

A CREDLENS GUIDE

Outcomes Data: Sources, Coverage, and Limits

A short guide to the three key data sources — surveys, government data, and private sector data — and what outcomes each provides and its limitations.

NATIONAL NON-PROFIT • TRUSTED DATA INFRASTRUCTURE • INDEPENDENT STRADA AFFILIATE

The CredLens Data Readiness Diagnostic

This guide is part of the Diagnostic, a self-scored assessment of your organization's ability to produce and use outcomes data.

HOW THE DIAGNOSTIC WORKS

- 15 minutes, nine self-scored questions
- Assess your records, data access, and internal capacity
- Complete individually, as a team, or across teams

YOU'LL WALK AWAY WITH

- Your overall data readiness level
- Subtotals that highlight strengths and opportunities
- Insights to guide next steps

Get the diagnostic → credlens.org/resources/readiness-diagnostic



ABOUT CREDLENS

CredLens is a national nonprofit and neutral source of quality outcomes data for degree and non-degree credentials. We connect issuer-verified credential records to real-world employment, earnings, and education outcomes — giving you longitudinal evidence to understand what happens after completion and demonstrate value.

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Where outcomes data comes from

Outcomes data — employment, earnings, and education — comes from three types of sources: surveys, government data, and private sector data. The table below lists sources within each type and the related coverage and access limits. Understanding these differences and your access to them is critical for data readiness.

SOURCE	WHAT IT IS	WHAT IT CANNOT TELL YOU
SURVEYS		
Your surveys of credential holders	Self-reported employment and earnings from surveys sent to credential holders.	Response rates are typically low, so results may not reflect all credential holders.
GOVERNMENT DATA		
State UI wage records	Quarterly wage and employment data employers report to the state unemployment insurance system.	Covers a single state only. Doesn't capture federal or military workers, anyone working out of state, or most self-employed and 1099 workers.
State longitudinal data systems (SLDS)	State-built systems that link education and workforce records.	Stays within state lines. Access and matching rules vary, with no visibility into anyone who leaves the state.
Federal new-hire and wage data	A federal database (the National Directory of New Hires) combining state and federal employment records, with near-universal coverage.	Can't be obtained directly — restricted by law to permitted purposes.
Federal tax data (IRS)	Earnings data reported to the IRS through employer and individual tax filings, with national coverage.	Highly restricted; available only through authorized data-matching programs.
Census PSEO	A U.S. Census Bureau program (Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes) publishing aggregate earnings and employment for graduates of participating institutions, by credential and field.	Publishes aggregate statistics for participating institutions, not individual outcomes for your credential holders. Covers only institutions with a Census data-sharing agreement, with variable coverage by state and cohort.
PRIVATE SECTOR DATA		
Commercial payroll data	Administrative earnings data derived from payroll records, with national coverage.	Obtained only through a data provider. Methodology and coverage vary by vendor.