

CASE STUDY #2

WELLSPRING INITIATIVE PHASE II

BRIDGING THE GAP

MICRO-CREDENTIALS FOR
PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS

PROJECT REPORT

Wellspring is a multi-year initiative of the [1EdTech Foundation](#) and [IMS Global Learning Consortium](#) aiming to accelerate the adoption of an education-to-work ecosystem based on open technology standards. Wellspring envisions an environment where educators and employers can collaborate on education curricula focused on skills, learners control their skills-based achievements through secure and verifiable [digital credentials](#), and employers can find highly qualified talent based on their verifiable credentials. The initiative establishes proof points through research, practice, and demonstration as a roadmap for talent ecosystem stakeholders to achieve digital transformation based upon proven open standards. See the [Wellspring Initiative](#) for more information.

This case study shares the practical experiences of the Wellspring Project’s C3PO* team related to the importance of digital credentials and corresponding competency frameworks in creating a professional career pathway in high-need job roles. The robust project team incorporated broad representation to inform, design, validate, and adopt a regional system for attracting, retaining, and upskilling direct support professionals.

USING MICRO-CREDENTIALS TO PROFESSIONALIZE A FIELD

The job role of direct support professional (DSP)—an individual who directly supports those with intellectual or developmental disabilities—has been challenging to fill and retain with quality expertise and talent. Despite training, identified core competencies, and a code of ethics, wages are low, and turnover is high.

A 2017 report to the United States president by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals describes the situation as a national crisis. Kansas, in response to this scarcity of talent, worked to build an innovative, collaborative, and sustainable model to cultivate a diverse talent pipeline and retain those already in the field.

A team composed of representatives from Wichita State University, Sedgwick County Developmental Disability Organization, InterHab, Inc. ResCare Central Kansas, and the Ohio Alliance of Direct Support Professionals joined the Wellspring project to accelerate work already underway to respond to the DSP identification and retention talent dire need.

This team, known as the Community Connections Career Partnership Opportunity (C3PO), included academic stakeholders, service provider employers, and national, inter-state, state, and local industry associations who collaborated to build a tiered training structure built on a foundation of aligned competencies.

While Wichita State’s Kim Moore masterfully managed the team, Dee Nighswonger of Sedgwick County Developmental Disability Organization served as the primary content expert and was instrumental in the organizational boundary spanning connections, design of the content frameworks, and extensive validation across many stakeholders with a vested interest in the project outcomes.



*Sedgwick County...
working for you*



*The C3PO team included representatives from Wichita State University, Sedgwick County Developmental Disability Organization, InterHab, Inc. ResCare Central Kansas, and the Ohio Alliance of Direct Support Professionals.

Building a Robust Talent Pipeline of Direct Support Professionals

The results of C3PO's work included a [series of academic credentials](#), a [multi-provider job role list of competencies](#), and alignment with both the [Ohio](#) and [National Alliance](#) for Direct Support Professional curriculum and competency areas with skills. These deliverables are poised to support the Kansas "Crisis in Care" reported by Interhab and efforts at the state level to accelerate a solution to elevate the job role of DSP to professional status.

The academic framework included three certificates, with eight different micro-credentials appropriate for high school pathways, traditional college-age students, adults reskilling to the field, and those looking to advance within current roles (Table 1). By targeting a broad range of potential learners in flexible, convenient delivery formats, the aim is to expand awareness, interest, and access to those who may be unemployed, underemployed, or just entering the employment pipeline. Faculty engagement and validation were critical to designing the competency structures and adherence to academic governance processes. Even more important was the "industry" validation and contributions through a series of feedback sessions with InterHab, plus other sessions that included identifying skill priorities and commonalities across providers. The [T-Profile tool](#), designed and facilitated by [Education Design Lab](#), was utilized to identify the critical [21st-century and technical skill competencies](#).

T-Profile Tool

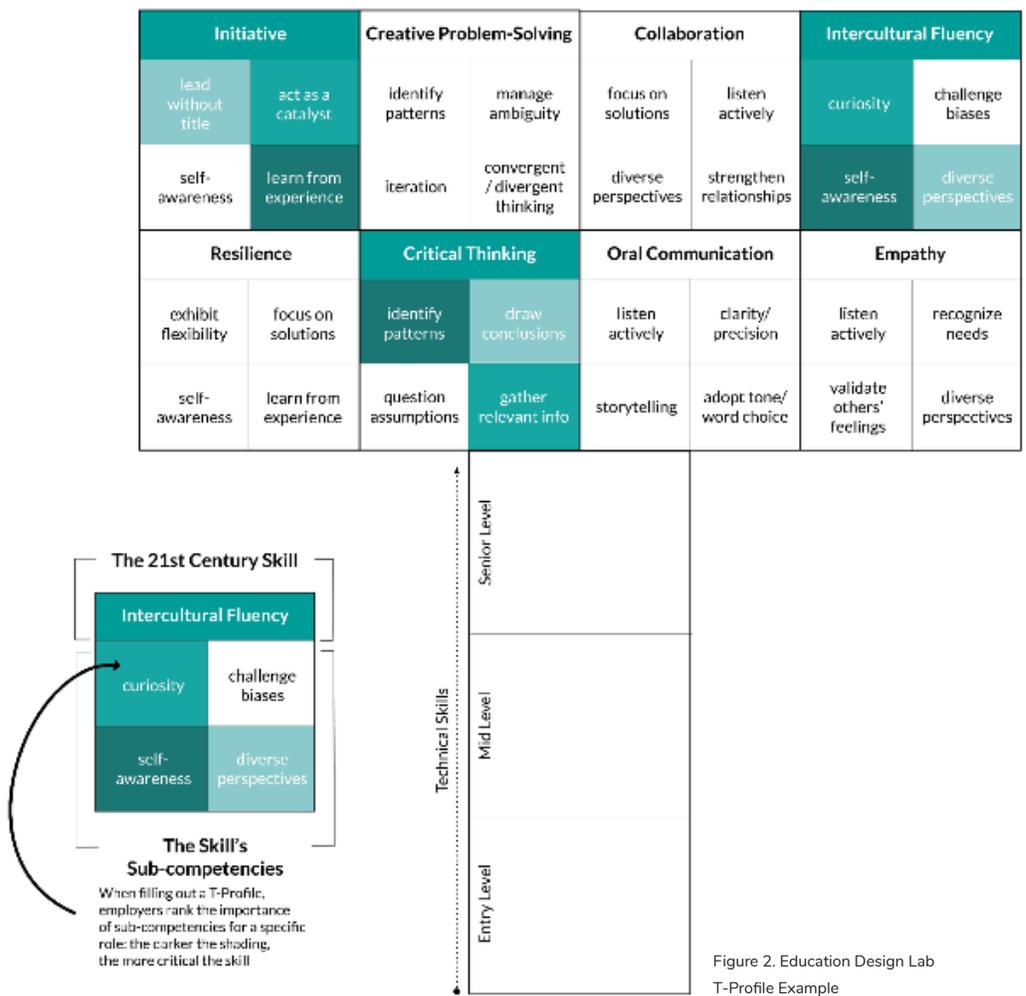


Figure 2. Education Design Lab T-Profile Example

Considerations for Successful Partnerships to Respond to Skill Gaps

The following Wellspring participant team insights offer guidance to groups attempting to build professional pathways that incorporate credit-based certifications, alternative delivery models, digital micro-credentials, and innovative partnerships.

- Executive leadership serves as champions for establishing the support, time, and resources needed to lead to success across all organizations. Wichita State was a foundational member of the project, and the vision was clearly articulated throughout the organization.
- The participating academic department designed the DSP certificates for use within that department; however, the flexible nature of the credential structure is likely to be reviewed and adopted by other academic departments that provide social services.
- Economic and social vitality is tied to a robust and skilled workforce. Attending to local, regional, and state demands through a focused effort can lead to widespread impact. A critical component of this work is a team representative of all stakeholders. In this case, the representation included the university, employers, and an industry expert and local, state, and inter-state level alliances with individuals.
- A multi-faceted validation process allows for input and feedback across many perspectives. This project served as an exemplar as the team engaged in a two-pronged approach. The first was to have stakeholders across their ecosystem participate in the T-profile exercise, and the second was to validate the resulting frameworks with faculty, service providers, human resource professionals, alliances, and other experts.
- A significant beneficial outcome of this work was the employer's willingness to recognize the designed credentials as a signal for an interview, hire, and advancement with a salary structure commensurate with the completion of training and acquisition of badges/certificates.
- Coordinating and optimizing a large group can be fraught with complexity. Understanding the role and the best way to maximize the members' contributions is important to the project's progress. Having an individual (or two) identified as chair(s) to lead the management of schedules is vital. Assigning tasks based upon time available and project commitment is crucial to project momentum and success.

“Wichita State University was committed to the development of a talent pipeline to serve the Kansas demands for more, quality, direct support professionals. We were pleased to contribute the necessary effort and leadership to the creation of an innovative micro-credential and certification pathways, in conjunction with our local and national partners.”

Shirley Lefever, Ph.D.

Interim Executive Vice President and Provost

Direct Support Certificates and Micro-Credentials

In conjunction with local and national partners, Wichita State University developed innovative micro-credential badges and certification pathways.

Certification

Micro-credentials Badges

<p>Direct Support Professional Basic</p>		
<p>Direct Support Professional Initial Proficiency</p>		
<p>Direct Support Professional Advanced Proficiency</p>		
		

Table 1. Wichita State University Direct Support Certificates and Micro-Credentials

About 1EdTech Foundation

[1EdTech Foundation](#) facilitates cooperative investment catalyzing a connected ecosystem of innovative educational products and digital credentials that together accelerate teaching and learning innovation enabling every individual to achieve without limits.

For more information visit [https:// www.1edtech.org](https://www.1edtech.org).

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About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global Learning Consortium is a non-profit organization that advances technology to scale and improve educational participation and attainment affordably. IMS members are leading suppliers, higher education institutions, K-12 districts and schools, and government organizations that enable better teaching and learning by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors the annual [Learning Impact](#) program to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality while developing the leadership and ideas to help shape the future of educational technology.

Learn more at <https://www.imsglobal.org>.

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¹ [Regional Centers for Workforce Transformation](#).

² [The Council on Quality and Leadership](#).

³ [National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. America's Direct Support Workforce Crisis](#).

⁴ Interhab. (n.d.) [Kansas is Facing a Crisis in Care](#).

⁵ Leaser, D. & Zanvill, H. (2021) The Importance of Incremental Credentialing: An Employer's View. [The evollution](#).