credentials lead to high-wage, high-demand jobs that are most likely to support students in careers that enable economic independence.

We can then use those insights to guide state policies, practices and investments to ensure more students have access to those opportunities. Most importantly, we can better advise students — in high school, in industry training, and at colleges and universities — to earn credentials that will launch them into fulfilling, economically sustainable careers that also support Tennessee’s economic development and prosperity.

Recognizing the need to more closely examine how current credentials and degrees open up greater economic opportunity and independence for students, **SCORE engaged in a learning journey over the past several months to study how Tennessee could better understand the impact of degrees and credentials on student outcomes and Tennessee workforce outcomes.** We brought together key stakeholders — education leaders, industry leaders, student support organizations and policymakers — to consider how Tennessee could measure this impact. We looked at how other states have pursued similar goals and discussed how best to align on the right approach for our state. This memo outlines our learnings so far.

Ultimately, SCORE believes it is critical for our state to create a framework outlining the outcomes we want to be true for Tennessee students so that we better support them in earning credentials that lead to those outcomes. Not only will this result in more students entering careers that enable economic independence, but it will also be essential for meeting our state’s workforce and economic development goals. With this framework, education leaders, policymakers, community partners and industry leaders will be able to act to ensure more students graduate with quality credentials.

Currently, we have an incomplete understanding of student success in Tennessee — in particular about the credentials and degrees that students earn every day.

- **First, important information about student success in Tennessee’s workforce is not collected at the state level (e.g., information about a student’s specific job) or has not been applied to specific credential programs that students earn.** Without applying this data to academic programs, we have limited knowledge of how well an academic program is aligned to urgent or evolving workforce opportunities across the state.

- **Additionally, the student success information that we do have is disjointed.** We know a student’s potential and actual earnings with existing data, but we have not connected this earnings information with other important measures (like job outlook). Nor have we applied a single coherent measure to the state’s credentials programs to gain a clear understanding of the opportunity a credential or degree provides a student.

Understanding Credential and Degree Outcomes

Data are critical to ensuring we have a clear, accurate understanding of what success looks like for all Tennesseans. Today, existing state and federal data can provide important insight into student outcomes. However, these outcomes have not been connected to give us a comprehensive look at student impact. Importantly, these measures have not been considered against the degrees and credentials students are earning, which is one important tool for understanding whether students are prepared for careers that enable economic independence.

Many data-supported metrics provide important perspective on how a credential or degree program equips students for post-education success when they enter the workforce.¹

- **Earnings** associated with the credential earned by the student — **including median earnings at different year intervals after completing a credential, lifetime earnings, and minimum income** — capture whether a credential or degree has supported a student into a career that provides earnings sufficient for a high quality of life, as well as enough earnings to pay off the cost of the credential or degree program.²
- **Job outlook**, both **short-term and long-term**, associated with the credential measures whether job opportunities aligned to it are currently in demand.³ It also projects the extent to which these job opportunities will still be in demand far into the future. Since today's students could be in careers for over 40 years, it's important for them to earn credentials and degrees that equip them for short-term and long-term career success.
- **Stackability** is an important aspect of credential opportunity to measure, as it can provide insight into whether a credential can be stacked or transferred into a higher credential or degree opportunity that opens up additional economic opportunities.⁴ Importantly, a credential may have limited workforce value for a student without being linked to a two-year, four-year or graduate degree. A high-quality measurement for this indicator is important to ensure that a credential's stackability can be assessed and applied in a framework that captures the quality and impact of credentials.

- **Portability** refers to the broad applicability of the skills and knowledge a student may gain through a credential program. This is an important component of a credential’s impact for students, as students may change jobs across companies and industries where a general skill set is valuable in addition to more technical or specialized skills. Portability can help students overcome a “lock-in” effect that may prohibit promotion or wage-growth opportunities over time.⁵ It is important to note, however, that data and measures to capture a credential’s portability are limited.

- **Workforce turnover** can also provide more insight into a credential program’s utility for students. For example, certain job opportunities or industries may yield higher earnings and high demand on average, but it is important for students to know whether existing data show the likelihood of individuals staying in those jobs for a long period of time. For example, nursing is a common high-demand job opportunity that is characterized by high rates of job turnover.⁶

- **Regional relevance** is another important aspect of a credential’s quality to consider. A credential may not have high-demand or high-wage opportunities statewide but may be valued by employers at the local level. Research suggests that most people work within 100 miles of where they lived at age 16, so this aspect holds significance in considering the number of individuals who live and work across Tennessee at the local level.⁷

- **Skills** capture the extent to which a credential equips students with skills that employers recognize at their firms and within their job opportunities — whether those are more general skills, such as leadership and communication, or more technical skills. In today’s labor market, employers continue to call for specific general and technical skills, while students also express a view of education as a critical stepping stone into career readiness.⁸ The skills and employer value provided to a student from a credential is a critical aspect to consider, yet the availability of existing data that captures skills and skills alignment to economic opportunity is limited.

- **Beyond measures that capture a credential’s economic opportunity**, many stakeholders believe it is important to ensure a credential or degree provides a student with **individual purpose and societal value**. A career pathway that leads to a credential or degree should support a student to reach their personal career aspirations and goals for their life while also meeting important societal and civic needs like education, health care and child care.⁹

State Spotlights: Other Approaches To Measuring Credential Impact

Other states have recognized the need to better understand credential impact. These initiatives focus on using data to measure and determine the quality, or value, of different credentials and degrees that students earn. Here are examples of states that are advancing this work:

- In **Texas**, the state’s Credentials of Value Framework uses a student’s post-graduate earnings to determine the value of bachelor’s degrees, associate degrees and certificates. If a student earns enough within 10 years of graduation to pay off the cost of the credential or degree program *and* earns more than the typical high school graduate, the credential or degree is considered valuable. This Credentials of Value Framework is part of the state’s Building a Talent Strong Texas initiative, which ties several state policies to credentials of value to support greater higher education attainment aligned to economic opportunity.
- **Florida** has established a Framework of Quality that uses both earnings and occupation demand to guide the selection of credentials and degrees into a master list. Degrees and nondegree credentials are evaluated for post-graduate outcomes under this framework, with the state also providing flexibility to academic programs that are in demand at the local level.
- **North Carolina’s** Workforce Credentials categorize nondegree credentials earned in the state by their level of alignment to high-wage, high-demand jobs. These categories — foundational, essential, career and advanced — provide perspective on the level to which these nondegree credentials in the state will provide North Carolinians with economic opportunity.

While these and other states have developed frameworks that capture the quality of credential programs, few states have developed clear multiple-measure criteria that assess the quality of all programs in the state. Tennessee has an opportunity to lead the nation in advancing a statewide multiple-measure framework that captures the impact of credentials and degrees on student success.

Imagine What Can Be True in Tennessee With a Quality Credentials Framework

As Tennessee defines and advances a vision of student success, key success measures can be incorporated into a statewide framework that assesses and clarifies how a credential or degree supports students in achieving these outcomes. And the need for a statewide framework is a priority and recommendation that SCORE is elevating for our state.

With a framework in place, Tennesseans could have a tool that guides how stakeholders support students toward education and training that prepares them for a career that enables economic independence. A quality credentials framework can facilitate alignment to ensure a student’s learning experience supports them in reaching Tennessee’s vision of student success in the future.

Importantly, Tennessee students are also supported by various stakeholder groups from education to career: K-12 education, postsecondary education, student support organizations and career coaches, industry partners, and policymakers. For these stakeholders, a quality credentials framework serves as a guide to incentivize each stakeholder to support students on a fulfilling pathway that culminates in a high-impact credential leading to economic independence:

- **Policymakers** could use the framework to set a new statewide goal centered on ensuring more students receive quality degrees and credentials. In addition, the defined framework could be used in directing funding within education systems to support students in earning these credentials.
- **K-12 education** could guide students along career pathways, prioritizing quality, workforce-aligned course opportunities, including early postsecondary opportunities and work-based learning.



- **Postsecondary education** could design new academic programs, modify existing ones and expand work-based learning experiences for students within programs of study.
- **Student support organizations** could expand career mentoring statewide and use the framework to help students make the most informed decisions about their education pathways.
- **When industry partners** move to or expand in Tennessee, they could co-own the production of quality degrees and credentials through education-employer partnerships aimed at meeting their employment needs while also strengthening Tennessee’s talent pipeline.

A framework that defines and monitors the quality of the degrees and credentials would establish a definition of student success that can also support increased economic development and prosperity for all Tennesseans. With all stakeholders aligned around a common framework, we can ensure Tennessee students are able to participate in and benefit from the state’s dynamic economic growth.

Looking Forward

Tennessee has a track record of leading the nation when it comes to taking bold, innovative steps for students. Over the next several months, SCORE will work with stakeholders across Tennessee to develop a recommended framework for quality credentials in Tennessee. Several critical actions must be taken to develop and advance this framework for students:

- **Identify** the foundational measures of student success that we want to uphold as a “North Star” for all Tennesseans.
- **Apply** these success measures within a statewide framework that assesses and determines the different opportunities provided to students by the credentials and degrees earned.
- **Advance** this framework into action to support students to succeed across Tennessee while also prioritizing policies and implementation practices to effectively apply it.

It’s time for Tennessee to lead again and cast a vision for what we want to be true for our students. That vision must include supporting students to earn credentials and degrees that place them on a path to greater economic independence.

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