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Beyond Projects: Building a Skills-based System

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For many employers, it is difficult to determine what a potential employee is truly qualified for if they hold a high school diploma, or even a two- or four-year college degree. With 70 percent of community college students--and more generally, half of all undergraduates--needing to take at least one remedial course, it is no guarantee that a high school graduate is prepared for credit-bearing courses in college. Even with a four-year degree it is questionable whether a student is ready to enter their chosen career field. Let's dig deeper and look at grade point averages or individual grades; it isn't any easier to ascertain what knowledge or skills an individual has. For instance, if you received a "B" grade in a college-level math course, what does that tell me about what you know or have mastered?

As a result of this lack of transparency in the traditional credentialing system, there have been several efforts to change the conversation by focusing on the recognition of skills. However, several requirements need to be in place for a scalable skills-based system to be successful, including the adoption of a common standards-based language for describing skills, the development of new public-private partnerships and the exchange of data that can support competency-based credentialing.

One response to the skills gap is that employers are focusing more than ever on industry credentialing as a means of identifying specific skill sets. For example, manufacturing is an industry that is impacted heavily by skills shortages brought on by the need for more replacement workers as many retire. There are as many as 600,000 manufacturing jobs going unfilled today. In response, the Manufacturing Institute has promoted a sequence of industry-recommended stackable credentials in an effort to create more transparency and trust around what skills an individual has when they apply for a job.

Another approach has been to foster competency-based learning in our schools. There is a growing debate across the country about how to translate courses, such as math and science, into competencies and skills. Many states are currently experimenting with this type of disruptive innovation, leading to different models for what a skills-based future might look like. New