

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

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The New Exit Exam ... for Jobs

If college degrees represent courses of instruction completed, what measures what a graduate can do with the knowledge obtained?

To an increasing number of employers and job-training experts, the answer is a [Career Readiness Certificate](#). A portable skills credential based on nationally normed assessments, the CRC has now been fully recognized by 16 states since its fall 2004 [introduction in Virginia](#). Additionally, nearly 30 states are either deploying certificates locally, in the process of developing a program around the certificate or have shown an active interest in doing so.

The certificate is mostly used for jobs that do not require a bachelor's degree, but it is becoming common in many fields in which people are educated at community colleges. As a result, community colleges are playing key roles in creating certificate programs, and many are starting to require the certificate for entry to or exit from certain programs, or linking programs to their ability to prepare students to obtain certificates.

Considering the state of the U.S. economy and the reality of globalization, the CRC is "an idea whose time has come," according to Barbara Bolin, pioneer in the development of the certificate and president of the [National Association for Career Credentialing](#). It is a myth, she said, that employers want educators to provide them with fully trained employees for specific jobs. Instead, given the rapid growth of skills requirements in today's working world, she counters that employers would rather have educators provide them with employees that are "trainable" for any job.

"Over the last 10 to 15 years there has been a weakening confidence in the academic credentials with which people graduate from high school and college," Bolin said. "The CRC is the perfect complement to those credentials."

Even though the certificates have different names in different states — some refer to them as "work readiness" or "work ready" certificates — they are based on the same set of criteria, making them portable throughout the country. The current CRC model is based on three tests that are a part of [WorkKeys](#), a

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product developed by [ACT](#). The tests [measure reading for information, applied mathematics, and locating information](#). Upon completion of these assessments, the test taker is graded and may qualify for one of three certificates recognizing his or her level of competency: [bronze, silver or gold](#). In order for these certificates to have merit and to encourage the growth of their issuance, some argue that more employers must make use of them and list the CRC as either a recommended or required credential in their job listings. Many of the states issuing the certificate are heavily marketing it to employers and encouraging more of them to make use of it.

“Our huge focus is increasing employer participation,” said Peggy Torrey, deputy secretary for workforce in South Carolina’s Department of Commerce, adding that around 200 employers in the state currently list the certificate as either recommended or required on some job listings. “I think both employers and employees are reluctant to make [the CRC] a requirement until there’s a demand out there. Businesses don’t know about a credential until they see it, and job seekers don’t know about a credential until people ask for it.”

In South Carolina, however, the state is already making use of the certificate. Paraprofessional teacher aides must obtain a CRC to work in the state if they do not have an associate degree, Torrey said. These proficiency certificates allow these aides to meet the standards of [No Child Left Behind](#).

Some large private employers in CRC-issuing states, however, are starting to use the certificate for both their hiring, training and internal promotion. When an employer lists the CRC as either highly recommended or required in its job listing, Bolin said, it is making use of the certificate as a “pre-screening tool,” ensuring that its hires have a documented skill level. WorkKeys currently has over 15,000 jobs profiled to corresponding CRC scores and many states have [skill banks](#) open to the public.

This allows employers to determine what skills are needed for their jobs and for prospective employees to know for which jobs they are most qualified. Employers can also hire professional job profilers to determine the skill sets needed for a particular job, if desired. Torrey added that some employers in her state use the CRC for internal promotion and accountability as well, rewarding employees who show high skill proficiency and training those who show a lack in certain areas.

The CRC is even helping some employers hone their first-time hiring practices. A Campbell Soup manufacturing facility in North Carolina, for example, recently profiled about 20 jobs using the WorkKeys assessments, according to Stephanie Deese, director of work force initiatives for the North Carolina Community College System. Using these profiles, she said, the company just waived its two-year prior work experience requirement from some of its job listings. Now, anyone with a proficient CRC in hand may come to work for the company.

In states that are embracing the certificate, community colleges are offering the test to their students in different capacities. Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, in North Carolina, is now requiring a certain level of the CRC for entrance into its [pharmacy technician program](#). Deese said the program’s 51 percent attrition rate has been lowered to zero since adopting this requirement.

At Piedmont Community College, also in North Carolina, students enrolled in an upper-level nursing assistants program are being given the CRC to boost their credentials. According to Angela Webb, the college’s director of human resources development/Workforce Investment Act Program, students receiving the college’s “family caregiver certificate” earn nursing assistant certification along with a CRC after being given additional training that goes above and beyond the typical requirements for a certificate. Also, Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College, in South Carolina, is now requiring students in all fields for which there is not a national certification program to take the CRC.

There is a potential for further higher education use in North Carolina, where the CRC is [managed by the community college system](#). Deese and Webb said that some colleges are considering testing all incoming freshman for the CRC, to see where they stand academically. These colleges would then be able to shift their curricula to accommodate the students’ needs. Similar uses for the certificate are blossoming at

community colleges around the country.

To assuage the fears of some who think that the CRC may be seen as a replacement for an academic degree, advocates of the certificate say that its presence at the community college level does not devalue the associate degree. Rather, some say that the introduction of the CRC to these institutions can only increase their value and role in the economic development as the certificates attract more students.

“Community colleges are just wonderful in their basic charter because they are the most flexible and agile segment of higher education,” Bolin said. “Sometimes community colleges are good at being reactive to business. The CRC allows them to be proactive, in other words go out into the economic development community. The CRC will increase the prestige of some community colleges in meeting those economic needs.”

Still, promoting this certificate is not without its difficulties. Some who present the CRC to employers and educators often find that it is viewed as a lesser credential, only suited to those without academic degrees or for dislocated and disadvantaged workers. Those in workforce development argue that the CRC is for everyone at every skill level. In order to fight this stigma, these promoters ask the certificate’s critics to take the test for themselves.

“Taking the test is a humbling experience, and I’m a Ph.D.,” Torrey said of her experience with the CRC. “There’s a real misconception about the ceiling of the test. It’s a lot higher than people think.”

Now that the CRC, based on ACT’s WorkKeys assessments, has taken root in a number of states, ACT has introduced a certificate of its own. The ACT’s [National Career Readiness Certificate](#) (NCRC) is, according to some critics, a redundancy of the many CRCs being offered at the state level. It is based on the same assessments and is therefore similarly portable. Bolin said, among other issues, some states are concerned about having a vendor’s name on the certificate. There are, however, options available to states concerned about this branding.

“If you look at ACT as a vendor — I think of a vendor as someone who sells hot dogs — there are other ways not to call out ACT on your certificate,” said Scott Stimart, vice president and director of sales for the company’s work force development division, adding that most states pursuing the national certificate do so because they enjoy the association with ACT.

Though Michigan is the only state offering the NCRC as its official work skills certificate, Stimart said about six more states are talking about using the NCRC. The benefit of the ACT-issued certificate is not lost on states without a CRC initiative, which see the NCRC as an easy way of starting a new program in their states. Additionally, Stimart said that those using the national certificate managed by ACT can easily have their certificates verified, a task that may be difficult when verifying from state to state. States currently issuing their own CRCs may also purchase an ACT seal that can be applied to their certificates, adding them to this network.

“It’s an added step that people like to see, but it’s not necessary,” said Torrey of South Carolina’s use of the ACT seal. “We’ve often said that we would like for there to be other vendors in this market. [ACT] is not always easy to deal with.”

Despite some concerns about ACT and its entrance into the CRC-issuing market, Bolin and other advocates of the certificate are optimistic about its future. Nearly a half a million CRCs have been issued in the U.S., according to a new study cited by Bolin. She said the certificate has reached a critical mass of users and its usage can only grow.

“I am absolutely blown away with the rapid expansion,” said Bolin, who was present at the launch of the certificate in Virginia. “Still, we have a lot of marketing to do. We have a lot of work to get everybody in higher ed on board.”