

The CAREER READINESS CERTIFICATE:

The Foundation for Stackable Credentials



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BY BARBARA BOLIN

At its first meeting in January 2004, the Career Readiness Certificate Consortium was comprised of high-level government representatives from Virginia and its neighboring states. All founding members agreed on the need for a portable skill credential that certified readiness for job training, further education or work. There was also agreement that such a credential was needed as the foundation upon which other skill credentials could be built. At that time, the concept of stackable credentials was officially born, and only seven years later, this idea is accepted nationally and is rapidly being developed.

The first goal of the new consortium was to establish the Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) as the founding credential in the six states and one locality in the consortium (Tennessee, West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and Washington, D.C.). The common language chosen for the credential was ACT's WorkKey—the assessment system that is popular with employers—and there was agreement on a three-level certificate (bronze, silver and gold) based on Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information, and Locating Information assessments.

Kentucky had been using its employability certificate, the KEC, since 2003, but Virginia quickly caught up with full deployment of the Virginia Career Readiness Certificate in October 2004. As news of the CRC initiative and the consortium spread, other states convened meetings with employers and educators on the CRC, and the size of the consortium quickly increased. By March 2006, there were 42 states in the consortium matrix, indicating a significant number of full deployments (*i.e.*, state programs led

and supported by governors), many more beginning the deployment process, and others that were working on the initiative. In some states, such as North Carolina, the CRC effort was led by the community college system, while in others, state or local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) led the way. In one or two cases, educators in universities and high school systems took the initiative. In every case, the CRC was and is predicated on community partnerships as required by the Workforce Investment Act.

The Rise of a Skill Crisis

In the early days of the CRC, the U.S. and world economies were stable and generally doing well. However, among workforce development professionals and employers there was an emerging understanding of a developing skill crisis. This looming crisis was fueled by the rapid growth in education and economic development in India and China, and by the continued decline in the academic performance of students in the West.

Despite these concerns, apart from the worker shortage in health care, most unemployed adults in the United States were able to find jobs, eventually—even if those jobs were outside their usual fields. There was also funding for retraining, even though some of that money was wasted when older workers, in particular, were placed into college programs that were unnecessary, overwhelming or ineffective.

As the pace of globalization increased rapidly, technological advances allowed employers to take business processes to places where there were skilled workers, often overseas. At the same time, many employers in the United States compensated for a lack of skilled workers by “outsourcing” jobs to machines in their plants here at home.

The Benefits of the CRC

Since 2008, with severe competition for jobs in the United States, the CRC has gained support among employers and

job seekers as an efficient, inexpensive and reliable credential that quickly certifies trainability and employability. The certificate is especially valuable for dislocated workers who often do not have even a high school diploma. After years on the job, these workers have skills that are quickly and easily documented with WorkKeys assessments, and this makes a career change less painful as workers receive only the training they need for new positions. In many states, employers are using the CRC as a hiring filter when working with local WIB offices. CRC holders are often offered interviews ahead of those without it, and employers are saving time and money by interviewing only applicants in whom they have confidence.

It is notable too that the governors of Georgia and Oklahoma are using the number of CRCs held by current and available workers as two of the criteria for counties and cities in their states to be certified as WorkReady Communities. (You can visit www.gaworkready.com and www.okcareertech.org/cac/work-keys for more information.)

During 2010, in North Carolina, there was a 38 percent increase in the number of CRCs issued; approximately 150 high schools are providing students the opportunity to earn a CRC, and the certificate is integrated into all community college areas, both as a course prerequisite and as an exit credential. Recent reports from the state indicate that more than 430 employers currently use the CRC in their hiring processes, and they testify to the effectiveness of the credential; turnover rates have decreased, and on-the-job-training is shorter and more effective when a new worker has a CRC. There has also been increased diversity within the list of employers using the CRC, and to date, more than 88,000 certificates have been issued statewide.

Since the program was fully implemented in July 2008 in Arkansas, more than 2,600 employers have hired job seekers with the CRC, and more than

Figure 1



▲ The CRC is the foundation for a lifetime of career skill development and stackable credentials.

30,000 certificates have been issued. The program is available in 76 high schools, and the number of students receiving the CRC is being used as one indicator of quality for Secondary and Technical Education Programs monitored and approved by the Department of Career Education. Kellie Blake, the HR manager at Anchor Packaging, Inc., has said: “Our business is becoming more and more complex with new technology and customer standards certifications. As a result, the skill level required of employees has increased. The CRC program has given us a way to verify applicants have the prerequisite skills to be successful on the job in a relatively short period of time.”

In Indiana, the CRC has been used as an exit credential for high school students for several years. In Alaska, since 2010 all 11th- and 12th-graders have been required to take the three CRC assessments, so many students there have received the certificate. In Oregon, where the program was launched officially in January 2011, 312 employers have signed letters of intent to use the CRC in their hiring practices, and more than 9,500 certificates have been issued.

Since 2005, Virginia has been using the CRC as the foundation for stackable credentials. With the general title of CRC+, these certificates build on

the original CRC by adding other assessments to meet the needs of specific industry sector employers. For example, a diverse group of healthcare professionals developed a CRC+ in healthcare, several levels of CRC+ credentials for manu-

facturing technicians have been developed with the assistance of the Virginia Manufacturers Association, and work is ongoing to create a CRC+ for hospitality careers. The CRC is a requirement for every apprentice.

In the manufacturing sector, 2.7 million employees are 55 or older and are likely to leave the labor force in the next 10 years. In June this year, President Obama announced that up to 500,000 students in 30 community colleges now have the opportunity to earn manufacturing credentials through a certification system endorsed by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). The training curricula are applicable to all sectors in the manufacturing industry and the resulting credentials can be stacked with other training to help students toward associate degrees.

The foundation credential of these new NAM certifications is the CRC. CRC skills are now recognized as being essential for any worker, and they have recently been included in new adult education systems such as Workforce Connect from McGraw-Hill. All states are now represented in the CRC Consortium. It is estimated that more than 3 million CRCs have been issued nationwide—and that number is increasing exponentially.

Employers are clearly grateful for the benefits that have accrued through the CRC. Dean Inman of American Railcar Industries, says, "...we are now [hiring] only individuals who have the basic abilities to read, to do basic math, and to read and interpret charts and graphs and who are likely to be able to learn our jobs. We also believe that these individuals will make for a better overall workforce and that they will perform better and stay on the job longer, thus reducing turnover." **T**

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is president of the National Organization for Career Credentialing. She can be contacted at bolinb@earthlink.net. For more information about the Career Readiness Certificate Consortium, visit www.crcconsortium.org.

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