The current state is not news: our existing systems of education and workforce in America are inextricably linked, and yet this link is faulty.

It’s assumed that to have a successful career, after leaving their K12 experience, learners should spend some time in college, learning and developing skills, and they must exit with a degree.

The Existing System of Learning and Work, as Intended

This degree, in theory, communicates to potential employers something about what these learners know and can do. Employers can then theoretically match their hiring needs to the learning communicated by the degree or transcript. In the event that additional learning is needed, those employees can go back to school or take further classes, and the cycle continues.

However, this process actually works as intended for very few. In reality, rather than moving seamlessly from college to degree to employment, those who attempt to use the system as it’s intended find that it’s full of holes and cracks to slip through.
The existing system assumes that college is necessarily the first step for everyone. However, it’s actually not a viable or even desirable option for many, who find it too expensive, inflexible, time-consuming, and increasingly - not a guarantee of a good job.

Those who enroll often don’t complete, and are left with significant debt and no degree to show for it. They then enter the world of work with few signals to employers about their skills and capabilities. This is often mistakenly taken to mean that these learners do not possess valuable skills and capabilities.

This issue is especially pervasive for those the Lab calls “New Majority Learners” - those who have historically been and continue to be marginalized by current systems of learning and work, in large part because it was not designed for them. Here you can see a few populations who are part of the New Majority, though this is by no means an exhaustive list.
In their own words, here is how some New Majority Learners experience frustration with the current system.

TOWARD A FUTURE STATE

The field is coalescing around the need to shift from this broken and inequitable system of learning and work to a more equitable skills-based ecosystem.

Just as the existing system is powered by degrees, this new system must also be powered by a trusted currency, one that learners, employers, and educational institutions alike deem valuable. And one that is more universally accessible.

So what is the currency in this new system? Skills.
There is tremendous potential for a skills-based ecosystem to help individuals overcome these systemic barriers. In a skills-based ecosystem:

- College is reimagined as **skills-based programming**, which may but does not always lead to a degree.
- The degree is reimagined as **skills-based credentials** of all kinds - short-term, stackable, competency-based.
- And **hiring systems** are reimagined to be **skills-based** as well, matching the skills needed for a role with the skills possessed by a candidate.

In other words: skills-based programming leads to skills-based credentials, which are leveraged in skills-based hiring and advancement processes. Put it all together, and it looks more like this:

![Future State: Skills-Based Ecosystem](image)

We at the Lab believe in a skills-based ecosystem as a model to drive in a positive and more equitable direction. But in some ways, it’s still inadequate. There are vulnerabilities in this new model, when thinking about its long-term sustainability.

It’s not enough for the future system to be **skills-based**. It must be **validated-skills-based**. This means that any skills gained and credentialed, and then shared with employers, must first be validated.

**What is skills validation?** *(working definition)*

The process by which an assertion ("I assert that I have a skill!") is substantiated.

➔ Typically conducted by qualified 3rd party
➔ Creates trust that individual possesses a skill
➔ Based on a shared understanding of meaning of a skill
➔ Indicates level and context of a skill
➔ Can be conducted through various methods
Importantly, validation can occur based on both formal and informal learning and skill development. Individuals can and should be able to validate skills gained through lived and working experience, alongside those they may have gained through their formal education.

Skills-based programming, which helps learners develop skills, must incorporate validation - requiring demonstrations of mastery of all skills. This will lead to skills-based credentials, which are awarded only based on validated skills, including those gained through informal learning. And employers' trust in skills-based hiring will grow as they hire based only on validated skills which are borne out in the workplace.

Without validation woven throughout each facet of the ecosystem, there's a lot of assumption and guesswork involved. This might look like asserting that because someone worked as a receptionist, they have effective customer service skills, or that because someone attended a webinar, they now possess knowledge on that topic. These assertions haven't been fully validated and may actually be false.

As employers and other stakeholders evaluate the trustworthiness of this new skills currency, an abundance of false assertions poses a risk to the adoption and sustainability of all skills-based efforts long-term. Validation of skills is critical. We can't achieve our desired state - an equitable skills-based ecosystem - without a scalable, interoperable set of validation tools and methods in place.
EDUCATION DESIGN LAB’S XCREDIT

Through its XCredit initiative, Education Design Lab is prototyping this scalable, interoperable set of validation tools and methods, aiming to strengthen stakeholder confidence in the skills-based ecosystem. XCredit – or “Experience Credit” – seeks to validate skills an individual has gained through their life and working experiences, as currency for future opportunities.

With a distinguished group of technology partners, the Lab has spent the past two years building and piloting both (1) an initial set of skill validation tools and methods, and (2) an interoperable ecosystem. Together, these components will enable individuals to leverage their validated skills toward better employment and economic mobility.

These efforts are just the beginning. Additional validation tools and methods are needed which reflect the diversity of people’s lived experience and the broad and ever-changing array of in-demand skills. Validation opportunities need to be made widely accessible. Embedding skills validation throughout the full skills-based talent ecosystem (programming, credentialing, and hiring) is a long-term, large-scale effort which will require the contributions and support of many.

THE XCREDIT SKILLS VALIDATION NETWORK

To that end, Education Design Lab has launched the XCredit Skills Validation Network: an action-oriented, future-focused community which seeks to expand opportunities for the validation of skills gained through work and life experience. The Network will serve as a conduit to exploration, development, advancement, and collaboration between career navigation systems, assessment technologies, job placement and worker advancement organizations, skills data sets and platforms, and skills wallets and ecosystems.

Network members will collectively prototype a set of new skills validation tools and methods, and provide thought leadership to drive a national discourse.
The Network has thus far brought together a group of innovators from more than 10 organizations from across the skills-based ecosystem who are committed to these goals. While the Lab’s work supports New Majority Learners more broadly, the XCredit Skills Validation Network is targeting its efforts at a particular sub-group: Individuals who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs), which Opportunity@Work defines as those who are “at least 25 years old, currently active in the workforce, have a high school diploma, but do not have a bachelor’s degree.” As of 2021, STARs represent 50% of the US workforce.

In partnership with the Lab, Members seek to leverage the Network’s collective resources and expertise to pursue that which individually would not be possible.

**CONNECTING THE DOTS**

Our existing systems of education and work are excluding, undervaluing, and failing to meet the needs of too many simply because they do not align with a narrow perception of what it means to be talented or have potential.

And yet, as we continue our pursuit of a new system, a new labor market currency, we must be careful that the replacement is meaningful, trustworthy, and equitable. We must ensure it honors the hard-earned skills gained through experience, while also building confidence in employers who are depending on those skills for the success of their organizations. Skills validation can help us do both. **It’s imperative that we get this right.**