Creating a New Paradigm for Lifelong Learning

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With numerous rapid technological advances and shifting market demands, the job landscape has dramatically changed from what it was even just a few years ago. There's no room for standing still in today's workforce, even among those who've steadily climbed the career ladder and can see the retirement finish line. For older workers who've "paid their dues" and mastered critical competencies gained from decades of experience in their fields, it can be challenging to keep pace with the emerging skills required to thrive in our complex economy. Yet, they bring many of the skills and dispositions that are in demand among employers: work ethic, motivation, critical thinking, collaboration, resilience, and others, which can give seasoned job candidates a significant competitive advantage when coupled with the right new skills.

For those who've navigated years in the workforce, there may be more room for optimism than angst, especially for those willing to embrace the need for lifelong learning. While technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and automation may make some jobs obsolete, they also create a need for new skills that older individuals can gain through additional education and training.

There is evidence that the demand for skilled workers of all ages and experience levels will continue to grow in the coming years, with a majority of good jobs expected to require some form of credential beyond a high school education. More U.S. adults need credentials of value that equip them for a rapidly changing economy, setting them on a path to personal growth and financial security, and building stronger communities. That's why Lumina Foundation set this ambitious goal: By 2040, 75 percent of working-age adults in the U.S. labor force will have college degrees or other credentials of value, leading to economic prosperity.

The incoming generation of workers alone can't reach this goal. A continuing decline in the population of high school graduates in the U.S. will mean fewer young people entering college and the workforce in the years ahead. Along with changing immigration policies and other trends, employers will need to leverage existing workers to meet their labor needs.

The Assets of Seasoned Professionals

Employers have long been sounding alarms about skilled labor shortages, while simultaneously overlooking a solution in plain sight. Older workers can typically remain productive in the workplace for more than a decade before retiring, and they bring assets that stem more from experience than training. They understand workplace requirements and dynamics, have gained industry knowledge, and have proven their ability to deliver results under pressure. Most importantly, they can build upon their existing foundation of skills rather than starting from scratch.

The challenge is ensuring they have access to the timely, targeted, and cost-effective training that allows them to complement their experience with present-day skills. More than 100 million adults in the U.S. do not have a post-high school credential. Yet 43 million adults—a majority of whom are between the ages of 35 and 64—have completed some education and training beyond high school but left before earning a credential, according to the **National Student Clearinghouse**. Many may be primed to return to programs that offer a streamlined and affordable path to a credential, provided the right incentives and conditions are in place.

With limited reliable information about which programs lead to good jobs and better pay—in other words, which ones will pay off in the marketplace—many adults may feel ill-equipped to decipher the confusing web of options. **Credential Engine** estimates that there are more than a million programs offering training and credentials in high-demand fields through specialized boot camps, community colleges, universities, and trade schools. Yet, as a society, we have generally not allocated the necessary attention, resources, and status to these short-term and non-credit offerings. That has often left potential students without the career services and financial aid support they need to identify, pursue, and pay for the credentials that are best for them.

Addressing these challenges will require new ideas and mechanisms for making college and training programs affordable, accessible, flexible, and aligned with workforce needs. One practical path to reskilling the current workforce is through short-term credential options that provide high-quality training and have real market value. However, first, we need the systems in place to identify, evaluate, and connect programs that provide marketable skills and competencies to help individuals catch up.

States Are Retooling Education and Training Systems

While we often discuss the importance of lifelong learning, we have historically not invested much in job training for adult learners. The rapidly changing workforce landscape and competitive pressures have prompted several states to focus on connecting and enhancing education and training systems to facilitate easier access to additional learning opportunities through short-term credential programs.

A recent Lumina-sponsored review of state activity by **HCM Strategists** found that 31 states invested more than $5.6 billion in short-term workforce credential programs in recent years. Examples of innovative state efforts include:

- Virginia's **FastForward program** touts training in critical industries that takes weeks, not years, by building better connections between education and workforce programs provided through community colleges, universities, and training institutions. The average age of FastForward students is 38, showing that it's not just early-career workers pursuing training opportunities.
- Louisiana's **MJ Foster Promise** program supports students enrolled in short-term certificate programs in six key sectors, including health care, manufacturing, and information technology.
- Texas has been working with community colleges in recent years to address some of those issues, shifting **its funding formulas** to identify and support programs that lead to "credentials of value."

And it isn't just states that are making investments in this space: Congress just this year approved expanding federal Pell Grants for some workforce programs, meaning low-income adult learners will have more ways to pay for quality short-term programs at eligible higher education institutions.

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To help build on these investments, Lumina Foundation recently launched the **FutureReady States** initiative, a 12-state project designed to spark and expand innovation in short-term credential policies and practices. FutureReady states recognize they need to invest more heavily in education and training models that have long been on the margins, ensuring they are an effective path to better and better-paying jobs. That means connecting workers to short-term credential programs that have been proven to hold value in the job market. The onus is on states, working in collaboration with education and training institutions across the postsecondary landscape, to develop and ensure quality programs, enabling the broadest possible pool of workers to earn short-term credentials that yield tangible benefits. Lumina is working to empower state leaders to ask hard questions about how to ensure value while expanding opportunities in their communities. There's an emerging consensus around the essential role of short-term credentials in helping us meet workforce demands while providing a relatively fast and affordable pathway for adults to secure better jobs in today's economy. However, these investments will yield the most significant payoff if we prioritize both quality and value.