From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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USE CASE 1

Making Parenting Skills Visible

Validating Durable Skills Developed Through Parenting

Education Design Lab

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36
student parents took at least 1 assessment

22
validated their skills

#1
benefit sought: confidence + self-awareness

146
student parents surveyed

5
student parents interviewed

About the Learners

Student parents are one of the fastest-growing and most underserved segments of higher education.

Simultaneously enrolled in college and raising at least one child — often while working and serving as the primary caregiver and breadwinner — they develop sophisticated organizational, emotional, and durable competencies that are extremely in-demand across industries right now.

The Use Case

The student parent pilot was set up to test a specific question:

Can parenting experience be validated in a way that is credible to employers, legible in hiring systems, and meaningful to the people who lived it?

Our Partners

Participants were recruited through two channels: 18 came through Generation Hope, and 18 came through the Education Design Lab's broader student parent network — reflecting the Lab's ongoing body of work with this population.

Generation Hope is a nonprofit providing direct support and national advocacy and research for student parents in college.Through its Scholar Program, Generation Hope provides holistic support — scholarships, coaching, and wraparound services — to teen parents pursuing college degrees across the Washington, DC region, Greater New Orleans area, and the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

The Challenge

Student parents are not simply “busy learners.” They are operating across multiple high-stakes systems at once: school, work, parenting, finances, transportation, childcare, and family support.

That responsibility and complexity builds durable skills.

The problem is not that student parents lack evidence. The problem is that their strongest evidence often comes from contexts hiring systems do not recognize. A student parent may be making complex decisions daily, but if those decisions happened in a caregiving context, they are often treated as personal responsibility rather than professional capability.

This creates a translation gap.

Student parents may know they are capable. They may even have proof in their daily lives. But when asked to present that proof in an interview, resume, or professional profile, the language available to them often narrows. They are expected to speak in the vocabulary of paid work, even when some of their strongest skill development happened outside paid work.

> “When I’ve been in interviews, they never ask those kinds of questions. They want work-related experiences, so it’s almost impossible to name situations from your personal life.
>
> — XCredit participant

The challenge, then, is not only recognition. It is legitimacy. **Can caregiving be treated as valid evidence of workforce capability, not as something learners must work around?**

The Idea

Test whether performance-based assessments could validate skills developed through caregiving and give participants a portable credential they could use beyond the pilot.

Deeper learning questions:

- Could the assessment help participants see their own experiences differently?
- Could it give them language for skills they had been practicing but not naming?
- Could a badge help them carry caregiving-based skills into professional spaces with more confidence?

What Was Tested

The pilot deployed XCredit to student parents, giving them access to four durable skill assessments. These were prioritized based on a prior survey in which student parents identified the skills they believed they had developed through caregiving and the benefits they most hoped to gain from validation:

- Creative Problem-Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Resilience
- Empathy

What Happened

The strongest outcome was not only that 22 student parents validated their skills. It was that the assessment process changed how some participants interpreted their own experience.

Several participants completed more than the minimum number of assessments, not simply to collect badges, but because the process helped them reflect. For some, the assessment confirmed strengths they already suspected. For others, it disrupted their assumptions. One participant earned a credential in the skill she least expected to demonstrate. Another said the empathy assessment expanded her understanding of the skill itself.

This matters because many student parents are not starting from a blank page. They are starting from years of complex responsibility that has not been formally named. Validation gave them a structure for noticing what was already there.

At the same time, the pilot showed that a credential does not automatically become usable. Participants still needed support translating assessment results into resumes, LinkedIn language, interview examples, and professional narratives.

Top Findings

The findings below translate pilot learnings into practical design guidance for work-learn ecosystem practitioners building skills-based programs. Rather than asking whether student parents have durable skills, the pilot surfaced a more actionable question: what does it take for skills developed through caregiving to be validated, trusted, and used across education and employment systems? These findings show that quality validation depends not only on assessment, but also on how evidence is defined, how results are communicated, and how the experience is delivered for learners navigating complex lives.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
A badge is useful only when paired with a translation layer.	The pilot showed that digital credentials can help student parents carry evidence into professional spaces. But it also revealed the limits of credentialing on its own. A badge can say a skill was validated. It cannot, by itself, teach a participant how to introduce that skill in an interview, explain caregiving as evidence, or respond when an employer expects only paid work examples. That is where the next layer of support becomes essential. Participants shared needing practical tools that connect the credential to use: resume bullets, LinkedIn language, interview scripts, coaching prompts, and examples that make caregiving-based evidence feel appropriate in professional settings.	**Transparency + Trust; Data, Security, + Integration** Skills validation should provide clear, understandable results that help individuals know what was validated, how it was validated, and how to act on that evidence. For student parents, this means pairing credentials with transparent feedback, resume language, LinkedIn guidance, interview practice, and secure, portable skills data they can share across career systems.
Caregiving should be treated as a real-world context for performance-based evidence.	The pilot challenged a narrow view of what counts as valid skill evidence. Student parents demonstrated durable skills through responsibilities often categorized as "personal": managing competing needs, making decisions under pressure, coordinating care, advocating for children, and adapting when plans change. These experiences are not simply background stories. They are real-world contexts where durable skills are practiced and tested.	**Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts; Bias Mitigation.** High-quality validation should recognize skills gained outside formal education and paid work where appropriate. Assessment content should avoid privileging only traditional workplace examples and should be designed to capture credible evidence from lived experience without lowering standards.
For student parents, the delivery model determines whether validation is actually reachable.	Student parents were interested in participating, but their availability was shaped by caregiving, work, school, transportation, and household responsibilities. The self-paced digital model made participation possible, while stipends recognized the real cost of time. Platform friction, especially around navigation and retakes, created barriers. For this population, flexibility has to be built into the experience itself, not added as a support after launch.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity; Scalability + Adaptability.** Equitable validation for student parents requires mobile access, asynchronous completion, automatic saving, clear progress indicators, visible retake pathways, and compensation for time. These design choices are not accommodations. They are core conditions for participation and scale.

Replication Guidance

For Organizations Considering Skills Validation for Student Parents

The XCredit student parent pilot offers a practical framework for any organization evaluating whether to add durable-skills validation for caregiving populations.

Before You Launch

+ **Partner through trust.** Recruit via organizations that already hold trust with student parents—scholarship programs, community colleges with robust student parent services, or nonprofits like Generation Hope. Cold outreach usually does not work.
+ **Budget for compensation.** Stipends are not recruitment sweeteners—they signal that participant time has value and that their constraints are understood.
+ **Design for interruption.** The tool must work on mobile, save progress automatically, and resume seamlessly. Any re-entry barrier will cost engagement.
+ **Invest in articulation support.** Pair validation with coaching or peer cohort sessions that help participants name and narrate their skills in professional contexts. A badge without voice addresses only half the problem.
+ **Test navigation before launch.** Run retake flows, progress visibility, and credential redemption with actual student parents. These friction points directly limit impact.

When Validation May Work

- The population is embedded in a trusted community or program that can endorse the tool.
- The tool is mobile-accessible, self-paced, and tolerant of interruption.
- Skill domains map genuinely to competencies exercised in caregiving, grounded in workforce frameworks.
- There is a clear pathway from credential to use—a job application, promotion conversation, or career counseling touchpoint.
- Participants are in a stable enough place that professional development is within reach.

When to Reconsider

- No trusted intermediary exists in the deployment context. Participation will be low regardless of tool quality.
- The platform requires sustained, uninterrupted time or in-person attendance.
- There is no articulation or language support for credential holders.
- The issuing institution has no recognized credibility in the labor markets participants care about.

Voices from the Pilot

> I'm multitasking, delegating, planning, organizing, budgeting, being a health aid, teacher, cook, psychologist, coordinator, and project manager all in the same day.
>
> **— XCredit survey respondent**

> The skill I believed least in myself was the one I ended up getting. Being able to take it again allowed me to see what the intention was.
>
> **— XCredit participant**

> Having these questions really helped me understand myself more. I don't talk about a lot of these things, and it makes me reflect a lot better.
>
> **— XCredit participant**

Learn more about the Lab + our work

Learn more on our website
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