REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The Right Signals Initiative

To demonstrate a new model that recognizes quality credentials that send the "right signals" to employers, students, and colleges about the importance of degrees, certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeships, and badges.

Proposals due January 29, 2016

KEY DATES

December 8, 2015	RFP issue date
December 16, 2015	RFP Informational Conference Call at 2pm EST Toll-free 877-643-6951 passcode 83709607#
December 29, 2015	RFP Informational Conference Call at 4pm EST Toll-free 877-643-6951 passcode 83709607#
January 29, 2016	Proposals due by noon EST
Early February 2016	Applicants notified of status
March 2016	Orientation meeting in D.C.
April 1, 2016	Pilot colleges begin work
September 31, 2017	Pilot colleges conclude work
December 31, 2017	Project concludes with AACC disseminating findings

1 | Purpose

The highly diverse credentialing marketplace includes educational degrees and certificates, professional and industry certifications, apprenticeship certificates, digital badges and other micro-credentials, and licenses to practice. In different ways, each of these items attests to what people know and are able to do. Some students enter the workforce with credentials obtained online and/or in-person at other colleges, the workplace, high schools, IT boot camps, the military, community-based and other organizations. Some community college students start on the noncredit side of the house, earning an occupational certificate or industry certification, with interest in transferring to credit-bearing courses. In short, community colleges must operate in the highly diversified and constantly adapting intersection of their students' varied credentialing pathways.

The purpose of The Right Signals Initiative is to demonstrate a new credentialing model that recognizes multiple quality credentials to send "the right signals" to employers, students, and colleges about the meaning of these credentials. Key credentials to be targeted are degrees, certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeships, and badges. This work is being supported by a grant from Lumina Foundation as part of its commitment to creating a student-centered, learning-based credentialing system in the U.S. that is characterized by key attributes such as common language, transparency, portability, and trust in credentials.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) will work over 18 months with approximately 20 community colleges which are leaders in integrating the use of multiple, diverse credentials at scale across all college programs. The institutions involved will design and begin implementation of use of integrated multiple credentials during the grant period. They also will develop clear communications with students (potential and current) and employers to make the expanded array of credentialing choices clear. While doing that work, the colleges will test the usefulness of Lumina Foundation's Beta Connecting Credentials Framework as a tool to support translation and integration of multiple credentials. A number of other competency frameworks may also be helpful in this work, including the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), the Common Employability Skills Framework, and the U.S. Department of Labor Competency Model. Details on these frameworks are provided in Section 3 of this document.

Given the short duration of the grant, AACC is looking for colleges that bring a willingness to move quickly and are not starting from "point zero" in expanding and integrating credentialing. The colleges must be agile and committed to dynamic and transformative connections both in speech as well as action. The colleges involved will have proven successful activities and conversations to date. Undertaking the work of a pilot site will be comprehensive and sophisticated work, and RFP applicants must outline how they will be furthering their activities on their campus and/or within their systems. Colleges with existing efforts are more likely to keep pace within the network of pilot sites.

Findings from the work will inform AACC member colleges and partners in an evolving national dialogue on credentialing. For colleges not familiar with the call for a national dialogue on credentialing by some 90 co-sponsoring organizations, please visit: *www.connectingcredentials.org*.

2 | Background

AACC's 1,200 member colleges serve 13 million students and provide on-ramps to degree attainment, skilled careers, and economic viability including family-supporting wages. The Right Signals Initiative closely aligns with key reform efforts underway among AACC and its member colleges. In 2011, AACC launched the 21st-Century Initiative with a goal to educate 5 million more students with appropriate credentials by 2020. This work was followed by the generation of a Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, which produced a report, *Reclaiming the American Dream*, defining large-scale recommendations focused on clear and coherent pathways, clearly defined competencies, alignment and transparency of language across education, and industry mapping to labor market demands and accountability. These have been put into tangible action plans for community colleges in a guidebook, *Empowering Community Colleges to Build the Nation's Future: An Implementation Guide.*

This work is built on the premise that focusing on increasing credential attainment must include a diverse array of relevant and current credentials with labor market value, including degrees, certificates, industry-based certifications, apprenticeships, and badges. AACC believes that structuring this work within a pilot network of approximately 20 community colleges that have already undertaken some efforts to diversify their suite of credentials is the most promising approach. Doing so will accelerate the capture of solutions/strategies as forward-thinking colleges individually and collectively address the challenges of reimagining credentials within an integrated enterprise, looking both within and across their institutions at how to interweave industry certifications, badges, and other credentials.

Currently, the signaling about credentials is uneven and confusing to students, industry, and colleges. The clarity about what diverse credentials represent, and even the vocabulary used to describe them, ranges widely. The rigor and value each of these credentials signal to an employer and a learner can vary based on the particular industry sector, the authorizing (credential-awarding) institution, the kind of learning (in-person versus online/hybrid, practice-based versus classroom-only), and the age/current relevancy of the credential award. Industry partners require quality assurance from colleges that train workers. AACC believes that by having integrated, objective and national dialogues about skills and credentials connected to industry partners, colleges can develop and provide more streamlined signals to employers and learners about the meaning of credentials. The national economy will strengthen as a result of the creation of a more transparent, understandable credentialing system.

3 | Specifications for the Work

Colleges involved in The Right Signals Initiative will begin their work by identifying strategies and discussing successful practices related to integrating diverse credentials across the curriculum. Specifically, colleges will be asked to work with their local employers and/or the national employers engaged in the national dialogues to discuss integrated learning pathways for students so that the college can connect these diverse credentials and create a new model for a transparent, integrated credentialing system.

This process will require colleges to become familiar with the increasing number of learning outcomes-based frameworks that define what employers indicate that graduates must be able to know and do. As such, the project will encourage faculty to use these frameworks as tools to shape learning experiences both on- and off-campus. AACC believes that investigating increasing degree attainment, expanded use of certificates, growth in recognition of industry-based certifications and apprenticeships, and experimentation with badges in an integrated, systemic manner, will further enable colleges to properly support both students and employers.

Selected colleges will be asked to design and begin implementation of holistic and coordinated sets of interlocking pathways that can be enacted program and college-wide. These designs will be set by the colleges based on their existing work and interests to advance their activities. Shared lessons across all the sites will inform individual college work. Colleges also will be asked to provide feedback on the usefulness of the various competency-based frameworks that are already in existence as they do their individual work. AACC will provide technical assistance and share lessons across the wider membership of colleges at the conclusion of the project.

Colleges that will take on this bold and nuanced work will have to consider how to align credentials that are focused on different disciplines, levels, complexity of knowledge and skills; variances of authorizing providers and validating entities such as professional and industry associations; and diverse assessment and quality assurance methods.

Participating colleges must be able to think with large-scale vision about reform, as well as be willing to consider the details of implementation. AACC will be compiling information on how colleges:

- Incorporate the award of certifications and badges into their programs of study as a complement to the degrees and the certificates (credit and non-credit) they already award.

- Provide credit, as appropriate, toward degrees, certificates, badges, certifications, and for life experiences that students bring to the college.

- Negotiate transfer agreements with other institutions (2- and 4-year) so that they accept these hybrid awards for transfer to their institutions.

- Engage employers in their regions to make all of these diverse credentials understandable, useful, and accepted.

- Create career and education pathway maps and other navigational supports that reflect the scope and sequencing of competencies within full array of credentials being employed.

Guidance on expectations is addressed in section 4.

Examples of potential approaches colleges might consider undertaking individually or in combination are provided below. Colleges are not limited to the list below and should select an approach that they believe will advance their larger agenda within the context of The Right Signals Initiative purpose.

- Aligning programs of study with requirements for industry certification.
- Creating credit-bearing badges that can be stacked to contribute to meeting degree requirements.
- Increasing transferability of applied associate degrees and CTE certificates.
- Developing reframed transcripts that can incorporate attainment of third party credentials (e.g., industry certifications, badges).
- Introducing or expanding competency-based programs and credentials.
- Using an integrated credentialing strategy to bridge credit and non-credit offerings.
- Engaging employers to validate competencies they seek and credentials that accurately represent those competencies.
- Expanding credentialing for prior experientially acquired competencies learners possess when they enter a program.
- Developing a communications strategy for making the mix of potential credentials easy for learners and employers to understand.
- Aligning learning management and student information systems to incorporate expanded types of credentials.

AACC will provide the selected colleges with assistance in their work, through individual and collective discussions, as the sites assess their credentialing activities using a range of learning-outcomes competency-based tools to include:

Name and Tool[1] Brief Description	How to Use	Link for More
Connecting Credentials: Beta Credentials Framework The Beta Credentials Framework unifies terminology and breaks learning into knowledge and skills (specialized, personal, and social) as well as charts eight levels that outline the depth, breadth, and complexity of learning. The framework was developed by a team led by the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) and CLASP, working with a number of educational providers of credentials with support from Lumina Foundation in 2014–2015. The Beta Credential Framework was launched on June 11, 2015, for exploratory use.	This framework establishes a "common language" way to examine the competencies associated with any credential. It is a tool intended to help users see how to integrate the use of multiple credentials.	Download at website where there is also information describing how the framework can be used: connectingcredentials.org Print copies of the framework are available for free from http://lumina.go2vista.com/category
The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) The DQP provides a set of reference points for what students should know and be able to do to earn associate, bachelor's and master's degrees – in any field of study. The DQP engages faculty in the vital work of improving courses and shaping programs of study. There are five broad categories of proficiencies in the DQP: 1) Specialized Knowledge, 2) Broad Integrative Knowledge, 3) Intellectual Skills, 4) Applied Learning and Collaborative Learning, and 5) Civic and Global Learning. These provide a profile of what degrees mean in terms of specific learning outcomes.	This tool offers users a way to think through the learning outcomes associated with degree programs which can help in translating them into terms comparable with other credentials.	The DQP, as well as resources for implementation, can be found at www.degreeprofile.org Print copies are available for free at http://lumina.go2vista.com/category

[1] Industry sector frameworks are another set of common frameworks set by the Department of Labor, Career and Technical Education, and associations. These frameworks will be well known to specific programs within the colleges so are not specified in this chart.

Name and Tool[1] Brief Description	How to Use	Link for More
Common Employability Skills: *A Foundating for Success in the Workplace: The Skills All Employees Need, No Matter Where They Work* The National Network of Business and Industry Associations has developed a core set of fundamental skills that potential employees need in the workplace—and a common vocabulary to explain them. There are four areas of skills in the framework: Personal Skills, People Skills, Applied Knowledge, and Workplace Skills.	This tool can contribute to reflecting on whether and where key foundational skills are developed in the context of specific credentials.	http://www.nationalnetwork. org/wp-content/ uploads/2015/05/ Common_Employability_ Skills-03-30-152.pdf
Essential Learning Outcomes (ELO) Developed by the Association of American Colleges & Universities and launched in 2005, the Essential Learning Outcomes seek to define a set of learning outcomes that all students need from higher education in the 21st century. Complemented by a set of rubrics to assess student learning, the outcomes engage faculty in designing learning experiences and assessments.	This tool offers a way to assess how each of the credentials being employed contributes to learning outcomes all students need.	http://www.aacu.org/leap/ essential-learning-outcomes

Selected colleges will be asked to use the Beta Connecting Credentials Framework as a tool in their work. While there are many frameworks in existence, this framework has been a signature product for Lumina Foundation and can help the colleges make judgments about the underlying competencies represented in a credential. The framework matrix is organized around two learning domains: 1) knowledge and 2) skills (specialized, personal, and social. Eight levels indicate relative knowledge and skill complexity, breadth, and/ or depth. The structure provides the ability to translate any credential and to place it on a common reference platform for analysis.

Within the context of this project, community colleges can use the Connecting Credentials Framework to:

- Profile an instructional module, course, or program of study to clearly identify associated learning outcomes.
- Profile credentials to articulate the actual proficiency levels represented by a specific credential.
- Compare profiles of multiple credentials to identify differences and opportunities for alignment.

- Stack credentials or sequence courses within a career or learning pathway.
- Determine equivalence or sequence relationships among credentials within a career/ education pathway map.
- Develop new credentials.
- Align employer job descriptions (tasks) to credentials.

Technical assistance in the use of the Beta Credentials Framework will be provided to the selected colleges by Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), a partner organization also supported by Lumina Foundation. In support of the colleges' individual efforts, AACC will be coordinating and connecting participating colleges with other key national credentialing transformation initiatives. AACC encourages all colleges, including those which will not apply to The Right Signals Initiative, to become more informed on these national dialogues. More than 100 efforts are described in the Connecting Credentials' *Landscape Review of Innovations in the U.S. Credentialing Marketplace: A Working Document* at *www.connectingcredentials.org*.

AACC will distribute $60,000 per college over the 18 months of work. These funds can be used for a range of expenses (personnel, travel) based on the activities the college wants to undertake. A minimum of travel for two consistent staff to participate in three in-person meetings will be required, along with participation in group and individual conference calls, webinars, and contribution to collaborative work within the network of participating colleges is the only mandated expense.

AACC will showcase project findings to member colleges, AACC leadership circles, workforce and economic development project networks, and national partners. In addition, the work and all involved sites will be highlighted at AACC's 2017 Workforce Development Institute. Finally, based on the overarching lessons learned at the end of the grant, AACC will produce the following to inform future projects and the national dialogue:

- A white paper for national dissemination targeted to community colleges on the findings of the models produced by the pilot colleges.
- A profile of the experiences and learning among the colleges in the pilot group within the context of their campus credentialing activities and within their use of learning-based frameworks.

4 | Application Instructions and Format

Eligible Institutions

AACC welcomes applications from all current AACC member institutions. If you are unsure if your community college is an AACC member, contact 202-728-0200.

Submission Deadline and Format

Applications should be submitted electronically in one e-mail *TheRightSignals@aacc.nche.edu* no later than January 29, 2016, at noon (ET). **To access the application** *click here* **to download.**

- Subject line of e-mail: **AACC Lumina [insert your college name]**
- Colleges submit responses to RFP in 100 point-valued application.
- Ten pages maximum on 8.5"x11" paper, single-spaced, Calibri font 12-point.

Required Response Elements (7)

Category 1. President or CEO Support Letter [required, no point value, not counted toward 10-page max]

Category 2. Institutional Metrics and Staffing Capacity [15 points]

Category 3. Pre-Existing Focus and Traction to Date [25 points]

Category 4. Approach and Technical Assistance Requests [35 points]

Category 5. Sustainability Planning [15 points]

Category 6. Metrics and Evaluation [10 points]

Category 7. Budget and Budget Narrative [required, no point value, not counted toward 10-page max]

Details for information required by category are described on the next page. Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.

Review Process

- AACC will review all applications with Lumina Foundation, and non-competing partners involved in this work.
- At least three reviewers will score every application.
- The final colleges will be selected based on scores in the outlined categories, geographic and demographic diversity, and in conjunction with the funder's approval.
- All colleges will receive notification (selected and non-selected) in early February 2016.

Other Ways to Participate in the Evolving National Dialogue on Credentialing

- If colleges determine this RFP is not a good match for their institutions at this time, they are still encouraged to join the evolving national dialogue on credentialing. To learn more about this initiative and ways to participate (e.g., webinars, meetings, sharing documents, learning about 100+ initiatives underway by various sectors), visit *www.connectingcredentials.org.*
  - The Beta Credential Framework is downloadable at this website and there is a guide to assist institutions in using the framework.
  - There also are links to other competency-based frameworks that may be useful to your institutions (e.g., the DQP, the Common Employability Skills Frameworks, industry sector frameworks).

CATEGORY 1
Submission of President or CEO Support Letter [required, no point value, not counted in 10-page max]

Applicant must provide a cover letter stating the president or CEO's support for the college engaging in The Right Signals Initiative with a statement of the leader's a commitment to prioritize this from their office across the college.

Please note: The college president or CEO will be the individual informed if the application is selected.

CATEGORY 2
Institutional Metrics and Staffing Capacity [15 points]

- Applicant must describe the college's student body demographics as well as an overview of student engagement, persistence, and completion. For example, one college may have a particular focus on serving a small number of students engaged in military transitions and award many certificates to a small number of students versus a different college that channels hundreds of students through certain programs each term.

- Applicant must provide an overview of the college's internal capacity to undertake this work including naming the pre-existing staff that have focused on related work prior to the point of proposal application. Applicants should outline the individuals who would work on this project, from leadership to operational staff members to faculty, and the time allocations of those who will be involved.

Details in this section will speak to the college's prioritization by the team to be involved and show historic credential counts to date.

CATEGORY 3
Pre-Existing Focus and Traction to Date [25 points]

- Applicant must Indicate the array of credentials the college currently awards, and explain how the college has focused on aligning diverse credentials in its work to date, the strategies and tools employed to coordinate efforts, and the types of partners the college has organized (e.g., workforce, industry, economic development agencies, associations). Applicant should describe the work the college has already begun on common language around competencies and translating skills into measurable and universal items (e.g., for degrees, certificates, licenses, badges). If possible, applicant should provide background on credentialing strategies and how these have improved or influenced their equity opportunities.

- Applicant should describe critical stumbling blocks encountered in their work around creating common language, industry relevance, and credential types and/or struggles between credit/non-credit.

Details in this section will speak to the college's efforts to respond to unequal postsecondary outcomes and clear, flexible, and transparent pathways for students. Examples might include specific sector-based activities where this work has been tested to see traction of the college's impact or details on the reception and resonance of the college's work within the network of local partners.

CATEGORY 4
Approach and Technical Assistance Requests [35 points]

Applicant must explain how the college plans to design and implement a reframed credentialing strategy that will:
- Incorporate the award of certifications and badges into their programs of study as a complement to the degrees and the certificates (credit and non-credit) they already award.

- Provide credit, as appropriate, toward degrees, certificates, badges, certifications and for life experiences that students bring to the college.

- Negotiate transfer agreements with other institutions (2- and 4-year) so that they accept these hybrid awards for transfer to their institutions.

- Engage employers in their regions to make all of these diverse credentials understandable, useful, and accepted by them.

- Create career and education pathway maps and other navigational supports that reflect the scope and sequencing of competencies within full array of credentials being employed.

- Applicant must propose the scale of the project and extent of the impact on the college's programs, specifying the types of programs and credentials to be impacted.
- Applicant should describe the college's familiarity with the Beta Credentials Framework, the Degree Qualifications Profile, and other frameworks, and how the college envisions using those tools in developing integrated credentialing.
- Applicant should indicate the type of technical assistance desired to help expand and advance the college's connecting credentials work.

Details in this section will speak to the logical scale-up potential of the college's work; the extent of impact on the college's programs, the types of programs/credentials to be affected; and plans to implement systemic interoperability of multiple credentials. Colleges whose efforts have attained a greater level of maturity will have enacted some level of credential interoperability (e.g., recognizing industry certifications in a program area(s)). Examples might include how a college envisions aligning a highly fragmented credentialing system, based on its work to date. Applicants might describe the strategies/tools employed to coordinate efforts and how the next step will be conducted during this period. Applicants could also discuss how they have engaged with partners about pathway maps (workforce, industry, economic development agencies, and associations). How do you plan to build on/enhance these efforts as a result of this effort?

CATEGORY 5
Sustainability Planning [15 points]

- Applicant must outline intentions to continue to embed this work post-grant. Given that individual initiatives were started prior to engagement in this pilot, details in this section will not only provide confidence that the work will persist, but will reaffirm the range and caliber of sustainability methods needed for this cross-functional work.

CATEGORY 6
Metrics and Evaluation [10 points]

- Applicant must outline targets for the college consistent with their proposed strategy. Learning from the individual sites will be captured in case studies and profiles and will be disseminated to the wider network of AACC members. Colleges should commit to sharing findings in narrative and quantitative form in this section.

CATEGORY 7
Budget [required, no point value, not counted in 10-page max]

- Applicant must provide a budget of $60,000 in grant funds (cost-sharing of other funds is encouraged) for 18 months of work, starting in April 2016.
- A minimum of two consistent staff participating in three in-person meetings including, AACC's 2017 Workforce Development Institute (3 days/2 nights) meeting, as well as two meetings in Washington, DC, (2 days/1 night) should be included in the budget.
- Applicants must commit to a consistent presence on regular group and individual calls, webinars, contribution to shared products and reception to technical assistance and modification of their activities based on findings from the shared group. Budget narratives are required. Assume monthly calls at both the group and individual college levels.

AACC anticipates a robust and wide-ranging network of members will apply. AACC encourages the colleges to truly consider the deep level of engagement by leadership and staff as well as the enterprise-wide review of credential integration and signaling to employers, students and between and among colleges as they apply. The application review will occur in early 2016, with a launch event held for the colleges in March 2016.

For more information contact **Jen Worth**, senior vice president, Workforce and Economic Development at *TheRightSignals@aacc.nche.edu.*