

## 1. Introduction

The accredited degree is an established means to individual-level employability, but the proliferation of the degree is associated with a variety of well-understood issues. These issues include the student debt crisis, skill gaps, grade inflation, low social return, and contribution to lack of diversity in the labor market. Alternative credentials, or non-accredited credentials, are a broad category of offerings that exhibit greater variation intensity, price, and outcomes[1]. Alternative credentials are often a signal of niche skills and expertise in a particular job family. These characteristics combine to provide the benefit of high possible value addition to the labor market with the cost of a value calculation problem shared by potential employers and education consumers.

This paper seeks to reduce the general difficulty of credential value calculation by testing a method of value normalization with heuristics to identify those credentials likely to yield meaningful benefits to the typical job search. This paper tests the lens of prestige as a tool to normalize value across accredited and alternative credentials. This study leverages an original questionnaire to identify prestige levels of various credentials. This paper tests the composite hypothesis that some level of prestige allows an alternative credential to compete with traditional credentials for employment.

Several specific lines of evidence are required to support the composite hypothesis. Statistical evidence must demonstrate significant positive effects for accreditation and prestige on hirability. The effect size for prestige must be sufficiently large to dominate the accreditation effect over the attainable range. The questionnaire allows a prestige response on a 10-point scale, so the attainable range is from 1 to 10. A vignette analysis can test whether a dominant range for prestige exists within the attainable window. An ideal result would further show that one or more actual alternative credentials fall into this dominant range.

The motivation for the lens of prestige extends from the academic work in education economics and the economics of social norms. Education economics provides two mainstream accounts of the value of a degree. One account is

the human capital model, and the other is the signaling model. The human capital model explains that improved labor outcomes result from skills gained by a student in the course of education.

Stakeholders of various kinds prefer alternative credentials to the traditional  
35 degree for the attainment of specific technical skills[2]. For this reason, many college graduates supplement using alternative credentials. Some alternative learning providers specifically target this market with a special kind of alternative education called last-mile training. This presents an explanatory problem for the human capital model. If better labor outcomes arise from skill en-  
40 hancement, then alternatively educated individuals should enjoy better wages, employment rates, and so on, compared to college graduates.

The signaling model holds that credentials signal a basket of applicant qualities that employers value. Proponents of the signaling model commonly argue that the college degree signals intelligence, work ethic, and conformity[3]. The  
45 signaling model presents an explanation for the correlation of weak labor outcomes and alternative credentials, even if alternative credentials endow students with better skills. The explanation is that the alternative credential signals an offsetting deficit of some kind. This paper treats prestige as a signal rather than a matter of human capital. This paper prefers the signaling approach to directly  
50 investigate prestige effects with minimal theoretical baggage and without a need to test student skill.

In a broad review of economics and norm types, hiring decisions exist within what Elster would identify as work norms[4]. Elster supports a rational model of work norms, with the caveat that social interactions may involve unobserved  
55 emotional effects. Similarly, the rational model used in this paper may not extrapolate with accuracy into abnormal emotional situations. This paper will also make use of the distinction between social and legal norms provided by Elster.

Rivera is one scholar within the economics of work norms to have recently  
60 operationalized social norms as prestige[5]. Rivera finds that prestige is important in her analysis, but her analytical scope focuses on traditional education

and a few specific industries, including health and law. The current paper extends the analysis of prestige and hiring norms across many industries and to include alternative credentials.

## 65 2. Description of Data and Methodology

This paper investigates an original set of online questionnaire responses ( $n = 454$ ). Responses are cross-sectional data obtained in March of 2021. Respondents are United States citizens at or over the age of eighteen. Qualified respondents participated in the survey through the Amazon Mechanical Turk  
70 platform.

Appendix A contains the wording and response options for each question. Appendix A also contains the wording for a priming message presented at the start of the survey. The priming message lays out the definition of alternative credentials used in this study. The message also provides several concrete  
75 examples of alternative credentials, including “a Certified Project Manager certification, a portfolio of work, a Khan Academy profile, or a Nanodegree from Udacity.”

The dependent variable of interest is called hirability. This variable measures individual response on a 10-point scale to the question, “For many professions,  
80 alternative credentials can qualify a person for an entry-level position.” The questionnaire is composed of three sections. The first section collects respondent characteristics and baseline hirability. The second section collects prestige responses with respect to nine real-world learning providers. The third section collects hirability and prestige responses with respect to eight vignette learning  
85 providers.

Investigation of the first section of the questionnaire uses ordinary least squares analysis. Vignette data is analyzed as a panel in mixed models with individual random effects. The vignette model allows comparison between prestige and accreditation coefficients. Vignette analysis encounters a practical utility  
90 problem in that the schools are only vignettes rather than actual learning

providers. A comparison of descriptive statistics across vignettes and actual schools addresses this concern.

Half of the respondents randomly received an informational message about the nine real-world learning providers. Appendix A includes the wording of this message. The message provides rating data from two leading credential  
95 aggregator websites. University ratings are US News ranking information for the 2021 school year. Course Report provides the rating data for so-called coding bootcamps as of December 2020.

As an aside, inaccurate credential category labels contribute to the knowl-  
100 edge and value calculation problems that inhibit social adoption. Coding bootcamps focus on roles in the information technology industry, but these roles are much broader in scope than the category label implies. Moreover, the information technology industry is a special industry that cuts across all other industries. Much of the academic, policy, and industry discussion on coding  
105 bootcamps misses that these institutions provide credentials that potentially compete with university degrees in nearly any subject.

For example, General Assembly is one of the particular coding bootcamps investigated in this study. General Assembly provides credentials for user experience design, a set of skills involving market research, and applied technical art  
110 skills. General Assembly provides credentials for product management. Product management is a job family that competes for labor among business degree graduates. The data science credential provides skills that compete with accredited labor in mathematics, statistics, economics, and even subjects in the hard sciences like computational biology. Finally, there are credentials that relate to  
115 software development and compete with accredited degrees in computer science.

Respondent characteristics are categorical variables. Hirability and prestige are 10-point Likert-type responses. Prestige takes a second representation as a stipulated boolean. Stipulating prestige enables the application of results to a real job search. If stipulated prestige is highly correlated to prestige response,  
120 and if prestige response is correlated to improved hirability, then the selection criteria for stipulated prestige can be applied in an actual job search to poten-

tially improve outcomes.

To illustrate the method of two-way prestige validation, suppose that a vignette school is stipulated as high prestige. This situation is represented in regression as a dummy variable for stipulated high prestige with a value of true.  
The respondent reads that the vignette school is known to be prestigious. After reading this, the respondent provides a prestige response rating on a 10-point scale. Investigation of all responses allows an analyst to determine an average prestige response level which is associated with the stipulated high prestige criteria.

To preview results, stipulated high prestige turns out to be strongly correlated with high prestige response. Interestingly, there are cases where a respondent gives a low response rating to, for example, the University of Chicago, a school with high stipulated prestige based on aggregator website ratings. This result indicates the importance of some analysis that accounts for individual effects.

Two-way representation of prestige enables the application of findings into an actual job search. In an actual job search, individuals can easily access aggregator website data. In the real world, an individual cannot readily access questionnaire results for many credentials. Results from this paper include the identification of rules of thumb that a person can use to identify actual learning providers as high prestige. To ensure clarity of results, stipulated prestige always refers to the dummy variable, and prestige response refers to the 10-point measure.

The vignette section and the section on actual schools use stipulated prestige. All other variables are either 10-point Likert-type responses or categori-

cal variables<sup>1</sup>. Categorical variables are exclusively respondent characteristics. Four other respondent measures are Likert-type responses. Vignette responses include responses for hirability and prestige, while actual schools only receive  
150 responses for hirability.

Respondent characteristics include eight standard controls and four questions unique to this study. The eight standard controls include age, gender, ethnicity, income, level of education, employment status, the industry of occupation, and state of residence. A unique question on work norms records  
155 whether the respondent tends “to work more closely with coworkers at your company or customers and external business partners.” The motivation for this question is to test whether prestige disproportionately impacts roles that are outward or client-facing. Respondents are also directly asked whether they “prefer to hire or work with a person that has a college degree rather a person  
160 that holds a reputable certification or non-college credential.”

Another unique control is support for online education. This control allows analysis to separate hirability effects due to online education preference from hirability effects due to unaccredited education preference. In practice, many alternative credentials involve online learning, but accredited learning is also  
165 increasingly taking place online.

The fourth control is expected conventionality. This variable measures whether the respondent believes that “It will soon become common for high school graduates to obtain alternative credentials instead of going to college.” This is a useful correction variable for two reasons. First, it separates willingness to hire based  
170 on respondent preference from indirect willingness to hire based on perceived social norms. Individual preferences and social norms are certainly correlated,

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<sup>1</sup>It is an accepted practice to treat Likert-type responses as either categorical or continuous for regression analysis. Jaccard and Wan provide support for continuous analysis of Likert-type data. They note that severe departures from the assumptions on cardinality “do not seem to affect Type I and Type II errors dramatically,” particularly when the Likert scale is five or more points<sup>6</sup>. This paper treats responses on a 10-point scale as continuous.

but the correlation is small enough that failure to separate these effects leads to nontrivial statistical noise.

Second, surveys sometimes overreport demand effects because of the lack of  
175 cost constraint on respondent expression. This bias is sometimes called budget  
constraint bias or omitted budget constraint bias [7, 8]. Without a cost con-  
straint, respondents tend to exaggerate demand responses like the willingness  
to hire. Budget constraint bias affects both hirability and expected convention-  
ality, so conventionality operates in part as a bias control.

180 Vignette question formatting follows Atzmüller and Steiner [9]. Each vignette  
stipulates whether a school is accredited, whether the respondent should imagine  
the school as impressive, and whether the respondent should imagine that other  
people consider the school impressive. Each stipulated factor can take a value  
of true or false, resulting in eight vignette questions.

185 This study uses multiple regression and descriptive statistics to generate  
results. Multiple regression is conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS)  
for baseline hirability analysis and linear mixed models (LMM) are used for  
vignette analysis. OLS specification of vignette data is inappropriate because  
repeated measures of hirability from a single participant introduce an individual-  
190 level bias into resulting coefficients. LMM models are able to account for these  
individual-level effects. Following Magezi [10], linear mixed models in this paper  
use a within-participant random factor, or individual random effects, to correct  
for individual-level repeated measures bias. LMM yields linear coefficients, so  
the interpretation of LMM coefficients is similar to OLS. One difference of note  
195 is that adjusted r-squared is not available for an LMM model.

### 3. Results

Results ( $n = 454$ ) indicate that accredited degrees are generally higher in  
prestige compared to alternative credentials. Alternative credentials are mean-  
ingfully associated with hirability, and in certain situations, they are preferred  
200 to accredited degrees.

Competitive status indicates that a credential is correlated with hirability to a similar or greater extent compared to an accredited degree. Results provide evidence for three cases in which alternative credentials are competitive. First, specific alternative credentials are of particularly high prestige. This study  
205 finds that a credential from Google is sufficiently prestigious to be competitive without a requirement of supplementary conditions.

Second, some individuals award prestige preferentially to alternative learning providers. In a comparison among nine actual learning providers in this study, 71 percent of respondents prefer at least one alternative credential to at  
210 least one university degree. The proportion increases to about 75 percent when respondents view rating data from the online review aggregators Course Report and US News.

Third, certain independent factors in hiring decision models support the hirability of alternatively credentialed job candidates. Industry and state effects  
215 are two such compensating factors that can add up to overcome the average comparative preference for accredited labor to alternatively credentialed job candidates.

Baseline hirability is the institution-agnostic hirability measure. The mean response for baseline hirability is 7.58 on a 10-point scale, and the median response is 8. Table 1 gives average hirability and prestige for interesting segments  
220 of respondents. Four basic results in the table are worth noting. First, stipulated prestige always moves with prestige response as expected. Second, as expected, the hirability and prestige effects for accredited schools are generally higher than non-accredited schools.

Third, the difference in average hirability between high and low prestige providers is more than twice the difference in hirability between accredited and unaccredited providers. This supports the possibility of an actual competitive alternative credential in the attainable range of prestige. The fourth result is an initial attempt at a prestige rule of thumb. For both vignette and actual  
230 schools, if a school can obtain a prestige score of 7 or more, it will be at least as prestigious as the average accredited school.



Table 1: Average Hirability and Prestige

	Average Hirability	Average Prestige
<b>Actual Schools</b>		6.50
<b>Accredited</b>		7.05
<b>Unaccredited</b>		6.07
<b>Difference</b>		0.98
<b>Stipulated High Prestige</b>		6.72
<b>Stipulated Low Prestige</b>		6.23
<b>Difference</b>		0.49
<b>Vignette Schools</b>	6.49	6.21
<b>Accredited</b>	6.97	6.49
<b>Unaccredited</b>	6.02	5.93
<b>Difference</b>	0.95	0.56
<b>Stipulated High Prestige</b>	7.59	7.69
<b>Stipulated Low Prestige</b>	5.63	4.94
<b>Difference</b>	1.96	2.75

Google is the only unaccredited learning provider to achieve a competitive status on the basis of this initial rule. The mean prestige response for Google was 7.10, and the median response was 7. Two lower bars for competitive status are interesting. First, an alternative provider can be described as moderately competitive if it fails to beat the average university, but it succeeds in beating at least one university on average. The lowest average prestige response for an accredited university is 6.34 for the University of Nebraska.

Second, an alternative provider can be described as weakly competitive if it fails to beat any university on average, but it succeeds in beating at least one university in a significant percentage of individual responses. No alternative credentials investigated in this study meet the criteria for moderate competitiveness. App Academy, General Assembly, and Google are the three alternative learning providers with stipulated high prestige. All stipulated high prestige learning providers are at least weakly competitive.

When asked directly, 41.6 percent of respondents indicated that they would not prefer to work with a person that holds an accredited credential instead of

“a person that holds a reputable certification or non-college credential.” When examining prestige response instead of asking directly, over 70 percent of respondents reveal a preference for at least one actual alternative credential to at least one university credential. Over half of respondents preferred at least one actual alternative credential with stipulated high prestige to at least one university credential with stipulated high prestige. After excluding Google, over one-quarter of respondents continue to prefer at least one actual alternative credential with stipulated high prestige to at least one university credential with stipulated high prestige.

Zety is an online platform that facilitates job search. Zety reports that one in six job applicants in the United States receive an interview, and the average conversion rate from interview to offer was 19.78 in 2016[11]. Assuming rejections are independent enables naive estimation that most job searches consist of at least four interviews<sup>2</sup> and dozens of applications. Given the rates at which respondents prefer alternative credentials to accredited degrees, a job search of typical length is likely to include several applications and at least one interview with one or more employers that would prefer an alternative credential with stipulated high prestige to an accredited degree.

Table 2: Table of Regression Results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age, 45-60	0.61***	0.10	
External Facing, High	1.23***	0.13	
External Facing, Low	1.16***	0.10	
External Facing, Medium	1.16***	0.13	
Continued on Next Page			

<sup>2</sup>Four independent games that each include an eighty percent chance of rejection yields  $0.8^4 = 0.4096$ . The associated probability of having at least one offer result from four interviews would be about  $1 - 0.41 = 0.59$ , or 59 percent, which is more likely than not.

**Table 2 – Continued**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Expected Conventionality	0.32***	0.14***	0.17***
Income, 0-9999	0.88	-0.87**	-1.22***
Income, 100,000-124,999	1.25***	0.47**	0.41*
Income, 175,000-199,999	1.58*	0.40	
Income, 200,000+	1.14	-1.09*	
Income, 25,000-49,999	0.57**	0.19	
Income, 50000-74999	0.51**	0.26*	0.18
Income, 75000-99999	0.81***	0.29*	
Industry, Education	0.66**	0.40**	
Industry, Finance	0.34	-0.07	
Industry, Information Technology	0.46**	0.05	
Industry, Manufacturing	0.34	0.17	
Industry, Other	0.37	0.37**	
Is Accredited		1.23***	1.27***
(Is Accredited)(Prestige Response)		-0.09***	-0.10***
Is Stipulated High Prestige			0.14**
Is Stipulated Other Impressed		0.64***	0.59***
Is Stipulated Self Impressed		-0.05	
Online Ed Favorability	0.34***	0.09***	0.07**
Prefers Traditional Coworker	-0.22	0.19*	0.19*
Prestige Response		0.55***	0.53***
State, Arizona	1.35**	0.69**	
State, California	0.44**	0.27**	0.37**
State, Connecticut	0.72	-0.11	
State, Florida	0.79***	0.16	
State, Georgia	-0.88*	-0.22	
Continued on Next Page			

**Table 2 – Continued**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
State, Kansas	1.76	0.52	
State, Maryland	0.92**	0.31	
State, Massachusetts	1.43**	0.49	
State, Michigan	1.35***	0.26	
State, Mississippi	1.77***	0.45	
State, Missouri	0.81*	0.34	
State, Nebraska	-1.04	-0.75	
State, New Mexico	1.76*	0.10	
State, Pennsylvania	0.44	0.44**	
State, Tennessee	0.74	-0.13	
State, Texas	0.39	-0.10	
State, West Virginia	-1.31	-0.92	
Intercept	0.30	0.14	0.50*
R-squared	0.47		
R-squared Adj.	0.42		
N	454	3600	3600
Measures Per Respondent	1	8	8
* $p < 0.10$ , ** $p < 0.05$ , *** $p < .01$			

Table 2 gives three models. The first model is an ordinary least squares model of baseline hirability. Backward elimination to the point of adjusted r-squared maximization yields Model 1. Adding factors of accreditation and prestige to Model 1, then adapting the model to a linear mixed model (LMM) yields Model 2. Model 3 results from additional backward elimination on Model 2.

Four individuals that completed the first section of the questionnaire did

not complete the entire questionnaire. The remaining 450 respondents each  
 275 report hirability for the eight vignette schools, yielding 3,600 observations for  
 the mixed models.

Because LMM does not permit computation of r-squared, the termination  
 criteria for the factor elimination process in Model 3 was to retain all factors  
 with a p-value under 0.5. This is a permissive criterion intended to guard against  
 280 overfitting. The logical basis for this rule is that each observed effect is more  
 likely to exist than to not exist when  $p < 0.5$ . Despite permissive criteria, only  
 one insignificant factor for income exists in Model 3.

Model 2 and Model 3 have one other interesting difference. Model 3 includes  
 the boolean for whether a school was stipulated as high prestige. For vignette  
 285 schools with high prestige, the participant viewed two statements about the  
 vignette. The questionnaire instructs the participant to imagine a school they  
 consider to be impressive. The questionnaire also instructs the participant to  
 imagine that other people consider the school to be impressive. This situa-  
 tion is technically equivalent to an interaction of the two subcomponents. Be-  
 290 cause Model 2 includes both stipulated high prestige subcomponents and the  
 accreditation dummy, including high prestige generates perfect multicollinearity.  
 Backward elimination of Model 2 drops the factor for own stipulated prestige,  
 so subsequent insertion of high prestige is nonproblematic.

Model 3 is the preferred model. Prestige and accreditation effects are positive  
 295 and significant. These two effects also interact with a significant and negative  
 coefficient. The values of these coefficients of interest are consistent across Model  
 2 and Model 3. The dummy variable for accreditation is about two and a half  
 times larger than the prestige response, but the average prestige response is  
 near seven. This indicates that the prestige response explains a larger share of  
 300 hirability variance compared to accreditation.

An application of Model 3 is another approach to the identification of com-  
 petitive alternative credentials. Hold factors other than accreditation and pres-  
 tige constant. Let the hirability level of school  $k$  be called  $H_k$ . Let  $X_{ka}$  be  
 accreditation status,  $X_{kp}$  is prestige response,  $X_{kh}$  is the dummy for stipulated

305 high prestige, and  $X_{ko}$  is the dummy for whether other people consider the school prestigious.

Let  $H_1$  be an unaccredited school with high stipulated prestige. Let  $H_2$  be an accredited school without high stipulated prestige. Let  $X_{2p} = 6.49$ , which is the prestige response equal to the average for an accredited vignette, as reported  
310 in Table 1. This system of equations is described in equations 1a through 1e

$$H_k = 1.27X_{ka} - 0.1X_{ka}X_{kp} + 0.53X_{kp} + 0.14X_{kh} + 0.59X_{ko} \quad (1a)$$

$$H_1 = 0.53X_{kp} + 0.14 + 0.59 \quad (1b)$$

$$H_2 = 1.27 - 0.1(6.49) + 0.53(6.49) \quad (1c)$$

$$X_{kp} = (1.27 - 0.1(6.49) + 0.53(6.49) - 0.14 - 0.59)/0.53 \quad (1d)$$

$$X_{kp} \approx 6.28 \quad (1e)$$

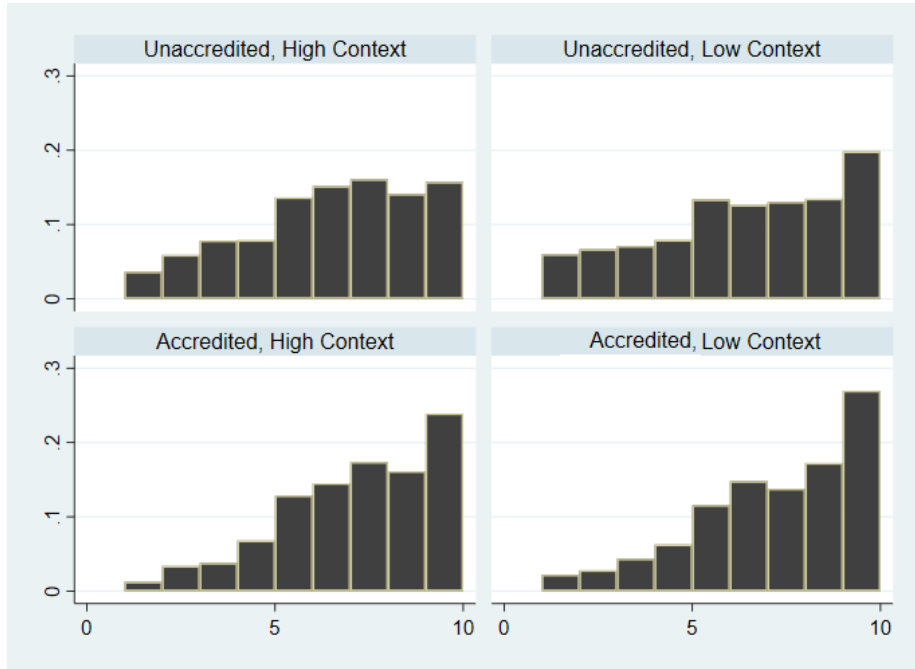
315 Equation 1e indicates that an alternative credential with stipulated high prestige and a prestige response of 6.28 or higher is approximately competitive with the average accredited vignette. Table 1 indicates that the prestige response for the average vignette school is 6.21. This is a significant difference compared to the average actual school prestige response of 6.50. Coincidentally,  
320 additive and proportional compensation of 6.28 both yield 6.57.

This prestige requirement exceeds the low bar set by comparison to the University of Nebraska. Google remains the only alternative provider to obtain general competitive status without the presence of other preferential factors. App Academy and General Assembly both have average prestige responses close to  
325 5.8. Models reveal several situations in which other factors overcome this deficit, but many of these offsetting factors are difficult to determine and leverage prior to a hiring decision. The California state effect is an interesting exception that an actual job search could exploit.

Alternative credentials provide a source of potential diverse labor to employers. Interestingly, neither ethnicity nor gender was significantly associated with  
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hirability. There is little evidence for the thesis that client-facing roles preferentially benefit from credential prestige or accreditation. Respondent client exposure on the job was associated with a slightly larger baseline willingness to hire an alternatively educated candidate. The extent of client contact was insignificant in mixed models.

Figure 1: Prestige Response Distribution for Actual Schools



Finally, Figure 1 visualizes the prestige response distribution for actual schools. The four subplots describe whether a respondent randomly received information from review site aggregators and how they evaluated credential accreditation. Exposure to aggregated review information is associated with fewer responses at the positive and negative extrema of the response distribution for accredited and unaccredited schools. On average, alternative education prestige rose, and accredited education prestige declined when a respondent received review aggregator site information.

## 4. Conclusions

345 This study hypothesized that some level of prestige allows an alternative credential to compete with traditional credentials for employment. Results provide evidence in favor of this hypothesis. Regression results show meaningful positive correlations of prestige and accreditation on hirability. A range of hirability responses that include the average response and some below-average responses  
350 find a dominant explanation in prestige effects over accreditation alone.

While prestige explains a larger share of hirability variance than accreditation, accreditation robustly maintains a meaningful effect on its own. The robust importance of accreditation indicates that arbitrary improvements to alternative credential quality and social acceptability are not likely to displace the  
355 higher education system in expectation. This study began with the assertion that alternative credentials are a source of unexploited technical value. The study validated a partial explanation from prestige as a representation of social norms. The introduction noted an important distinction between legal and social norms from Elster. By elimination, legal norm change is an important  
360 candidate to allow alternative credentials the opportunity to fully outcompete the hirability effects of accreditation.

In 2012, The Heritage Foundation called for two policy changes that are worth considering. First, the Foundation proposed that the government should directly accredit courses rather than organizations[12]. Second, they also called  
365 for a decoupling of accreditation and federal funding. An additional option would be to replace legal requirements for formal education could be replaced with skill assessments. With a legal requirement that prefers skills to degrees, the public sector gains the ability to transfer formal accreditation duties to a market model with no loss of labor quality control.

370 There are several reasons to be pessimistic about the feasibility of these policy changes. Reductions to education spending are unpopular with voters in the United States. Over ninety percent of K-12 students in the United States attended a public school in 2016[13], and there is a systematized pipeline from



public school to the traditional university system. Education represents an example of an entangled political economy[14]. Robust political economy points out additional reasons to doubt rapid innovation in this space[15]. Reduced political entanglement is associated with the absence of compulsory education. However, after they exist, the elimination of compulsory laws also appears intractable. The removal of compulsory education is a qualitative change that does not appear any less subject to the path dependency, lock-in, ratchet, and other effects that inhibit contraction in the quantitative process of appropriations.

An interesting alternative to formal legislative change is the emerging model of public-private partnerships in education. In 2013, Georgia Tech formally partnered with Udacity to produce an accredited online graduate degree in Computer Science[16]. Udacity was able to facilitate an improved online learning experience at scale with an affordable price. Georgia Tech offered branding, legitimacy, and accreditation, which supported a higher price point compared to the other offerings from Udacity.

In other cases, the hybridization of traditional and alternative education is indirect and informal. Prior learning assessments and portfolio reviews are two of many processes by which a university can award credit to a student without formal requirements connected to the source of student learning[17]. University support for prior learning is an implementation pattern for course-level accreditation that does not require legislative action. Formal and informal partnerships between traditional and alternative institutions can yield increased market surplus for producers and consumers.

Finally, this paper evaluated practical alternative credential selection strategies. One strategy is to leverage credentials from industry leaders. In this study, Google represented an alternative learning provider that is also an industry leader. Fortune 50 membership is a rule of thumb used in this study to select an industry-leading firm. A credential from Google was the only alternative credential to be identified as generally competitive with an accredited degree.

405 The second strategy is to use credential review aggregator sites to identify  
 high prestige credentials. This paper used Course Report as an aggregator to  
 search for alternative credentials. App Academy and General Assembly were  
 identified by applying search criteria that include a rating of 4.25 or better on  
 a 5-point scale and a minimum of four hundred reviews. The combination of  
 410 results with information on typical job search length from Zety indicated that  
 these credentials provide meaningful job search benefits, albeit with significantly  
 less efficacy than an accredited degree or a credential from Google.

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## Hireability and Educational Prestige

### Appendix A – Survey Questions

#### Priming Message for Section 1:

This survey asks questions about so-called alternative credentials. For the purposes of this survey, alternative credentials include certificates, documents, and proof of receiving education other than traditional credentials. Traditional credentials include a high school diploma or an undergraduate degree from an accredited university. Examples of alternative credentials include a Certified Project Manager certification, a portfolio of work, a Khan Academy profile, or a Nanodegree from Udacity.

#### Section 1, Questions about the Respondent:

1. Do you contribute to hiring and firing decisions at your company?
  - a. Not employed at present
  - b. Yes
  - c. No
2. For many professions, alternative credentials can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
3. It will soon become common for high school graduates to obtain alternative credentials instead of going to college.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
4. When you add up the pros and cons for online education, it's probably a good thing for society overall.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
5. Which of these industries most closely matches your profession?
  - a. Select one of the following:
    - i. Agriculture
    - ii. Education
    - iii. Energy
    - iv. Finance, Investment, or Accounting
    - v. Health
    - vi. Information Technology

- vii. Law
- viii. Manufacturing
- ix. Military
- x. Other
- xi. Retail
- xii. Real Estate or Property Management
- xiii. Transportation

6. Gender

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Other

7. Household Income

- a. 0-9,999
- b. 10,000-24,999
- c. 25,000-49,999
- d. 50,000-74,999
- e. 75,000-99,999
- f. 100,000-124,999
- g. 125,000-149,999
- h. 150,000-174,999
- i. 175,000-199,999
- j. 200,000+
- k. Prefer not to answer

8. Age

- a. < 18
- b. 18 - 29
- c. 30 - 44
- d. 45 - 60
- e. > 60

9. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- a. Did Not Graduate from High School
- b. GED
- c. High School Diploma
- d. Some College
- e. Obtained Undergraduate Degree
- f. Obtained Non-Doctoral Graduate Degree
- g. Obtained a Doctoral Degree

10. Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

- a. American Indian or Alaskan Native
- b. Asian / Pacific Islander
- c. Black or African American
- d. Hispanic
- e. White / Caucasian
- f. Other

11. What state do you reside in?

- a. Select among the 50 states or D.C.

12. What is the name of a reputable certification or non-college credential in your profession? Use "n/a" if nothing comes to mind.

- a. Free text response

13. I prefer to hire or work with a person that has a college degree rather a person that holds a reputable certification or non-college credential.

- a. True or false

14. Do you tend to work more closely with coworkers at your company or customers and external business partners?

- a. Not employed at present
- b. I usually spend more time with customers and external business partners than with coworkers.
- c. I usually spend at least an hour each day with customers and external business partners.
- d. I usually spend less than an hour each day in direct contact with customers and external business partners.

## Priming Message for Section 2:

The next section of this survey is the second of three sections. This section will ask about whether you are familiar with two universities and two coding bootcamps. You will also be asked to rate these learning providers for quality. \*

\*Half of survey takers will be randomly selected to view the following two paragraphs of additional information:

Specifically, you will be asked about eight learning providers based in the United States which include four universities and four coding bootcamps. California Institute of Technology (CIT) and the University of Chicago are Top 10 ranked universities for 2021 according to US News. CIT was less frequently reviewed by users compared to University of Chicago. Portland State University (PSU) and University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) are two members of a 14-way tie for the lowest-ranked universities for 2021 according to US News. UNO was less frequently reviewed by users compared to PSU.

Coding bootcamp data is provided by Course Report as of December 1, 2020. According to this data, App Academy and General Assembly are two of the Top 10 coding bootcamps most frequently reviewed by users. General Assembly has a lower rating compared to App Academy. FVI School of Technology and Bov Academy are two minimally reviewed learning providers. Bov Academy has a lower rating compared to FVI School of Technology.

## Section 2, Concrete Prestige Ratings:

1. Select each learning provider that you have heard of before today.
  - a. California Institute of Technology
  - b. University of Chicago
  - c. Portland State University
  - d. University of Nebraska Omaha
  - e. App Academy
  - f. General Assembly
  - g. FVI School of Technology
  - h. Bov Academy
  - i. Google
  - j. I have not heard of any of these learning providers before today
2. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at California Institute of Technology?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

3. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at University of Chicago?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
4. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at Portland State University?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
5. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at University of Nebraska Omaha?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
6. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at App Academy?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
7. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at General Assembly?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
8. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at FVI School of Technology?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
9. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at Bov Academy?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.
10. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at Google?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.



### Section 3, Vignette Questions:

This is the final section. It asks you to review 8 hypothetical school descriptions and then answer two questions about each school. These eight scenarios are created by taking every combination of inputs. There are three inputs with two possible values for each.

Consider this information for each school:

1. Is the school **accredited** or **unaccredited**?
2. When you heard of this school, were you **impressed** or **unimpressed**?
3. Do other people consider the school to be **impressive** or **unimpressive**?

**School A** is an **unaccredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **unimpressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **unimpressive**.

1. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
2. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School B** is an **unaccredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **unimpressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **impressive**.

3. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
4. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School C** is an **unaccredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **impressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **unimpressive**.

5. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.

6. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School D** is an **unaccredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **impressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **impressive**.

7. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
8. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School E** is an **accredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **unimpressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **unimpressive**.

9. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
10. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School F** is an **accredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **unimpressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **impressive**.

11. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
12. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School G** is an **accredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **impressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **unimpressive**.

13. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
14. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.

**School H** is an **accredited** learning provider for jobs in your industry.

You have heard of them and you are **impressed**.

Talking to your boss, coworkers, and several customers reveals that other people consider this school to be **impressive**.

15. For many professions, learning at this school can qualify a person for an entry-level position.
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates stronger agreement.
16. How impressed would you be if you heard that someone studied at this school?
  - a. Respond on a scale from 1 to 10, where a higher score indicates higher prestige.