Micro-pathways Explained

Micro-pathways will be an important bridge to the future in this new agile and uncertain age

Why Micro-pathways?

You’ve heard Udacity and EdX (two learning platforms) recommend nano-degrees. You may have heard that the number of “micro” credentials on offer has doubled in the past year to more than 700,000. Certificates and non-degree programs are the fastest growing learning offerings at community colleges over the last year. These are all attempts to break down degrees into targeted units of learning. And units that name the skills employers are asking for in job postings. But even the community colleges offering them believe we all need a more user-friendly and explainable way to organize and stack these options for learners.

At the Lab, we define a micro-pathway as “two or more stackable credentials that can be packaged as a validated market signal connecting learners to employment in high growth careers.”

It is most important as a kind of subway map to show consumers where they can go to hop on a reliable transport to marketable skills. It shows the stops along the way, the transfer stations, the fastest route, a destination, and other places they might go if they change their mind along the journey. For a high school student, it is critical to be able to test different skill-building journeys, but to understand how they might link together into a degree.

As we speak, billions of dollars are being invested by companies hoping to win parts of the race shifting us all toward a skills-based economy. Artificial intelligence, precision data skills assessment, virtual reality training environments. At the heart of this, the part providing navigation, relevance and motivation for the learner, will be that subway map of micro-pathways.

Example Pathway

Micro-pathways are modular, allowing for flexibility and stackability— a choose-your-own pathway for learners.

Credential #2 can be earned independently of Credential #1. Together, both credentials can stack together to allow for a learner to earn Credential #3.

Each credential connects learners to employment in a higher-paying position.
Defining Criteria

We see five key data points that a quality micro-pathway must address to help learners navigate the rising sea of opportunities as colleges, employers, content providers rush to fill the “if-not-degree-now-what” space.

1. Verified regional data confirms salary increases: If this is a “stack” of two to three credentials or certifications, each one must demonstrate a reasonable salary bump toward median wage income or higher.

2. Can weave school and work together: As 70% of college learners are working at least half-time, it’s essential that micro-pathways can be completed in parallel to work, or even through the workplace (as we are designing with several partners).

3. Stackability: that those skills “stack” towards a degree and/or recognized industry certifications in a portable way (which means you can earn some skills with one provider and others with the next provider and not have to start over).

4. Fast, with milestones: the credential can be earned quickly. Meaningful, salary-bumping milestones, toward a recognized pathway credential that can be earned in nine to 18 months.

5. Includes 21st century skills: as the liberal arts degree loses influence, we must still bring credentials for critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving into the shorter-term pathways. These skills improve hire-ability across all jobs and are the most critical for moving up a career ladder to management.

Micro-pathways in Response to COVID-19

Coronavirus gives us the moment to put a stake in the ground and clarify for high school, community college students, or any younger or older adult who wants to upskill, what is the new ticket to their American Dream. Roughly 60% of Americans say they have lost hours or their jobs entirely, according to a new Strada tracking poll. And many say they would hope to reskill to a different career entirely.

We feel particular urgency to design through this crisis with underserved populations, as COVID-19 is leaving a devastating wake of rippling impact for them. And going back to college, which has been a safe harbor in previous recessions, doesn’t feel safe because of rising costs, tenuous savings for middle and lower income learners, and frankly, the relevance and length of many degree offerings.
Logistics Pathway / Working Full-time
Developed with Goodwill San Antonio for Employees in San Antonio, TX

Hourly Median Income in San Antonio, TX

$22.43/hour

Goodwill Retail Worker
$11.05/hour

Collaboration Microcredential Embedded

BGMT 1301: Supervision + Collaboration Microcredential

time to complete: 8 weeks
cost: $297

Opportunity for Pay Raise
The first certificate and 21st century skills microcredential likely make an employee eligible for a pay raise, while earning the next credential and before securing new, higher-skilled jobs.

Logistics Specialist
$18.03/hour

Logistics Coordinator
$17.69/hour

Medical Technician
$20.07/hour

Logistics Management Level 1 Certificate

time to complete: 18 months
cost: $2,079

Micro-pathways Explained
Healthcare Pathway: Associate Supervisor / Full-time Enrolled
Developed with Virginia Western Community College for Learners in Roanoke, VA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Hourly Median Income in Roanoke, VA</th>
<th>Time to Complete</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Waiter</td>
<td>$10/hour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Certified Medical Assistant</td>
<td>$15.14/hour</td>
<td>3.5 months</td>
<td>$2,226</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Communication Microcredential</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical Office Specialist</td>
<td>$19.40/hour</td>
<td>11.5 months</td>
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<td>Associate Supervisor</td>
<td>$24.10/hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.A.S. Degree with Medical Administrative Management Specialization</td>
<td>$24.10/hour</td>
<td>1 year + 7.5 months</td>
<td>$4,819</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hourly Median Income in Roanoke, VA