

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Since 2008, Lumina Foundation has been advocating for the goal that 60% of Americans would earn college degrees or other high-quality credentials beyond high school by 2025. Since that time, the nonprofit has been tracking the country's progress with A Stronger Nation, an online searchable data tool.

15 years in, it shows significant progress is being made across the nation, but that educational attainment rates are not equitably distributed. Courtney Brown is Lumina's Vice President of Strategic Impact and Planning and the author of A Stronger Nation. Hey, Courtney. Good seeing you and good hearing you.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Hi, Ramona. Great to be with you today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I know you're updating, you've just released some updates on A Stronger Nation. Before we talk about the progress that is being made, tell me what you are describing as a post-high school credential, certification, degree. Give me a little bit of a scope on what that might encompass.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah, that's a great question. We advocate for learning beyond high school. And when we talk about that, we talk about high-quality learning, and that includes any degree; associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, or higher, as well as a certificate or a workforce certification, so either of those things. So those short-term credentials also matter to the workforce of today and tomorrow.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And so that could be an industry certification with plumbing, electrician.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Welding. Absolutely. And these are certificates that you may get in healthcare. They may be in IT. Anything that actually provides value to an individual.

And when we look at these short-term credentials, these certificates or certifications, we actually determine high quality by a labor market value. So we put a labor market value above a high school degree alone on those. For certifications, it's a 10% labor market value. And for certificates, a 15% labor market value.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is the value that a worker gets, an employee gets, job seeker gets from having one of these post-high school certifications?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

These certificates, these certifications, these short-term credentials are really essential for people to have so they can get a job. So when I think about the Infrastructure Bill, the CHIPS Bill, these things that are coming out, and all the jobs that are going to be created, those individuals that are going to be hired need to have those skills.

They need to have credentialed skills. A certificate in IT, a certification in plumbing help to demonstrate to an employer that they have the skills and knowledge that are necessary to get that job, to actually be successful in that job.

One of the things is that the market is flooded with all types of certificate certifications that you can get. And we want to make sure these are actually valuable to the individual, that they aren't getting a dead-end certification, spending a lot of money getting this, and they aren't actually translating into the workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At one point, I interviewed somebody from Credential Engine, I think they said there was over 9,000 different credentials out there.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Absolutely. I think it's more like 900,000. There's a great deal of credentials in the marketplace. And it is essential. We want to make sure that this is about the individual having something that creates a good job and a good life for them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So when the project started, according to the data, just under 38% of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 had these post-high school degrees, credentials, or certifications. Are we making progress?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

We are absolutely making progress. Over the 15 years, we have increased by 16 percentage points, which is pretty amazing. We're almost at 54% as a nation now for attainment. That includes the short-term credentials as well as degrees.

So it is incredible progress that we have seen. And I'm really happy to see that. In A Stronger Nation, which we've been doing since 2009, which is this report on attainment, we use data from the American Community Survey. And so the most recent data that they have put out is 2021 data. They do this every year. So, every year, they put out the data.

The data from 2020, they just lacked some validity and reliability, we felt. Now, if you remember, in 2020, the pandemic was in full force and data collection was really difficult. So they just didn't have the sample size necessary to get great data.

And so, as a result, we did not publish Stronger Nation in 2020, which means the last time we published it was in 2019. So from 2019 till 2021, the data that we're releasing now, we've seen an almost two percentage point jump in attainment, which is the largest increase we have seen across any two-year period since we started Stronger Nation.

It's incredibly promising. It's incredibly great news for our nation, for individuals, for the future of our economy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is that in each category, people going to college, people getting industry credentials and certification, or is it split up a little bit?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah. There is some differences across credentials. So one of the great things about our Stronger Nation tool, and I would encourage you and to your listeners to go onto our Stronger Nation tool and play around with it. You can find it at [luminafoundation.org](https://luminafoundation.org).

So in that Stronger Nation tool, as you scroll down the page, you can see the credentials broken up by type of credential and the percent that have attained that credential. Now, we don't double-count anyone. Whatever your highest level of credential is, that's where you get counted. So if you have an associate's and a bachelor's, you're just counted as a bachelor's. So we're not double-counting people.

But in the data, what we've seen nationally is that degree attainment increased quite a bit. Degree attainment increased by about two percentage points. Those short-term credentials that we were just talking about pretty much stayed flat or, in some cases, decreased a little bit in 2021.

This could be a whole host of reasons why this had happened. It could be that many of those people that had a certificate or certification got a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree in that year. So they've changed categories, if you will. It could be that.

It could be the labor market. Again, 2021 was a year of continued disruption from the pandemic. And it could be some odd things were happening in the labor market. It could be that individuals weren't actually able to access the training. We know with these short-term credentials, a lot of them are hands-on. So you actually need to be in person to obtain these skills and knowledge.

And in 2021, a lot of what we were doing was virtual. People didn't have the ability to go in and learn how to weld or learn the nursing tools that they may need to do in person. So we may see this change as we move forward, but it's something we need to keep watch on.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's really a great explanation because I was feeling a little concerned when we were talking earlier and you were saying things were slowing down in that field. But if somebody goes on and gets a bachelor's degree, fantastic.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Fantastic. Absolutely. That's what we want. We want these credentials. One of the things when we think about a high-quality credential is they should lead to further learning. They should continue an opportunity for all Americans to have access to the next credential so they can continue to skill and upskill and reskill as necessary.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

At the beginning, I mentioned that, while there's progress, it's not necessarily equitably distributed. Some groups, some races and ethnicities, the rate of attainment is getting better, but they're still lagging a little bit behind the nation.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah, absolutely. Again, on the Stronger Nation tool, you can see these data desegregated by race, ethnicity. And you can look at the trend from 2009 all the way to the most current data in 2021.

So what we saw this year, some good news, is we saw a really large increase by the Hispanic and Latino population. So from 2019 to 2021, their attainment increased by over two and a half... around two and a half percentage points. We saw similar for Black Americans; it increased about two percentage points. This is great news. We really want to see some movement.

Unfortunately, as you said, the attainment for Black Americans, for Hispanic, Latino, and Native American Indians still falls far below that of white Americans or Asian Americans. So where the national attainment rate for degrees, this is just for degrees, is at about 46%, so that's the national degree attainment at about 46%, Black attainment is only at 34%. Hispanic attainment, almost 28%.

And American Indian, Alaska Native attainment is just over 25%. So you can see there's a huge gap there between where these three populations sit and the national average at about 46%. White attainment being at 50%. Asian attainment being over almost 66%.

So while the news is encouraging that we've seen an increase for some of these groups over the last two years, there's still a long way to go before we actually have an equitable attainment here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you have numbers for when the project started 15 years ago where those groups were?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah, absolutely. And on Stronger Nation, you can see that going all the way back to the data from 2009. And it shows a trend line. So we can see all race ethnicities have gone up consistently since 2009, which is good.

We've seen some white attainment and Asian attainment increasing at a little bit faster rate, which is great for those populations. But we also want to see those attainment rates for Black Americans, for Hispanic Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans to increase even more substantially so we don't have these incredible gaps by race ethnicity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also noticed in your report that, state by state, the attainment level has gone up, which is pretty remarkable.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah, absolutely. So we saw, for the first time ever, for degree attainment, and this is just for degree attainment, associate degrees and higher, every single state increased in attainment, which, again, is really good news. And we don't always see that. So every state increased.

It wasn't quite the same story with certificates and certifications. Some states dropped in certificate or certification attainment. And again, that could be a result of their labor markets. They were scattered across the country, so there's no regional reason I can say to that.

But each state, it really depends on their labor market, what was going on there, perhaps, and their population and what they needed at that time. And again, the 2021 data, again, was a time of disruption. And so we'll see how these states bounce back or come back in the next year in the 2022 data.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Courtney, you do look at the younger population in this data. What is it showing? What kind of trends are we seeing?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Yeah. So our Stronger Nation tool allows people to look at the 25 to 64. So the 2025 60% goal is based on the working-age population, 25 to 64. But we also look at the 25-to-34-year-old population as our indicator of where the country is going.

When we set the goal in 2008, the 25-to-34-year-old attainment rate was actually lower than the 25-to-64-year-olds, just slightly lower. And what we're seeing is, since then, that attainment rate has grown significantly and surpassed the national attainment rate.

And the 25-to-34-year-old attainment rate sits at almost 56%, which is really good news to our nation, to the future of our nation, that we have a more educated population coming through. We need to not let our foot off the pedal and continue to make sure that we are educating a younger population as well as adults. But this 56% for the 25-to-34-year-old population is really good news for us.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there anything in the data that really surprised you?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

I was so pleasantly surprised, I will say, about the increase, the almost two percentage point increase over 2019. So that was a welcome surprise.

I am pleased to see the increase in the Hispanic and Latino and the Black American increase in attainment. Love to see that higher, but it's showing progress. And so I was really excited to see that.

The certificate and certification data surprised me a little bit until I started thinking about it more. But I guess I was surprised in a disappointed way that we didn't see increases there. But given everything that was happening during the pandemic, I think given that those things stayed relatively stable, it is probably good news. And it's just something that I'll be keeping a close eye on as we move forward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What changes could be made to encourage people to get these post-high school credentials?

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

If I were an employer, I would look at the state and say this is great. We have a more educated population. We have a more educated nation.

But knowing what skills and knowledge I'm going to need from my employers moving forward, especially... Basically, at full employment right now as a nation, employers are still saying that they're not getting the skills, that we still don't have individuals with the skills and knowledge they need to fill the jobs that they have open.

And so what can employers do to skill and re-skill the employees they have right now? So if I was an employer, I would begin to think about that and the role that these short-term credentials could have. So how can they help their employees in getting those and future employees get these skills so we can actually fill the skills gap that we have as a nation?

Because as we continue to have these new bills come up, Infrastructure Bill, the CHIPS Bill, and whatnot, we need more talent. So that would be one of the first things as an employer, I would say.

If I was a policymaker, I would think about we're on a good role here, we're increasing attainment. Again, it's not sufficient. And if I want to bring new jobs to my community, to my state, to my nation, how do I make sure that my population, my residents, have the skills and knowledge they need?

We need to think about increasing enrollment, increasing completion, and making sure that we're doing it in an equitable way so that everyone has an opportunity. For individuals, so those people that maybe don't have a credential, I think we've seen a lot of people questioning lately, "Well, why do I need to get a credential? Right now, the economy is great. Or I can get a job and I can make a lot more with a high school degree alone than I could a couple of years ago."

"In fact, what is the reason for me to spend my time getting a credential when I can be making more money at a fast-food restaurant or a service industry or a store or something?" And the reality is that, to get a better job, to get the next job, individuals are going to need some type of credentialed learning.

Those jobs aren't going to last. The economy is not continuing... We keep questioning if we're going into a recession. Those jobs are not going to continue to last. And these are the individuals that are going to be hurt the most.

And so we want to make sure that those individuals recognize that getting some type of learning beyond high school, getting on that pathway is really essential for them to get a good job and a good life and move forward.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think all of that is great advice, Courtney. Thank you very much for sharing your time with me.

Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation Vice President:

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Courtney Brown, Lumina Foundation's Vice President of Strategic Impact and Planning, and the author of A Stronger Nation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Thank you for listening.