

**0:00:08.5 Dakota Pawlicki:** Hey everybody, welcome to Today's Students, Tomorrow's Talent, the show about work and learning after high school brought to you by Lumina Foundation. And welcome to our newest season, we have a great lineup of guests and topics for 2024 and I'm so very grateful to have you with us.

I could not think of a better way to kick off this season than with the two guests that we have lined up for today. If you missed the news, there are promising signs that our country is becoming more and more educated, talented, and ready for the future. Recently released data on Lumina's Stronger Nation tool shows that the national education attainment rate has reached 54.3%. This is a tremendous increase from when Lumina began tracking this data in 2008, at that time only 38.1% of adults had a high-quality credential earned after high school. What this amounts to is millions and millions of more people, our friends, family, neighbors, co-workers and employees having earned the knowledge and skills required to live a prosperous life in today's America.

Underneath this banner headline is a ton more data, highlights from states like Kentucky and Rhode Island with accelerated credential completion, and insights on the growing demand for education and training after high school. To help us dig into all of this, I've called in the experts, the visionaries, the data deep divers to talk more about this year's Stronger Nations data.

**0:01:28.4 Dakota Pawlicki:** Joining me is Dr. Courtney Brown, Vice President of Impact and Planning at Lumina Foundation. And her colleague, Dr. Chris Mullin, Strategy Director of Data and Measurement. Courtney, Chris, thank you so much for joining us today.

**0:01:41.0 Courtney Brown:** Happy to be here.

**0:01:42.6 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah. Of course, of course. So, let's just jump straight in, if you don't mind. There's a ton of information in Stronger Nation, a lot of great material out there. Courtney, can you just give us kind of a brief overview about some of the highlights that you found in this year's Stronger Nation data?

**0:01:57.6 Courtney Brown:** Yeah, absolutely. Well, first of all, for those of you who aren't familiar with Stronger Nation, Dakota, you gave a great summary. When, in 2008 Lumina set a goal for the nation, that by 2025, 60% of people in the United States would have a high-quality credential or degree by 2025. And so, when we set that goal, we decided we needed some way to keep ourselves accountable and keep the nation accountable to that goal. And so, we started Stronger Nation in 2009, it started as a 200-page book that we would mail out to thousands of people every year. And a few years into that, we decided, oh, we should actually use an online version. Not only was that allowed to us to make corrections over time if there was a problem there, but it just made it more accessible to everyone to actually see the data, play with the data and do some comparisons. The Stronger Nation provides this accountability to the national goal, that 60% goal. And in it we're able to desegregate data, first of all, by the nation and then by every state, by race, ethnicity, by age groups, we can do subpopulations within that and then we can look over time to see how those trends have changed. So, it's a really accessible tool that anybody can go in and play with, I always encourage people to go in there, mess around with it, and look where your county sits. So that's kind of what Stronger Nation is.

**0:03:21.2 Courtney Brown:** And as you said, one of the amazing things is that in 2008, as you pointed out, 38% of people in the United States had an associate's degree or higher. And when we

first started counting, we could only look at associates or higher, we didn't have a way to count those quality credentials. But since 2008 to today, we have grown 16 percentage points, the country has increased in attainment by 16 percentage points as of our most recent data in 2022. Tremendous accomplishment for all of our partners, states, and communities to get us that far.

**0:03:57.4 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, that's incredible growth over the course of time. I got to ask, though, does anyone miss the book? Like, do you miss having a Stronger Nation book next to you all the time?

**0:04:06.0 Courtney Brown:** Absolutely. So, we still have people that ask if we can print it out and send it out to them, and there is a way on the site you can print it out if you want to kill a few hundred trees, because it's a really, it's a long, dense piece. And I actually still keep the older Stronger Nation books just because they are like easy to flip through. But this is so much more accessible and so much easier to use for everyone, so use this, you don't need to print it out.

**0:04:29.5 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, absolutely. The tool is really cool and I love the way that you can really dive deep into your state, to your county, to race, ethnicity data. There's just a lot more and I know you're continuing to add to the tool with every year. Obviously, you and your team keep really good track of all this and this isn't just a once-a-year kind of endeavor for you. So, I always like to ask you, what kind of surprised you in this year's data? You already have a good pulse on things and kind of I think probably have some good expectations of where things may be heading, but as you dug into the most recent data available, was there any good news that really surprised you or caught the team off guard?

**0:05:08.7 Courtney Brown:** I think there's a lot of good news. So, one of the things that happened was, as you know in 2020, we had a pandemic, and we use census data that collects the data every year. And so, the data that were released in '21 that reflected the 2020 data just were not very good, there wasn't enough data, we had really low sample sizes. And so, we did not feel comfortable reporting the 2020 data. So, for the first time ever, we skipped that year, we did not report in Stronger Nation 2020. So last year, when we released the data, it was actually had been two years since we had reported on the most recent data. So, we saw huge increases in attainment last year when we put out the report, and that was great news. And so, I was a little concerned that this year, when a year later, when we put it out, that we wouldn't see large increases or maybe no increases and we actually saw really robust increases again. So, it was good news for us to see that, that the country continues to increase attainment. So, I think that was really good news. The second piece of really good news is the younger population, the 25 to 34 year olds, greatly increased in attainment since 2008. We talked about where the country was in 2008, but the younger population, those that are 25 to 34, it was a bit discouraging when we looked at the data in 2008.

**0:06:33.8 Courtney Brown:** 'Cause the 25 to 34-year-olds, the younger populations, the ones that should be kind of like our beacon of the future, actually had a lower attainment rate than the full working-age population. So, they sat just below 38%, which isn't great when we think about the future of our country. The incredible news is they now sit at over 56%, so they have not only met the working age population, they have surpassed the working age population by two percentage points. Which was, again, good news to sit at over 56% for that population, really good news for the future of our country.

**0:07:13.4 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, absolutely. Great to see that more folks are getting the kind of

education training they need and is definitely indicative of the kind of environment that we're living in. We're always talking about how jobs of today and tomorrow need education training after high school. And here's some further evidence of that. Chris, I'd love to also bring you in too and just see, hey, out of the new data, is there anything that caught you by surprise? What good news did you see that you might not have expected?

**0:07:40.7 Chris Mullin:** Sure, yeah, thank you and thank you for having me and having us. I really appreciated, you mentioned before how we try and dig deeper into the data every year and improve. And for us this year, an improvement was in our racial justice and equity tab on the top. We really tried to track trends by race, ethnicity over time and the types of credentials that they were receiving, right? So, we would know are Hispanics or people who identify as Black earning mostly associate degrees or whatnot. And so that chart and putting that together was really rewarding because we saw great increases in attainment and degrees for our racial and ethnic populations. And so that really helps us signal and understand where we're getting closer and closer in the gap. So, for me, the creation of that chart and watching the trends change over time, going back to 2009, was really a good sign that all the hard work that our partners are doing across the country is really paying off for all Americans. And we still have work to go, we still have gaps to close and goals to meet, but that was really rewarding to see.

**0:08:41.6 Courtney Brown:** Yeah. Can I double down on that for a second? So what Chris is mentioning, this new part of the tool is pretty neat because we've had partners over time say, "I really want to better understand one of the subpopulations. So, let's say the Hispanic Latino population. How has bachelor's degree attainment increased from 2008 to 2022 for the most recent data?" And we would only be able to say associate degrees and higher, this is where it is. But now the data allow you to disaggregate, so you can see the percentage of Hispanic Latinos who had associate degrees in 2008, all the way up until the most recent data. Or you could look at bachelor's degrees, so it really allows you to look at that data. And it really was speaking to what our partners and many of the people that we work with have been asking for every year.

**0:09:29.6 Dakota Pawlicki:** And I'm so glad you brought it up because there are some interesting findings as well around some of the trends with Hispanic students. And I also would like to just connect the dots to some other work that I know your team does with Gallup as well. There's this clear connection between the trends in Stronger Nation and the most, the '22, 2022 state of education or higher education report that you all did with Gallup. Young Hispanic students have made significant increases in degree attainment between 2009, 2008 and 2022. But the Gallup survey that you all partnered with kind of suggests that the Hispanic students face greater discrimination, some negative experiences, particularly in short-term credential programs. What does that relationship suggest to you? Like how do we make sense of we're experiencing... Hispanic students are reporting feeling greater levels of discrimination while at the same time outpacing a growth when it comes to credential completion and post-secondary attainment?

**0:10:29.0 Courtney Brown:** Yeah, I'm glad you asked that question. So, for some of your listeners, we have a partnership with Gallup and we put out the Lumina Foundation Gallup State of Higher Ed Report every year. And...

**0:10:37.8 Dakota Pawlicki:** Rolls right off the tongue.

**0:10:39.0 Courtney Brown:** Yeah.

[chuckle]

**0:10:39.8 Courtney Brown:** And it's a poll that we do every fall and then throughout the spring, we release many reports. We just released one on students of color, we released one on policy impacts on who's going to enroll, we are releasing one on affordability in the next couple of weeks and then the bigger report comes out in May. And we're really trying to understand student experience, current students, prospective students, students who stopped out, people who never considered enrolling on what enables them to come and what barriers they are to stay enrolled. And so, one of the ones with that, the students of color report that we looked at were asking them about discrimination on campus. Do you face discrimination? Do you feel like you belong? And you're right, what we found were Hispanic Latino and Black students report feeling much more discrimination on campus and a lack of belonging on campus, which is alarming and we need to take action. But when we disaggregated the data by what type of credential they were pursuing, we really see that most discrimination they're facing is on the short-term credential space, in the certificate and the certification space. Much less, I mean, they're still facing discrimination on four-year campuses, but it's much less discrimination than we see in other places.

**0:11:55.0 Courtney Brown:** And they feel much more belonging on campuses when actually when it's a much more diverse campus or they're maybe attending an HSI, a Hispanic-serving institution, or an HBCU, where they see students that look like themselves and they feel like they belong more. So given that, the discrimination is really more based on the short-term credential space and not in the four-year space, then it makes more sense why you see that that degree attainment is increasing pretty tremendously. You brought up the Latino population, I think they've gone up by maybe 16 percentage points or more, I'm sorry, maybe over 20 percentage points since 2008 until today. The 25 to 34-year-olds, that younger population is really where we're seeing that increase in degree attainment for the Hispanic Latino population.

**0:12:48.0 Dakota Pawlicki:** I want to go back as well. You had mentioned the pandemic and kind of how you were thinking about 2020 data. But for a lot of our folks, like we've ripped from the headlines kind of things like we're hearing a lot about enrollment declines over the past couple of years. Can you draw the through line about like when you... How that enrollment decline might show up eventually in Stronger Nation data? Obviously, it takes people a while to get through credential programs. So, talk to us about how you kind of envision that playing out into this work.

**0:13:21.4 Courtney Brown:** Yeah. Great question. We get asked that a lot, like, wait, but the enrollment numbers are so far down, like they keep declining yet attainment is increasing. Why is there a disconnect? And it's simple in some ways, if you think about some numbers, and I'll keep it simple with numbers. So, when we look at attainment, we measure attainment in Stronger Nation, we are looking at 25 to 64-year-olds. So, you have to be 25 before we're counting you. And that's important when you think about the enrollment decline, because the enrollment decline while it happened for everyone, traditional age and adults, most of the people that complete a credential are traditional aged students. And most of the decline that we saw, what we saw declined everywhere in the two year, the four year space, but they were for that traditional aged student. They have not yet hit 25, so we have not yet begun to count them. And so, my guess, if we don't find ways to bring those individuals back or get them started as soon as possible, is we may see that decline by about 2025. Probably not in this year's data, but maybe another year or two, we will begin to see some of that decline. So, we still have time to take action and get some of these individuals, again, to re-

engage, those that stopped out during the pandemic or those have yet to enroll.

**0:14:41.0 Courtney Brown:** We have time to get them to re-engage, but my fear is that we're going to start to see some of that decline. Even though we've seen enrollment numbers come back a little bit to pre-pandemic numbers, we still have a ways to go.

**0:14:53.7 Dakota Pawlicki:** And by 2025, do you mean the 2025 data, knowing that we're looking at 2022 data now or by next year?

**0:15:00.7 Courtney Brown:** Ah, yeah, great question. So, you're right. So, the most current data we have is 2022, so next year when we report on Stronger Nation, again, we update it, we'll be using 2023 data. I don't think we'll begin to see that; I think it will be in the 2025 data, which will be reported around '26, '27. Yeah.

**0:15:17.0 Dakota Pawlicki:** Well, we'll have you back in a few years and...

**0:15:19.0 Courtney Brown:** Can't wait. Yeah.

**0:15:19.8 Dakota Pawlicki:** Pick this back up again. Wonderful. I want to, again, as you mentioned you're always building onto the tool. And over the years of since you started, you used to only be able to count associates, bachelors degrees, but you've definitely... Lumina has really helped the field learn ways to count high quality short-term credentials, certificates and certifications that meet certain parameters. There are a lot of critics and folks though that look at this and just say, "Oh, well, I know you all set that big goal and what you're doing is just counting a bunch of new credentials to make sure you hit your goal." What do you respond to folks that kind of come to you with that kind of a question? I'm sure you get it a lot.

**0:16:01.6 Courtney Brown:** I welcome that question because I think it's really important for us to speak to it over and over again. So, when Lumina set the national goal in 2008, we always said degrees or other high-quality credentials. That was always part of our goal statement. And in fact, there's a footnote in our first strategic plan when... On quality, and it said a quality credential is one that leads to further learning opportunities and employment. And so that was, that's how we decided to define quality credentials. The problem we encountered were twofold. One, there was no way, no national way to measure short-term credentials. For associate degrees and higher, we can use the American Community Survey and it is a robust survey that allows us to disaggregate to the state, to the county level, and by race, ethnicity. Very important. There is no such thing or there was no such thing in 2008 to do short-term credentials. So, we kept exploring different opportunities, and every once in a while, the federal government would put out some sort of survey where we could kind of grab some of that data and look at it, but it wasn't regular and it wasn't clear. And so not being able to count it was an issue and then a lot of these things live in a black box where it's even hard to tell is somebody getting employment or is it leading to further learning? So, it was... So, both of those things were against us.

**0:17:28.7 Courtney Brown:** So, we decided that we should look at certificates and certifications, that was based on a lot of recommendations from the field, including our partners at Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. And so, there was a survey that was coming out at the time, a federal survey that they were working on that was measuring certificates. And so, we thought, "Oh, we'll wait till that comes out we'll be able to measure certificates." And they said,

"Well, it's going to probably come out in a few years." And I said, "Well, we don't have that time." So, because it's a federal survey, it's available to the public and they said, "Well, you can take this and do what you want with it." It was available. So, we actually gave it to NORC at University of Chicago and said, "Run this with nationally representative survey." And that's how we got our first data on certificates, it was a not... We weren't able to, from that survey, desegregate by states, but then again, we worked with our partners at Georgetown, and they were able to actually estimate certificates for each state. We haven't been able to track, desegregating by race ethnicity quite yet, but we're able to get that certificate data. And we continue to partner with Georgetown to come up with the national and the state data.

**0:18:37.5 Courtney Brown:** And then a couple of years ago, the BLS, other census, the CPS through the Bureau of Labor Statistics started asking a certification question. And so, we were able to measure certifications. Now, to your point, do we count everything? Absolutely not. There are certificates and certifications. Maybe you're going to give me a certificate after I finish this, certificate of completion for doing your podcast. We all get certificates in many ways. That doesn't mean I can take that certificate and on that alone, although this is a fabulous experience, I can't take that certificate and get a job that's going to pay a living wage. So, we needed to make sure that on its own, a certificate or certification would lead to employment and not just any employment, but we needed to put a labor market premium on that. Because if you're only going to make what you'd make as a high school graduate, then why get this other credential? What's the value for the individual?

**0:19:37.2 Courtney Brown:** And so, we decided we needed to put a labor market premium on each of those. So, we only count certifications. Now, our definition for certifications is they are usually an industry certification. So, they are provided by industry, manufacturing, plumbing, information technology, nursing. So, they're different certifications. You take a test with that industry. So, we put a 10% premium, labor market premium on certification. So, we only count a certification if it has a 10% labor market premium, you make 10% more than you would with a high school degree alone.

**0:20:16.1 Courtney Brown:** For certificates, we use a 15%. We only count that if you make with that certificate 15% over what you would make with a high school degree alone. There are millions of certificates and certifications we do not count because they do not meet our definition of quality. And then now we count all degrees because in the aggregate, they do lead to a labor market premium for individuals over high school alone. So, we absolutely do not count everything. In fact, when we first started doing it, many of our partners thought we were being too conservative and thought we weren't counting enough that we should change some of our criteria. But we decided it would be better to count less and have more respect from the field than try to cook the books and just reach the goal faster.

**0:21:05.3 Dakota Pawlicki:** I appreciate that. And one of the things, again, I love with the Stronger Nation tools that you are really detailed in the methodology notes. There's a lot of additional notes that are out there. So as folks want to dig in to learn more about how you calculated what's counting, what's not counting, all of that, I love that you all kind of show the math, if you will, and allow people to kind of dig in to their own pieces as well so they can figure out a way to apply it locally or to what their work is. Chris, I want to bring you in too because out of the Stronger Nation tool, there was this unusual decline in the very short-term credential completion rates that we were talking about, particularly across from 30 states, DC and Puerto Rico. Jamie Merisotis wrote about

this in a January 31st post. I'll just read this little bit here. He says, reasons for the most recent declines could include higher wages to mitigate labor shortages and states looking harder at the quality of non-degree credentials awarded. In the past, if we noticed a decrease in one type of credential, gains elsewhere were enough to show year-over-year growth in a state's or territory's overall education after high school. This year's slight declines in short-term credentials represents an anomaly that we plan to study further. So, Chris, I guess, how do you, Chris, plan on solving this anomaly? I love meeting the guy who is responsible for figuring out what anomaly is.

**0:22:31.1 Chris Mullin:** Yeah, that's a great question, Dakota, and thank you for it very much. It is something we look at very closely. As Courtney said, we spend all year long looking at data, looking at data sources. There's a new data source coming out this year in July we're going to look at called the National Training and Education and Workforce Survey from the National Science Foundation, which might help us better understand what's happening. So, we try and use data we know now and look backwards as well. It's hard to really put a finger on exactly what happened because we don't have the student level, individual level resources to say definitively what happened or whatnot. But we do know that there's a lot of action in the country around short-term credentials and getting students into the labor force and the workforce. And so, we're continuing to look at that. What's important to note is that Stronger Nation is a study about individuals first and credentials second, which is to say it's about the population of the United States. We center and place the students' experience first and then work to understand what it is that they're earning. The way that we do that is through these federal data sets, which are surveys of individuals. It's not some massive data set that we have behind closed doors. And so, we do work very hard to be transparent about it.

**0:23:44.8 Chris Mullin:** Some things that we know that are happening in this space is that, yeah, there are these newer short-term credentials that are coming up, as Jamie said in the piece, he gave some ideas. Some things we're looking at is how many of those might be being earned to individuals who already have a degree, who are upskilling. We know a lot, especially in the technology sector, are awarded to individuals who appear to already have a degree, and they're just learning the latest version of Java 8 or whatever new technology or tool is coming out. And so that's the question for us. Where are these growing? And then in the fields that they're growing, who is really earning them? And that's what we're trying to unpack and understand to the best of our ability.

**0:24:27.2 Dakota Pawlicki:** Do you have any working hypotheses or hunches or a smell, a whiff of something that might account for this unusual decline?

**0:24:38.7 Chris Mullin:** Yeah, I wish, I mean, I'm curious and there's lots of things and we can talk about it. Every county is different. Employment patterns are different. There's, people might move within state. We see people moving from larger areas maybe out to more suburbs of states. And so, you see this flow a little bit of individuals. And so, we're trying to really understand, that shouldn't really impact what we count because it should be a response to the survey, but it might impact, maybe they're taking a job somewhere else and their pay might be changing or whatever the case may be. And so, we're really trying to understand that. I mean, there's, I probably have a sheet of paper with about 20 different research questions, Dakota, that I'd like to answer to solve this. And we continue to engage the field and researchers who are taking work underway to do this very thing. Peter Barr at the University of Michigan, Di Xu at the University of California Irvine, Michelle Van Noy at Rutgers University, among a number of others who are really trying to unpack

and understand what's happening. So, we can be as transparent on it and accurate as possible in the future.

**0:25:43.2 Courtney Brown:** I would just add a couple of things. So, Chris mentioned something that I think is really important to make sure that we underscore is that we only count the first, or the, each individual by a credential. So, if somebody has a bachelor's degree, we don't count them as having a certificate. So, they're already counted. So, we don't double count people. They get counted once and there's almost a hierarchy that we have that you have a certification, certificate, and they kind of move up. So, a couple of theories on my part. Well, first of all, before I even give a theory, I would not take too much look into any one year, especially for the certificate certification space, because the data are complicated. They aren't as robust. We don't have enough of it. And it's more of an equation to come up with a certificate, especially the certificate data. And so, we just need to be careful on saying, making any great actions because of one year. And so, you really want to look at the trend lines. And last year's data, not the ones that reported this January of '24, but in January of '23, we also saw some craziness happen. We saw some states skyrocket, like Indiana was one, that their certificate certification numbers skyrocketed, and then they came down again this year.

**0:26:55.3 Courtney Brown:** So, they've kind of stabilized. So, some of these states where we saw this incredible movement really stabilized almost those pre-pandemic numbers. So, I think there was some stuff going on. So, we want to pay attention to that trend line. The second thing is we saw degree attainment increase. And so, as Chris mentioned, it is possible that people had a certificate or certification and then built it into an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree. We can't see student level, as he mentioned, where you see that somebody has a certificate and then they got an associate's degree. But that's quite possible is that, a lot of the work that our partners and states have been doing with stackable credentials and pathways is really taking root. And people are able to stack those credentials and they're building them into degrees. So, we're seeing more in the degree space and less in the short-term credential space. So, a lot of things could be happening, but my recommendation is don't freak out by one year of the certificate data ever because it's just not, it's an estimate. And it's almost an estimate of an estimate. It's the best possible thing we have right now. Hopefully, N2s will probably, hopefully, provide us better information. But right now, we're dealing with the best possible data we have. So, look at it and follow the trend lines, but don't live or die based on where you sit from that.

**0:28:13.7 Dakota Pawlicki:** That's really, really helpful. And, while I have two really smart data folks in the room, I get to the basic question about surveys. We've all mentioned a couple of times, like, hey, this is survey data. People, a layman like me, I think a survey, I'm like, oh yeah, Instagram asked me which brands I've seen lately, that's a survey. Can you just like, what is a survey in the context of this kind of tool and research mean? Like, are they valid and reliable measurements? Or is it easy for someone to be like, oh yeah, I have a doctorate degree. No one's going to come check on me. I mean, what are your thoughts? Chris?

**0:28:51.0 Chris Mullin:** Sure, yeah, that's a great question. And so, as Courtney mentioned, we use federal surveys to the extent possible so people can actually get the data and download it themselves. And by survey, we mean this, these are really rigorous data collection efforts. And so, there's a whole process that these federal surveys go through. There are 13 different federal statistical agencies that have really high rigorous standards and are setting the field for the future as well. So, you mentioned the certification question. They do something called cognitive testing. So,



they will get a bunch of data about individuals and then ask them what kind of credentials they have, already knowing the answer. And depending on the words they use, depends upon whether or not that question is interpreted appropriately or right. So, there's a whole science behind the surveys that take place. This isn't something that, like you said, you might sit down and write really fast for a newspaper column or something like that to get quick feedback. It goes through a very rigorous process. So, for like the certification question, they ask, is it a professional certificate or certification? Because that's what people identify as.

**0:29:55.8 Chris Mullin:** They don't understand the word industry as much. And so, there's this, it's all to say, there's a lot of testing and word choice that goes into actually every word and how it's structured in these surveys. These surveys then are collected during a calendar year, which is why we have a little bit of a lag. It takes them a little bit of time to clean and go through and make sure the data is accurate and valid and right, and then release it later the next calendar year. So, a lot of the ACS data that we use comes out late in the fall. And we spend all fall and through the holidays, to be quite honest, our contractors are fantastic. And they help us put up a new data product out in January. And so that's a little bit about the survey process and the rigor that goes behind it and all the great work that our federal agencies do to make sure we have data that we can use that's trusted, reliable, relevant, and accurate.

**0:30:44.0 Courtney Brown:** Yeah, which is one of the reasons why I said in 2020, we chose not to use that data because even the ACS, just they didn't feel the confidence in it, even though they collected millions of pieces of data from people, it still wasn't up to their standards. And so, it wasn't up to our standards.

**0:30:58.5 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, so my survey that I use in my neighborhood work is certainly not going to pass this bar, that's good to know. And that's not what we're talking about. Before, we're going to really talk more with you, Chris, in the second segment about short-term credentials. But I did have just a couple of more questions to kind of round out overall. One of the things, you all did a really wonderful webinar when Stronger Nation Tool was released. One of the guests you had was Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education. And one of the things he discussed that kind of caught my ear was he called attention to the need to fix the transfer system. Can you talk a little bit more about what he meant in that context? Like, why is it important for us to, first, what's broken the transfer system and why do we need to fix it?

**0:31:46.4 Courtney Brown:** Yeah, well, wow, if I could be in Ted Mitchell's head, like, that would be amazing to know all the things he knows. So, I'm going to guess.

**0:31:53.7 Dakota Pawlicki:** Sure.

**0:31:55.4 Courtney Brown:** One of the things he said before he mentioned transfer, he said, one of the biggest issues we have is the some college, no degree population. Those are the people that started college, started an associate's degree or higher, and for whatever reason, stopped out without completing. Our nation is in crisis when we look at that number because we are over 40 million people, over 40 million people in the United States started college and for whatever reason, stopped out. And that number is pre-pandemic. So, we already talked about how enrollment declined, plunged during the pandemic. So, we know that number is going to be higher now. The most recent data will come out, I believe, in June of this year from the National Student Clearinghouse.

**0:32:32.2 Courtney Brown:** So, when he talked about that, some of it is that some people that stop out are transferring from the associate's degree to a bachelor's degree before they are completing the associate's degree. And that transfer just doesn't work. And so, they are left, they stop out for whatever reason, whether it's financial, whether they have other responsibilities, whatever it might be, without completing a credential. So, we have to fix that system. We have to figure out how do we earn credentials as you go, how do we figure out, you know, how to make sure that they have a credential before they transfer, how do we make that a more seamless transfer with regards to cost and belonging and providing what that student needs so that more students can be successful?

**0:33:19.7 Courtney Brown:** Because right now it's not working, the transfer degree, as an associate degree, doesn't work on its own if you aren't actually able to access that bachelor's degree. So, it's definitely something we need to address, but I would say that the reason is we, when we see it in that some college and no degree population that is over, I can't say it enough, like, I don't think people understand over 40 million people fall into that category. Yeah.

**0:33:45.5 Dakota Pawlicki:** And I know one of the other things he mentioned was that, he gave a hypothetical example of, you go to school A and you accumulate 20 or 30 credits, for whatever reason you need to go to school B and they say, great, start over again, we're not taking any of those credits, you know. Even force folks who end up do completing through that system, they end up taking a lot more credit hours, a lot more financial costs that's on the student as well. In addition to those folks who just say, nevermind, it's not worth it. And maybe stop out for a variety of very good and worthy reasons.

**0:34:21.7 Courtney Brown:** Right. It's not just the cost, it's the opportunity cost because they're not working during that time or they're having to pay out for childcare and other things so that they can continue to pursue their education.

**0:34:32.2 Dakota Pawlicki:** The other thing I'll just ask too, we see higher ed has been in the news a lot. I don't know, it feels like a lot more over the past five years or so. And in a way that's great. But in a way there's a lot of folks that also try to use information and kind of spin it and put their own narrative on pieces. Certainly, there's a lot of national narratives that we're always exploring and learning more about. And while a lot of people like us, I think, do take the long view on Stronger Nation data, you just said it earlier when we were talking about the anomaly with short-term credentials of saying, hey, don't look at it one year, take the longer view on it, there are folks who kind of take one year's findings and kind of turn it into a narrative of pieces. So, I guess I'm just curious from your perspective, you've been leading this work for a while, Courtney, what have you observed about how people react to one year's data versus many years data and how that kind of informs the public narratives that we end up reading month after month and whatever your favorite newspaper is these days?

**0:35:46.6 Courtney Brown:** Yeah, people only freak out when their data go down. They do that a lot more than they celebrate that it goes up. And usually where we're seeing it go down are those short-term credentials. Most states, like every year, year after year, their degree attainment continues to increase, which is amazing and really where you should be focusing a lot of those efforts, because that does take state policy and institution leaders and system leaders to really work on that over years and years to increase. This is not a quick fix. We can't overnight increase attainment by 10 percentage points. It's just not possible. It takes a while to get a credential. It takes a while, before that, to change practice and policy, the more students are impacted. So, we want to

look at these data. Like you should look at, absolutely people should look at these data every year. And especially look at who's being left behind. Like that's how I look at it. Let's look at the data, what are the data look like when I desegregate by race, ethnicity, when I desegregate by age, when I desegregate by region?

**0:36:50.0 Courtney Brown:** See who is not being served or underserved. And what can we do or are we doing something right now to change a policy and practice to enable more people to access and succeed in post-secondary education? So, this is one piece of the puzzle. It's almost like that final piece. You have to know all the other things that are happening before it. 'Cause you're not going to just increase attainment if you're not addressing access, you're not addressing the racial and ethnic gaps that we see. You're not addressing re-enrollment and success. We can't keep adding to that 40 million some college, no degree population. So, it's looking at the data as almost like your finish line, but what are all the other things that you have to put in place? And if you're not looking at that, then there's no way you're going to change your finish line. You want to look at that, but also uncover what else your state is doing, your community is doing, your institution is doing to get to that. What is your theory of change? And that's how I want, I hope people will look at it. Again, it's not, the only piece of data or the only year they should look at. And I hope that people are celebrating their successes. This has been an amazing accomplishment for the nation that over a short period of time, we have increased attainment by 16 percentage points. And that is degree increases and short-term, the ability to count those short-term credentials.

**0:38:08.2 Courtney Brown:** But it absolutely is degree increases across the board. And we all need to just celebrate ourselves, celebrate the partners in the communities, celebrate the partners at institutions and states who have been a part of this because we couldn't have accomplished it without everybody coming to the table to really address it. So I hope people do that, but also recognize we're not where we need to be yet. There are huge racial ethnic gaps that exist. And when we look at the data and desegregate it by race, ethnicity, there are many states that are being left behind. There are more poor and rural people that are being left behind. We really need to take the data, celebrate where we are, but then take action to make it even better moving forward.

**0:38:51.0 Dakota Pawlicki:** And part of what I hear you saying is stay very curious. This is a really robust data tool. There's a lot to dig into, but there's also a lot more to dig into. So, as you see something in your state, in your county in a particular population you're looking at, go and learn more. Don't just take that and run with that one individual piece that might resonate with something.

**0:39:13.7 Courtney Brown:** Absolutely. And, you know, this is the high-level data, the national data where we can compare apples to apples. People in their communities have better data. They have data that represents who they know are in their communities. They can desegregate the data much better and have finer data. So, use your data. This is not what you should be relying on. This is kind of high-level picture, but you're right. Be curious, dig into your own data and decide what you need to do.

**0:39:42.4 Dakota Pawlicki:** Before we close out, Chris, is there anything you wanted to add from what we've covered so far?

**0:39:49.7 Chris Mullin:** No, I don't have much more to add other than just to echo the point that Courtney made. We get phone calls from February, March, April, May, we get phone calls from very caring people across the country who want to understand the data more and dig in. And that's

really what brings joy to the work for us, is people who care very much, and we do all we can to help them. So, if you have questions or concerns, or want to learn more, we're always here to answer them, to have conversations with you, to learn from you, and to really make this tool better so we all know the direction we're heading and how we can make that direction continue to grow and be successful.

**0:40:26.9 Dakota Pawlicki:** Well, this is a perfect place for us to take a pause. Courtney, thank you so much for joining us in the studio today. It's so great to have you. And I know we're only just a couple minutes from Lumina's offices, so glad you could swing on by. And Chris, you're stuck with me for a little bit longer. Folks, stick around, Chris and I are going to dive even deeper into some of the short-term credential work. Stay tuned and thanks so much.

[music]

**0:40:52.0 Dakota Pawlicki:** Hey, everyone. Welcome back. I'm here with Dr. Chris Mullin to dive a little bit deeper into some of the short-term credentials and short-term credential work that is within Stronger Nation. Chris, there's just a ton for you and I to dig into. And honestly, we could probably talk for a very, very long time about this. But I think the first question that I think about that I hear a lot from local partners, city partners, even some states, comes down to that wage premium. But as Courtney said earlier, the working definition of what gets in Stronger Nation is [a], a short-term credential has to lead to further learning, and [b], has to have a wage premium of either 10% or 15% depending on what that credential is. How do you account when working with national data for all the regional differences? If a credential in Ohio only results in a 5% wage premium, but the same credential in Idaho gives you a 25% premium, does that get counted in Stronger Nation? Like, how do you handle those kinds of regional discrepancies in in labor market wages?

**0:42:00.8 Chris Mullin:** Yeah. Well, it's great to be with you and thank you so much. I'm really looking forward to today's conversation. At present, we don't account for it very well. And part of the reason is because it's very complex. When we talk about regional wage differences, it's not only state to state, but it's within a state, right? So, what we're trying to think through is what's the right level? And we're continuing this work now as we speak, is what's the right geography to try and break the earnings down to? And what data do we have available? So again, Stronger Nation relies upon federal data. We do that because we need to be able to compare apples to apples, each state using the same data point in the same way, to be fair. And so that limits us a little bit in terms of the analysis that we can do and the analysis maybe that we want to do. And so, I think a lot of our conversation today is going to balance between these two realities. One is the federal data that comes to us from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and US Department of Education and the Census Bureau that we use to create Stronger Nation. And on the other hand, is the data available to states, which is always much richer and better in many ways to kind of do these analyses where you can really understand the nuances of communities more closely.

**0:43:20.9 Dakota Pawlicki:** Is the wage data connected to the same survey data? You know, so we talked earlier that, hey, we kind of figure out this based on some really rigorous survey data. Is that in that same survey kind of asking people about their wages? Or is it a matter of marrying two data sets together?

**0:43:39.8 Chris Mullin:** That's a great question. So, it's a matter of marrying two together. And then deduplicating, this is part of the challenge we have in doing race ethnicity breakouts, is for our

certification data. Again, advancements over time in federal data collections mean that we can get that from the current population survey, the annual and social economic supplement that comes out, and we use the wages there, and then we estimate certificates and use wages over there too. And then with the, not we, Georgetown Center on Educational Workforce, our labor market economists who are brilliant individuals who do this work and teach me every day, and then they have to merge them together to de-duplicate because it's, in many cases, students who are Americans who might have a certificate, might also have a certification. And so, this, like you said, this marrying together of data sets makes it very hard because which data set do you rely on for a different variable, right? And so, it just creates some challenges for us that we have not yet been able to feel good about in terms of the way that we present the data to the public. because we want it to be as clear as possible and as accurate as possible.

**0:44:44.9 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah. It's always important in this kind of work to not let perfect be the enemy of the good. Absolutely. And I guess my other thought, you know, one of the questions I get asked most is like, well, why 10% and 15%? How did you all arrive at those particular wage premiums?

**0:45:06.1 Chris Mullin:** Sure. It's a lot of work done by Georgetown in the research literature about the earnings premium that you usually call and Courtney talked before. When that first came out, they had 20% because to be a conservative estimate. And they continue to look at the research literature and see what the research literature says about what these economic returns should be. Something economists call the sheepskin effect. Like, you have a piece of paper and what does that mean for earnings? And so, and look at the research and refining it over time, that's how they landed at the 15% for certificates and 10% for certifications. It's grounded in research around earnings outcomes, sheepskin effects, or actual benefit of having a piece of paper in your hand that said you earn something and how that influences your earnings.

**0:45:50.8 Chris Mullin:** When I started this work, I actually was in a system office when the 20% came out, and I'm like, well, that's way too conservative. So, I've lived this maybe as some of your listeners have on both sides, I've lived it as a state leader who's worked closely on studying it, attainment goal for the state. I was working in learning the numbers and trying to understand it. And now I have the great opportunity and privilege to work within Lumina to try and make the data as good as possible.

**0:46:19.2 Dakota Pawlicki:** And I feel like it's important to also emphasize, again, something going back to our first segment together, the reason there isn't a wage premium on an associate's or bachelor's degree in terms of Stronger Nation data reporting is because there's quite a bit of research out there that still shows no matter what that degree is, an associates or bachelor's, that there is a wage premium. Is that still true today?

**0:46:43.3 Chris Mullin:** It is still true today. I mean, it's still something we monitor very closely and are continually looking at, right? Because we want to make sure that individuals who have, who are working and have a credential are actually seeing a benefit from it. The shifting responsibility for cost over the past 40 years and who's paying for it, and the ROI and the value conversations really make sure that's imperative upon us to do so. And let's not forget that this, the goal, you know, 60% wasn't a number that Lumina just picked out the air. It was a number that reflected the percent of the workforce that needed a post-secondary credential by this time, right? So, it was grounded in research around what kind of workforce our country needs to thrive in the country and

thrive in the nation and thrive in the world, globally.

**0:47:33.3 Chris Mullin:** And so, this is not a mental exercise of like 60 sounds good. It's grounded in data. And so, a little bit aspirational. I mean, we want to, we want to lead the country. That goes back to President Bush and President Obama and President Trump. All of them have kind of centered attainment as an important part of our economic growth and development. And so that's how we got to that 60%, and that's why we're driving that way. So, it is very much about the earnings that somebody has and the ability just to provide for the life that they want to lead.

**0:48:09.3 Dakota Pawlicki:** That's incredibly helpful. I mean, and there is, I think right now we are in a lot of the narrative around is college worth it, is getting training after high school worth it? I know there's just been a lot of additional data coming out and reproving the point that says, yes. Like not only does it matter in terms of the money that you need to earn to live in America today, period, let alone prosper, but also for all the other non-monetary reasons when it comes to happiness, health, family outcomes, you name it. So, it feels like another affirmation of what we already are learning.

**0:48:48.9 Chris Mullin:** Right. Because with a... In part a good wage also signifies a good job. Which might mean benefits and other things. I mean, at present we have 40 million people with some college, no credential. So started at some point and stopped out. And that's it, that's just a challenge because they didn't achieve potentially what they wanted to from their college experience, right? They didn't transfer and get the degree, as you talked about earlier. They didn't get a credential along the way. And so, part of this is our interest is helping people understand the value that they have and the value that they bring. Especially as we start talking here about short term credentials, there are a lot of credentials that are very valuable to individuals. But they might not have the economic gain, and that's a tension that we work with. Somebody might get a credential that just helps them get started and get their first job, which might not be very good. The hope is that, that's great and it's sufficient, but not enough because we won't be able to live the American dream, and earn a credential and have a lifestyle where they're able to do so.

**0:49:58.0 Dakota Pawlicki:** You know, the other... Chris, I'm so glad that you're with me for a lot of reasons today. One of them is because you did prior to coming to Lumina, you were with a state office. And I think that gives you some real grounding in practitioner space and what a lot of folks, and we know that people go and visit and use the Stronger Nation tool in part to learn about what it looks like at home, and hopefully to really use that data to inform their own work, inform their own strategies, and those kinds of pieces. One of the questions I get asked a lot from the cities and communities I work with is around just how to count short term credentials locally. We know that we can use reasonable estimates in Stronger Nation to get down to the state level, but that's really about it. We can't get down to the county level. And so, I guess I'm curious, Lumina continues to put significant efforts into counting these kinds of credentials at the national level and lower. But what advice do you give to local, regional folks, state folks who want to get a stronger sense of what short-term credential completion looks like in their own context?

**0:51:15.4 Chris Mullin:** Sure. Well, I think what's really important, what's been empowering to me when I've had the opportunity to talk to some regions around the country is you've got to, if you set it, you have to first set a vision that you want to focus on this. And when I say it's not one person in an office setting a vision, it's individuals working together, like the great work you do, Dakota, with all the labs around the country. And then that part, as soon as you do that, you start to realize that I

might have to pull together a couple different pieces of data that I have. And so sometimes the institutions of higher education will enter the space and say like, well, this is how many degrees I awarded last year, and then an employment training provider that might be funded by WEOA or a federal workforce program will be like, well, here's how many I produce. Right?

**0:51:57.3 Chris Mullin:** And they think they could just stack these together and say, here, we gave you 85,000 in this metropolitan area last year, that should be good enough. But how do we integrate those data together? See where there's duplication, right? Because 10% of students are enrolled in more than one institution at any point in time. That's been pretty consistent over time. So, where's their duplication happening? And then how do we deduplicate that? And of those who are earning these, how many might already have a credential already? Again, going back Stronger Nations about your first credential attainment. And so, I think that's the challenge there is to make sure that your denominator in whatever any county is doing is that one single person counted once. And so, there's opportunities to come together, but the only real way that it happens, it can't be solved by turning to the state or a system office and saying, hey, go do all this and de-duplicate it necessarily.

**0:52:52.0 Chris Mullin:** So that's one thing is to have regional conversations about it and a vision, and then working to de-duplicate and put data together to make it happen. Another strategy is, would be for a state office, or the scheme at the regional level, is to take the survey. These surveys are paid by taxpayer dollars. They've been vetted and tested and used time and time again. Take the, a forthcoming N2 survey, take the American Community Survey, that'll couple education questions, work with your local universities to do some public service and public good, and have them deploy the survey in your service area. And that can give you local estimates. I think I've learned some about, like North Carolina has this fund that the legislature put where researchers can use that money to answer questions in the state that are relevant to the state.

**0:53:41.7 Chris Mullin:** I need to learn more about that model. But it sounds like a fantastic model, right? That you can use the university researchers in partnership maybe with some college researchers at both public and private, and mix it together and say, okay, this is the metropolitan area we want to serve. We're going to take the questions from the current population survey or another survey. Ask them of the people in our community every year, get the answers and give us a really good understanding of what's happening. And even maybe do it by populations that matter to that community. It might be low income individuals, it might be learners of color, it might be individuals with disabilities, whatever the vision is for that community, you can really do it pretty robustly. And I think using the partnerships that you have right available in your backyard.

**0:54:27.7 Dakota Pawlicki:** In terms of linking data sets, and I mean, this is, there's like whole conferences about this. So maybe I'm sorry in advance for asking this question, but it's like, okay, as you said, there's, you have formal higher education institutions, community colleges, state colleges, technical colleges, all these accredited kind of folks over here. You also have an array, a pretty wide array of other workforce training providers. Some that are supported by public tax dollars, others that aren't. You also have private sector partners that are just offering some kind of post-secondary credential certificate certification that doesn't involve any tax dollars whatsoever. Their data is their own administrative data, and they aren't really accountable to anybody. Talk me through how you even begin to link those data sets together, let alone starting to deal with some of the data quality issues like de-duping and only counting the first credential and all those other arrays.

**0:55:36.3 Chris Mullin:** Sure. And so, part of this is there's opportunities to link data together. It's

just oftentimes the agencies that have the legal authority and legislative ability to do so are situated within some kind of state governing offices or entity, right? Because when you start to talk about earnings, that's very personal data and there's limits around who can have access to that. So, in some cases if you're looking at earnings that are pulling that office in your, so your department of unemployment insurance, it can really help. They have different names in different states. The Labor Market Institute, or that's the association of all them. We spend a lot of time talking with the individuals there and professionals learning from their point of view, I'll be at their conference with them this summer learning more about all their work. And so, pulling that data together.

**0:56:31.0 Chris Mullin:** The interesting part on the labor side, which is different than education I'm learning as I just completed some work to understand federal data sets really in depth around credentials, is that for education providers, they have to report to the federal government directly the outcomes of the education. In other words, they have to report who got the degree or a certificate from an educational institution. In the Department of Labor and other workforce programs that we hear a lot about apprenticeships and others, the arrangement is this federal state partnership. And so, what's been happening back to the 1960s at least if not beforehand, is states collect the data and then the states send the data to the federal government. And somewhere in that translation, the 50 different ways of collecting the data and sending it to the federal government just hasn't resulted in very consistent data from state to state in a way that makes it super helpful for us to understand what's happening.

**0:57:29.0 Chris Mullin:** And furthermore, there are not requirements of federal training providers to confer a credential when somebody completes a training. So, somebody can go to learn how to fix brakes on a car and get a good paying job working as a mechanic, but it might not be that that provider's required to give them a credential. Well, so we have somebody with skills and knowledge and abilities who's getting a financial benefit, but nowhere in the database do we know that they got a credential because they were never conferred one by the provider. So, on the training side, that's where we're having some challenges and we're working really hard to have conversations and encourage providers, some do, but not all, to really make sure that when somebody completes a program of study that they are given the sheepskin, the credential that they earned. And this really has to do for me with personal equity issues.

**0:58:21.5 Chris Mullin:** We know that between completing college and getting a job, sometimes there are hiring requirements, right? Like when I became a teacher, I had to get fingerprinted, I had to pass a statewide exam, and I had to get my teaching certificate before I could teach, right? Luckily, I passed everything without a problem. But if I'm an individual whose life experiences resulted in some decisions that were unfortunate and would prevent me from getting a job, let's say I want to work on a truck working on power lines, that job pays six figures. It's a great job. Those trucks have a lot of equipment on them. It costs a lot of money. In some cases, if you have a DUI for example, you can't even work on those trucks. So, the question is, well, if you get the line-work certificate, maybe you can get a job somewhere else and not have to drive the truck, is the point I'm saying. And so, if the workforce training opportunity is only aligned where the participant doesn't get a credential at the end because it's set up by an employer, but the employer requires things of the people who complete the program that some of those individuals can't have, they have nothing to take with them to another space and say, hey, I've learned these skills and I have these transferable skills and abilities, can I work for you instead?

**0:59:37.8 Chris Mullin:** That's makes, those are some anecdotes about why it's hard to match these



data together, because we don't always know what the credentials that students are earning on the training programs. So those are oftentimes the federal state quoted ones. From the private proprietaries, we see a lot of online badges and certificates pop up. I think I've earned about 20 from one of them already. I'm currently enrolled in a non-credit program at a university right now to upscale my own understanding of user experience and user design of websites or whatnot to make Stronger Nation better. So even if I were to earn that, it doesn't matter because I already have a degree. So, I wouldn't change the payment. But the challenge is, is my information is going to be in somebody's database somewhere. And that data, there's no central place for that data to sit and to be collected.

**1:00:32.6 Chris Mullin:** In the 1970s, a lot of this is non-credit in particular. In the 1970s and actually late '60s, early '70s, 34 agencies came together, public and private to try and understand what's happening in non-credit education, pull the data together. And they did so in the way they called the continuing education unit, which isn't really a credential, but at least it's a signal of completing some education and training. So, there's some work in the non-credit space. So, I know this answer for your listeners, like, this is a lot. I've had to take a lot of notes. I'll just summarize that education providers provide credentials that can easily be shared and put together. Sometimes federal and state workforce training programs don't require credentials, so it's hard to understand what happens with them. And then the private providers often have data that sits in some kind of private proprietary database. And so, getting them all to work together is something we've tried and are trying very hard to do, but are yet to be successful.

**1:01:27.8 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, I mean, I think as a data novice, it seems to me that we are in a time, in an era where we have a lot of data, rarely are we bumping into challenges of not having enough data or not having a reliable way or a valid way to collect data anymore. And in fact, we might even have too much data sometimes, and that can be difficult to wrestle with, so what I also hear you saying is that there are things for us to work on and explore about the intersectionality and where certain data sets intersect and what must we share and why are we sharing it together. But then there's also the inter kind of data relation piece. And you've mentioned that you've done some real digging on this, especially on the federal side. I'm looking at a paper that you've just published in March around aligning federal, I'm going to read one sentence here because I think it's so great right here in your opening.

**1:02:30.5 Dakota Pawlicki:** While it is not one federal statistical agency's responsibility to collect every credential, it is incumbent on federal agencies to align their own data systems to validate, honor and reflect the lived experience of today's students pursuing tomorrow's credentials. And so can you just talk to me a little bit more about, as you look just in terms of federal agencies, what are some of the recommendations that you just see about, okay, we acknowledge that there's all these challenges about working with proprietary and non-proprietary, but let's set that aside for a moment. Just say, what can we do inside our own house as the federal government to make this a little bit easier and to make our data exchange a little bit better?

**1:03:09.6 Chris Mullin:** Well, thank you. I wrote that sentence and as soon as I did, I felt good about it. You know, every once in a while, you say something, you're like, oh, that was actually, I actually said something that actually made sense.

**1:03:17.8 Dakota Pawlicki:** Well, it hit. It's a good pull quote, man. It hit, for sure.

**1:03:21.9 Chris Mullin:** Well, thank you for that. And honestly, it's part of the reason I came to Lumina and have so much respect for this organization before I got here is, it's really how do we honor and validate really the lives of individuals, and one way to do is through understanding the credentials that they own. And so, what I think there's an opportunity for, and there's actually work going on right now, the federal agencies, and they're called chief data officers and others are coming together to talk more and to understand a little bit. That being said, like any ecosystem of individuals, they're very focused on making sure their data products are really good. And so, the challenge is that if you pick up different federal surveys, they call different credentials different things. And when we try and aggregate them back together, it's like, well, is that a professional certification?

**1:04:11.3 Chris Mullin:** Is that an industry certification? Is that an occupational certification or what's the difference? And us who spend our days doing this have a hard enough time understanding it, let alone the individuals on the ground who are the most important users, who are the ones that are actually trying to turn the data into practice. They're actually trying to improve their communities. And so, in the paper I just recommend that we come together in a room and start talking about the data we use. Why do you use the word professional certification? And if the answer is because you've sat down with hundreds of people and asked them questions and they understand professional certification more than they do industry certification, okay, then let's all use that word. Let's use the word that makes the most sense, that reflects the same thing. And I think there's some space and opportunity to do that.

**1:05:00.2 Chris Mullin:** I'm really excited about the opportunities to be involved in those conversations. If we can support that and make sure that we just create a common national narrative that allows everybody to understand the data we have, understand where there's opportunities to grow and understand exactly what roles these different credentials play. So, I'm looking at the certificates of postmasters, postgraduate, undergraduate, post-secondary, educational, vocational, and those are all different surveys using different terms, and it just makes the world really confusing for the rest of us. So, my hope is that we can find a way for these federal statistical agencies to come together and agree to some common terminology around credentials.

**1:05:44.3 Dakota Pawlicki:** And I'm sure for some folks that might sound pedantic, but you're absolutely right. I mean, just to draw a parallel, we've seen this a lot in housing work actually. A lot of communities and cities that are trying to address homelessness and make sure unhoused people have places to live, they go around and they figure out who's providing what kind of service. Well, everyone's using different language to really say the same thing. And it's not really until we can start speaking the same language can we actually figure out how our current system is working. And I got to imagine if it's that complex and housing service providers just got to be even more complex when it gets into 22 different federal agencies, I don't know if that number's accurate, but it feels right. All these different federal agencies trying to collect and provide their own data tools and speak to their own particular context and area.

**1:06:34.1 Chris Mullin:** Yeah, what's fascinating is like everything has a history. We all have histories. You have your own history to cut out, I have my history. It makes us who we are today, right? We've lived through goods and bads and ups and downs. I went to college as a Pell Grant student, so I understand that experience more. I'm a white male. I still lived through that too, and I have to own that and understand that. So, we all have our things. And believe it or not, the same is true for data, which sounds really weird, but data is an idea that somebody writes down on a piece

of paper and then years later people go back, oh, let's change it a little bit. Let's change that. And it has this personality it takes over time. And sometimes people do that in silos without really engaging others. And I think that's where we can all do a better job is more participatory.

**1:07:17.6 Chris Mullin:** It democratizes the opportunity, it equalizes the voices at the table, and it allows for a richer and more stronger understanding of what it is that we're trying to do collectively. And so that's really what we aspire to in the future is we ought to come together, come out with one answer, but by engaging more stakeholders and those with different lived experiences who understand things differently, I think we'll have a richer answer moving forward in our life, but also weird enough in the data that we count and collect, it's not just an easy, I have a cup. I don't have a cup. No, there's mugs, there's wine glasses, there's water glasses, there's juice glasses, there's all types of cups. And so, we've got to find a way to kind of get to the word cup. I have the coffee cup in front of me. Sorry. That's where it came from. We got to find a way to get to the common word that we can use together.

**1:08:08.9 Dakota Pawlicki:** Yeah, absolutely. And I so appreciate you saying that. I mean, I follow you on LinkedIn, and I think you are a top LinkedIn producer. I know it sounds like a weird thing to say, but I'm not crazy about social media as a human. And so, I always am grateful to find people who write kind of longer and more detailed things so that I actually feel like, oh, wait, I'm learning from you. And one of the things I routinely learn from you and a reminder of exactly what you're saying about how data itself has its own history and looking at some of the ways that we count, some of the language that we use, some of the reasons we do certain things goes back to the '60s and '70s. And I know a lot of us are anchored like, oh, well, that was only 20 years ago. It's indeed not 20 years ago anymore. That was like 50, 60 years ago. And so really trying to be mindful of where this history is and then also trying to get things updated in an appropriate way without losing the benefit of the generations before us, who have really put a lot of hard work into is a tricky balance for sure.

**1:09:11.7 Chris Mullin:** Yeah, it absolutely is. And we see it, and that's where these people talk about the structures over time. And that's a structure, right? How do you account something, a survey instrument is a structure. It has its own form and shape and its own building. And so those are the things that we all have take time to reflect upon and figure out how to improve without doing year to year shifts. If you change the whole thing tomorrow, then the trend line breaks and we have problems. So, it's a complicated problem to solve, but one that I'm just fortunate to have the opportunity to be engaged in. Thank you for the compliment. I try and share what I'm learning as I'm learning it because we sit in these privileged positions where we have the time to think all day long and talk to wonderful people like yourselves and your colleagues. You've had me meet with some of your regional groups and stuff, and they're fantastic. They ask the best questions and really trying to answer them and empower individuals to the greatest extent that we can.

**1:10:02.1 Dakota Pawlicki:** So, I guess, I know it's got to feel good to have Stronger Nation released, and there's the blogs are out and the webinar is out and all of that. So, I got to ask you, I hate to ask you this already, but it's like, well, what are we expecting for next year's tool? What are you excited about? Hopefully a nut that you can crack as you are already, I know, and probably already have been planning for the next year's Stronger Nation.

**1:10:31.5 Chris Mullin:** Oh yeah. I don't have an answer for you yet, but we do have this development phase that goes through October 31st to try and see what can we do different. We have

to build the web tool and then import all the data, like I said, on that tight turnaround when it starts coming out late in the fall, early winter to get Stronger Nation in January. So, we're always looking at everything. I'm going to take a run again to see if we can figure out a way to do certificates by race, ethnicity, we have yet to be successful to do that. But maybe there's a way, this earnings question I think is a really important one. I'll be looking into that in terms of regional differences and how do you cut that down, but no real answers and no firm like this is what's going to happen next.

**1:11:10.9 Chris Mullin:** Like we said, this year, we were really happy to add that new chart that showed trends and what type of credentials were being earned by different people, identify with different racial and ethnic groups. And you can also do that by state too. So, we're really proud of that and happy to make that a reality. I don't have anything like that I can say for that this year, but we're excited to get back to work in the summer thinking, and we've got some great partners who help us do this work, and they're really thoughtful. And also, the questions that you send to us, I can't reiterate it enough. Sometimes you hear people say, oh, send me your questions. And they're like, they don't really want to hear from me. I really want to hear from you. I'm sincere because the questions you ask help us understand.

**1:11:57.1 Chris Mullin:** And Dakota, thank you so much for having us on this podcast series because the questions you ask and your touch points with leaders across this country really help us understand where the pain points are and how do we prioritize what's the most important thing to tackle, and then go back to our desks and work with our expert partners and try and figure out how to answer those questions. So, you can find me or Courtney on the Lumina website under the staff of who we are. Send me an email and we'll have a phone call, and I'll take everything I can to learn from you, learn with you, and hopefully I give you answers that your listeners might need and also learn something along the way and really try to make the tool better. So that's where it comes from. Any improvement we have really comes from the field. It doesn't come from us at all.

**1:12:39.2 Dakota Pawlicki:** Well, that's a great place to leave it. Dr. Chris Mullin, Strategy Director of Data Measurement at Lumina, thank you so much for joining us and diving deeper into short-term credentials. And I know it's sincere. If folks do have questions or are interested in engaging the topic, they should just absolutely reach out to you. You've been such a wonderful asset to me and the folks that we have a chance to serve, and thanks for coming on the show today. Really appreciate you helping us kick off this newest season.

**1:13:07.9 Chris Mullin:** My pleasure. Thank you.

[music]

**1:13:13.3 Dakota Pawlicki:** Everyone, thanks for being with us today. I want to really encourage everyone to go explore the Stronger Nation tool available at Lumina's website. It has loads more data and insights, a goal exploration tool, plenty of ways to disaggregate data, whether you're a fellow data nerd or just want to check out how educated your own community is, head over to [luminafoundation.org/strongernation](https://luminafoundation.org/strongernation) and fully explore a really powerful tool. My thanks to our guests Dr. Courtney Brown and Dr. Chris Mullin for joining me today. And thank you for watching today's show. It's going to be a great season. So, if you haven't subscribed yet, please do. Our show is produced by Jacob Mann and me, Dakota Pawlicki, with support from Matthew Jenkins, Amy Bartner and the team at Site Strategies. Well Done Marketing supports the promotion of our show.

## EP 42 - Full Show

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