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The Growth of Skills-Based Hiring: An Exploration of Evidence from Six States

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Contents

Introduction	1
Alabama	2
Arkansas	3
Colorado	4
Connecticut	5
Indiana	6
North Dakota	7
Cross-State Themes	8
LERs, SBH, and XCredit	9
Conclusion	10
References	11

Introduction

State governments, educational institutions, companies, and non-degree credential (NDC) influencer organizations have begun to look more deeply into skills-based hiring (SBH) and a closely related trend, learning and employment records (LERs). Various distinct yet connected factors, like ever-rising student loan debt, a tight labor market, and post-pandemic restructuring, are forcing stakeholders to reconsider traditional degree requirements and the prevailing structures of current workforce development programming. One of the most visible manifestations of this reconsideration is the current trend of eliminating or reevaluating degree requirements for employment, which has been observed at major corporations such as Google, IBM, and Delta (Dodd, 2023). Whether or not this translates into companies hiring more workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) is unclear. In this brief, we will explore the trend of SBH by looking at employers with less opaque hiring practices than private companies: state governments. Many state governments, like the aforementioned corporations, are also reevaluating or even eliminating degree requirements for state jobs.

As private sector employers began exploring changes in the relationship between hiring and traditional credentials, states and other entities were already seeking out ways to enable job seekers to document and verify skills they have developed prior to entering the classroom. Within higher education institutions, such efforts tended to take the form of prior learning assessment (PLA), which enables students to earn college credit through assessment exams, skills crosswalks (e.g., military service equivalencies), or portfolio reviews. Outside of colleges and universities, systems of digital badging emerged, which allows anyone to verify a competency or skill and share that qualification with potential employers. In 2021, Education Design Lab (EDL) announced XCredit, a new initiative “aimed at offering new ways of assessing and credentialing the informal learning of transitioning military members, veterans, and unemployed and underemployed job-seeking civilians” (2021). While PLA and digital badges often focus on specific technical skills, XCredit focuses on broadly applicable 21st Century Skills like critical thinking, oral communication, and problem solving.

This brief focuses on the SBH practices of six states: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Indiana, and North Dakota. These states were selected because they are leaders in the practices of SBH and LERs, and because they are diverse in terms of geography, economy, and political climate. In spite of these differences, they all participate in efforts to promote SBH and LERs through state policy involving both their state legislatures and governor’s offices. This brief aims to answer the following questions: Where do state-based efforts to promote SBH and LERs tend to originate? What kinds of policy changes and initiatives ultimately emerge from those efforts? Which organizations and individuals help to usher excitement about SBH and LERs into practice? To connect this report with EDL’s XCredit program, we also consider how states’ approaches to SBH and LERs could or already do incorporate validated 21st Century Skills.

Alabama

SBH efforts in Alabama center on the Alabama Talent Triad, a large-scale complex initiative designed to create a statewide ecosystem for SBH sponsored by AlabamaWorks! and Governor Kay Ivey's Office of Education and Transformation (Alabama Governor's Office Education/Workforce et al., 2023). The Talent Triad initiative began development in 2018, when a bloc consisting of 19 state agencies joined together with stakeholders such as employers, nonprofits, and credential providers to centralize state workforce efforts (Silver, 2023). Launched in pilot form in April 2023, the Talent Triad consists of three main components: the Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool (ACCET), the Alabama Credential Registry, and the Alabama Skills-Based Job Description Generator and Employer Portal. The Triad's resources are designed to serve employers, job seekers, and credential providers alike, all of whom are able to access the initiatives and resources at no cost (Alabama Governor's Office Education/Workforce et al., 2023).

Each piece of the Triad was introduced over the course of a few years, with the complete three-pronged tool being launched in Fall 2023. The first to launch was ACCET in 2020, which provides students and job seekers with a digital wallet in which to store and display LERs (Alabama Governor's Office Education/Workforce et al., 2023). The Alabama Credential Registry, launched in September 2021, provides education and training providers with a centralized location to publish records of credentials as well as a place to display the competencies and skills that learners will gain via credential completion (Office of the Governor of Alabama, 2021; Silver, 2023). Finally, Governor Ivey's office launched the Alabama Skills-Based Job Description Generator and Employer Portal in 2022 (Office of the Governor of Alabama, 2021). This portal is designed to help employers create custom skill-based descriptions for job openings that will help them match open positions with candidates.

Early findings from the Talent Triad pilot indicate signs of promising design practices around noncredit, particularly with regard to its competency ontology (Competency-Based Education Network, 2023). The Talent Triad also stands out as a pioneer in that it is the only LER platform led by a state government (Competency-Based Education Network, 2023). Alabama's Talent Triad has recently been awarded a SkillsFWD grant (Fain, 2023b).

Arkansas

Arkansas was part of the Markle Foundation's Skillful State Initiative, which has since been folded into the Rework America State Alliance. This involvement complements the state's new SBH ecosystem, a fully functional LER and SBH training and job-matching marketplace called Ready for Life. Spearheaded by Governor Asa Hutchinson, the Ready for Life platform was launched with funding from the Emergency Education Relief fund provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act in 2021 (Dryer & Murphy, 2021; Fain & Ashburn, 2023). Ready for Life is an online platform that uses artificial intelligence to support and connect job seekers, educators, employers, and employment agencies. The platform provides users with a unified database of educational, workforce development, and job opportunities (Dryer & Murphy, 2021). The main resources provided by Ready for Life are its learning management system, statewide longitudinal data system, and LERs (KARK, 2021).

SBH was a prominent part of Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders' agenda, even earning a mention in her inauguration speech in January 2023 (Sparkman, 2023). She consolidated her education policy under the Arkansas Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, Schools Safety (LEARNS) Plan, which is now enshrined in both Arkansas legislation and in an executive order (Russell, 2023; Williams, 2023). As part of this plan, the state government granted \$1.2 million to Lonoke Business Academy, a skills-based school that is part of the Lonoke Public School district (Earley, 2023b). Lonoke Business Academy, which partners with Arkansas State University, Beebe, offers programs in industrial and diesel technology as well as a pre-healthcare track (Earley, 2023a). Gov. Sanders also created the Governor's Workforce Cabinet via executive order to help direct her workforce development and career education policy (Earley, 2023b).

Colorado

The rise of SBH in Colorado began at the local level before becoming a statewide effort. In 2019, Boulder County eliminated the four-year-degree requirement for over 20 percent of its job categories for the purpose of increasing the size and diversity of the county worker talent pool (Barton, 2019). Boulder County reported that, after implementing the change in 2019, they saw a 10 percent increase in the number of applicants and employees of color by 2021 (Hutton, 2023). That change proved to be so successful that the Boulder Chamber of Commerce now holds SBH trainings across the county (Zhavoronkova & Naranjo, 2022). Colorado's early work to promote SBH practices with the Markle Foundation's Skillful Initiative also helped to set the stage for statewide policy change (Colorado Department of Labor & Employment, 2022; Zhavoronkova & Naranjo, 2022). These initiatives provided candidate-starved state agencies with SBH training in an effort to reduce employee workloads and reduce job vacancies (Zhavoronkova & Naranjo, 2022). A Division Director of the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Finance (HCPF) reported that implementing a skills-based approach to hiring helped reduce the department's vacancy rate from around 35 percent to under 10 percent (Skillful, 2019). Though this change at the HCPF occurred before the statewide implementation of SBH, these data point toward SBH as a potential benefit for state agencies in Colorado.

On April 14, 2022, Governor Jared Polis signed Executive Order 2022-15, which promotes SBH in Colorado. Preceding the executive order, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) and the Department of Personnel & Administration (DPA) conducted a survey of state agency hiring practices and found that many agencies were already using SBH strategies (Colorado Department of Labor & Employment, 2022). The executive order is supported by an allocation of \$700,000 to cover the staffing and other costs of transitioning to SBH (Gurney, 2023). Implemented by the Colorado DPA, it promotes SBH through four main activities: providing SBH training and resources to human resources professionals, developing a skills-based selection plan template to be used by state agencies for a quarter of state job postings, integrating work-based learning models into SBH templates and training, and leveraging a partnership with CDLE to connect the aforementioned efforts together (Colorado Department of Labor & Employment, 2022; Gurney, 2023). Early feedback from this SBH initiative indicates that it is expanding quality and diversity in the talent pool for state jobs (Gurney, 2023). The executive director of the state's public sector employee union, Colorado Workers for Innovative and New Solutions, applauded the executive order for its efforts to reduce the unsustainable workloads in government offices caused by staffing shortages: "This new policy is an important step toward ensuring our state is well staffed and able to provide critical public services and resources to families in every corner of Colorado" (Office of Colorado Governor Jared Polis, 2022).

Colorado was recently awarded a grant from the SkillsFWD collaborative that will support the efforts of the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CDWC) to address the state's behavioral health labor shortage with skills-based strategies (Fain, 2023a, 2023b). The public-private partnership, helmed by the CDWC, is working to create more entry points and recognition for skills and experience and to connect LERs to the state's Walmart-funded digital wallet, myColorado (Fain, 2023a).

Connecticut

Connecticut SBH efforts are housed in the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS), a division of the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development that functions as the administrative staff for the Governor’s Workforce Council. OWS, which is charged with “developing workforce policy, utilizing data to set a vision for the workforce pipeline, and coordinating the state’s workforce ecosystem around a common strategy and set of goals,” was launched in July 2020 by Governor Ned Lamont (Bednarz & Watson, 2020).

In 2021, Connecticut mandated the creation of an NDC database to be helmed by the executive director of the Office of Higher Education (Council of State Governments, 2022). In 2023, Connecticut passed legislation requiring its commissioner of administrative services to conduct a feasibility study on eliminating degree requirements for some state employee roles (Smalley, 2023). The state had already been using an SBH approach for several years, however, for positions such as building inspector and some IT roles (Frazer, 2023). Connecticut’s OWS has been awarded a grant from SkillsFWD to assist the state’s efforts to promote SBH strategies, LERs, and employment equity (Fain, 2023b).

Indiana

Indiana has launched several initiatives related to SBH and LERs. The state has participated in both cohorts of the NGA's Skills-Driven State Community of Practice, due in part to the success of its SBH- and LER-related initiatives. Several efforts in Indiana paved the way for the development of statewide LERs: the Indiana Credential Registry and e-Transcript initiatives of the CHE, the Workforce and Talent initiative of the state's Economic Development Corporation, the Institute for Workforce Excellence of the state Chamber of Commerce, and the Indiana Achievement Wallet of Western Governors University (Kuehr, 2022b). In 2022, the NGA funded the development of statewide LER systems via a \$150,000 grant (Kuehr, 2022a; Snape, 2022). Indiana also partnered with the Markle Foundation's Skillful Initiative to create the Governor's Coaching Corps, a program that provided skills-focused training and related tools to career coaching professionals from workforce centers, schools, and nonprofits (Markle Foundation, 2021).

Indiana put SBH to the test in 2019 by eliminating degree requirements for most IT positions in the state government (Levinson, 2023). The Indiana Office of Technology (IOT) was the first agency to use the State Earn and Learn (SEAL) designation to hire alternatively skilled workers (IOT, 2020). Most of the SEAL candidates participate in a 12-month program that aims to guide Indiana residents from their previous job into a state IT role (IOT, 2020; Levinson, 2023). The state has hired 57 people through SEAL, 42 of whom have graduated from the connected 12-month apprenticeship program (IOT, 2020; Trinkle, 2022). Though SEAL is still relatively small in scale, it recently received an *Indianapolis Business Journal* HR Impact award and has a 90 percent success rate for program participants being hired to government IT jobs (Freed, 2022; IOT, 2023).

North Dakota

North Dakota has participated in both phases of the NGA’s Skills-Driven State Community of Practice. The state’s IT department was the starting point for implementation of its SBH policies. The highly centralized North Dakota Information Technology Department, which oversees cybersecurity for the state’s entire public sector, has begun to revise job listings to eliminate degree and certification requirements (Freed, 2022; Wood, 2019). This change was spearheaded by Michael Gregg, the state’s chief information security officer (Stone, 2023).

North Dakota has been a leader in terms of LER systems. The state was among the first to develop a digital credential publishing application to include high school transcripts: Open Credential Publisher, launched in 2022. The app was developed via grants from the National Center for Education Statistics and the Walmart Corporation (North Dakota Information Technology, 2022). This digital credential or “learner wallet” app allows North Dakotans to store their degrees, certifications, credentials, badges, and skills in one place. The state’s workforce boards have partnered with EDL’s XCredit program to incorporate XCredit credentials into these wallets.

Cross-State Themes

Among our six focus states, a few themes emerged: the role of influencer organizations, the importance of governor's offices, and the ways in which funding shapes policy.

All six states were members of the National Governors Association's Skills-Driven State Community of Practice. Connecticut and Colorado participated in Phase 1 of this project, while Alabama, Arkansas, North Dakota, and Indiana participated in both Phases 1 and 2. The Community of Practice aims to promote the adoption of LERs at the state level and encourages state leaders and governor's office employees as they work to connect skills-based training to SBH practices.

We observed several commonalities among the governor's offices in our focus states. All were members of the Rework America State Alliance, which emerged from the Markle Foundation's Skillful Initiative. They tended to be the drivers of their state's initiatives related to SBH and LERs, and their efforts were often part of a wider workforce or education vision like Alabama Works! or Arkansas LEARNs. In some states—e.g., Arkansas and Connecticut—these efforts included the creation of a governor-appointed workforce advisory board. Executive orders were a useful strategy for promoting SBH and/or LERs in Arkansas, Colorado, and Connecticut. In Colorado and Connecticut, the state governments employed the tactic of leading by example to promote SBH by removing or reducing degree requirements for state employment. Similar state government SBH efforts were confined to the IT departments in Indiana and North Dakota at the time of our study, but Indiana's innovative connected apprenticeship program, SEAL, is an interesting development that may be scaled up or replicated in other states (Quaintance, 2023).

Among our focus states, funding came from many sources—e.g., the federal government, state governments, and influencer organizations. The most notable example of federal grant influence among our six focus states was found in Arkansas, where the state's Ready for Life platform was partially funded through the CARES Act. State governments in most of the focus states allocated money in their budgets to support SBH and/or LERs; one example of this is the state grant funding for the skills-based Lonoke Business Academy in Arkansas. Influencer organizations like the Markle Foundation and SkillsFWD provided funding both to support developments in SBH and LERs at the state level and for specific related programs within states; five of our six focus states received funding from at least one of these sources.

LERs, SBH, and XCredit

These case studies connect to EDL's XCredit program in two key ways. First, given that XCredit provides job seekers the opportunity to validate and document their 21st Century Skills, state support for digital LERs presents an important opportunity for XCredit to increase the recognition of and demand for the awards it grants to job seekers. As states create and promote these digital records, digital credentials like those offered by XCredit will become more common and potentially more trusted. Ideally, if XCredit were to be routinely incorporated into states' LERs the way they already are in North Dakota, they will become more valuable in the labor market.

Second, state SBH policies could impact the pace at which validated 21st Century Skills gain recognition in the job market. While all jobs require these broad competencies, they do not carry the same weight in the hiring process across fields. The ability to demonstrate these skills may be less pivotal in hiring decisions for technical occupations, for example, where knowledge of specific tools and processes is required and likely to be more highly valued than "soft" skills. As such, if SBH remains generally confined to IT departments, as they were in Indiana and North Dakota, validation of the specific technical competencies required in IT may remain the focus of LERs. However, if broader SBH strategies like those on the books in Colorado and Connecticut become more common, validating broadly applicable skills may be more significant for job seekers.

These two observations point to potential intersections between XCredit and developing state policies. But both possibilities depend on developing evidence of XCredit's effectiveness for job seekers. States will be more willing to incorporate XCredit into their LERs if they are provided with evidence that employees with these documented skills have better outcomes or demonstrate better performance than other workers. States may also be more open to broadening their SBH policies on the basis of such evidence.

Conclusion

1. To do SBH and LERs well, it is important to provide financial support for public agencies and institutions that serve as conduits between job seekers and employers. How can influencer organizations support community colleges and other providers of non-degree credentials?
2. The full potential of SBH and LERs cannot be realized without long-term commitments to their development from state governments. Governors often lead the charge for SBH and LERs, but policy changes initiated via executive order may not be sustainable, as they can simply be thrown out by the next governor. There is also a limited evidence base to support SBH and LERs, which need to be further studied in order to be fully understood.
3. State governments can promote SBH and LERs through strategic partnerships with organizations that have insight into worker perspectives, such as trade associations or labor unions. For example, in Colorado, the governor's SBH policies have the support of the state employees union. Partnerships with state workers unions in particular may be an effective way to promote SBH, since many SBH initiatives are focused around state government employees.

While SBH is an already emerging trend among state governments and major corporations alike, many aspects of this practice—e.g., its sustainability or longevity, its impact on the economy, its benefits to new hires—remain unclear. While major business and finance-oriented publications frequently write about the promise of SBH practices, there is limited research on its effectiveness, particularly in terms of learner outcomes in the labor market. In fact, all that exists to date is a limited study of a program out of Western Governor's University and some think-tank analyses (Butrica & Mudrazija, 2022; DeMark et al., 2022; DeMark & Kozyrev, 2021).

This preliminary exploration of state policies has helped crystallize several sets of more specific questions about SBH and LERs. Some of these questions are about hiring practices: Do companies and state governments with SBH policies materially change their hiring practices? How do they view LERs, and do LERs change their hiring practices? Other questions revolve around individual decision-making: Do SBH policies change the way potential job candidates think about their chances of being hired or affect their confidence in their ability to succeed in a role? Do SBH policies influence non-degree-holders' decisions to pursue certain roles or careers? Do these policies make individuals less likely to pursue postsecondary education? Still other questions have to do with institutional perceptions of BH policies: What do different stakeholder groups—e.g., credential providers, employers, job seekers, labor unions—think about SBH policies? Finally, there is a need to explore the range of ways skills are being validated across states. While our research has identified states' commitments to SBH in general, it is yet to be seen how many of these states will approach the validation and documentation of skills.

While SBH is still emergent as a trend, particularly in the world of community colleges and CTE, careful study is needed to determine the impact of these policies, with state governments serving as a particularly appealing area of focus. The aims of SBH are lofty, with many proponents speaking of their potential to promote equity and connect people to quality jobs through the breaking of the “paper ceiling.” It will take careful study, however, to determine whether the practice truly benefits degreeless individuals.

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