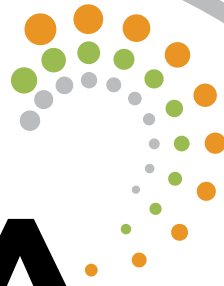


HALLMARKS OF
EXCELLENCE

UPCEA[®]

IN CREDENTIAL INNOVATION





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a millennium, universities have awarded degrees to their graduates in much the same form as America's academic institutions do today. Through their durability and credibility, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees have stood the test of time, sustaining their relevance and their power to convey academic accomplishment. In recent decades, though, new forms of credentials have expanded the portfolio of ways for recognizing educational achievement.

These "alternative credentials"—which include certificates, micro-credentials, digital badges, or micro-certificates—signal specific competencies, certification, and sometimes licensure. They took root in the armed forces, throughout financial and information technology professions, and in the shadows of conventional academic institutions. They grew because of the need for smaller, timely, and more focused educational components earned incrementally over a lifetime of learning and professional development. They have the potential to flourish because of the ubiquity of the internet—as a means of delivering education and now as a potential home for a digital record that tracks student accomplishment over a lifetime.

Even as universities have been steadfast in their dedication to traditional degrees, innovations in credentialing found a back door into academe. These new credentials are often prefixed by "non" (noncredit programs leading to nondegrees for nontraditional students) rather than defined by what they truly are: important, alternative means of acquiring education and university-based credentials. Nor is "alternative credentials" a phrase recognized by consumers or employers, or even within much of higher education itself. There is no standard definition or delineation of what is included under the umbrella of "alternative credentials." Innovative leaders in professional and continuing education have championed new models that design, deliver, and recognize shorter educational programs within their institutions. The growth of these programs suggests it is now time to find positive terminology and a clear identity to welcome them into the portfolio of university offerings.

This third set of Hallmarks of Excellence¹ focuses on these alternative credentials—through the innovative process, within the context of established universities and academic degrees, and in search of the ideals and integrity that should drive the growth of new forms of educational designations.

These Hallmarks of Excellence call for:

- *An idealistic, aspirational view of nontraditional credentials*—alternative credentials should occupy a more central space, consistent with the values of their institutions, and integrate their universities with the concrete educational needs of employers and professions.
- *An entrepreneurial agility to bridge the needs of external constituents with the resources, reputation, and mission of traditional universities*—alternative credentials should be inventive and responsive in ways that promote new programs, models, and recognition, thereby transporting their schools into new territory.
- *A self-conscious ethical focus that reflects the highest ideals of academic institutions and the greater purpose of innovation in credentialing*—in a largely lawless environment, where alternative credentials could easily exploit the absence of accountability and consistency, there is an even greater imperative to exemplify a longer, larger, and lasting view of the importance of these initiatives.

1 [Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Leadership](#) and [Hallmarks in Excellence in Professional and Continuing Education](#), sponsored by UPCEA: Leaders in Professional, Continuing, and Online Education.

Excellent Practices— Eight Pillars

Alternative credentials will help shape the reputation—and likely the future—of America's universities. They will also shape the pivotal role of those in professional and continuing education within their institutions and communities, as they develop and promote new ways of bundling and certifying educational experiences. More importantly, these programs have the potential to impact our nation's workforce in innumerable ways. What we do now will launch an expanded array of possibilities into the second academic millennium. Creating small programs could have large consequences.

We identify eight facets in leading credential innovation in traditional universities:

1 Advocacy and Leadership within the University

Recognizing that alternative credentials, by their very nature, challenge traditional settings, those leading efforts to expand credential offerings need to be adept and agile in defining and defending these in the languages, values, mission, and structures of academe—and potentially within a culture of skepticism.

2 Entrepreneurial Initiative

Recognizing that new forms of credentialing command imagination and investigation, risk-taking and respect for academic processes, and a skill set to manage change responsibly, those leading these efforts must have the drive and discipline to create new initiatives.

3 University-to-Business Stakeholder Engagement

Recognizing that new forms of credentialing cannot occur in an ivory tower, those leading these efforts must welcome employers, professions, and industries as partners; respond to their needs and objectives; and seek their ongoing involvement, and even expertise, in ways uncommon in traditional academe.

4 The Faculty Experience

Recognizing the role of subject-matter expertise in learning, those leading these efforts must identify and cultivate teaching talent—from within and beyond the academy—and ensure their success in traditional and online classrooms.

5 The Learner Experience

Recognizing that the learner might seek a swift, convenient, and even transactional relationship, those leading these efforts must design programs that are easily accessible and immediately valuable.

6 Digital Technology

Recognizing the need to bundle a lifetime of unique credentials and accomplishments, those leading these efforts must find new ways of verifying learning and enabling students to document their achievements.

7 External Advocacy and Leadership Beyond the University

Recognizing the ill-defined, unregulated, and poorly understood nature of alternative credentials, those leading these efforts must find external forums to educate consumers and other constituents on the value of alternative credentials by building awareness, appreciation, and, ultimately, consistency.

8 Professionalism

Recognizing the general lack of oversight and clarity in this dynamic phase, those leading these efforts have a unique historical opportunity to envision and embody exemplary professional standards of both excellence and integrity.

INTERNAL ADVOCACY

Goal

Issuing any university credential—whether a degree or an alternative credential—reflects upon the reputation and responsibility of the institution. While alternative credentials can expand university offerings in ways that are increasingly responsive to the needs of learners and employers, they must still maintain the ethical and academic standards expected from institutions of higher learning.

A primary challenge is to persuade and reassure internal stakeholders of the legitimacy and importance of awarding credentials beyond those typically offered by colleges and universities. These stakeholders might be unfamiliar with, and even leery of, nontraditional credentials—particularly given the dynamic and unsettled nature of this ever-changing aspect of higher education—elevating the importance of a consistent and holistic institutional approach.

Key Elements

- + Articulate a vision for the development of alternative credentials consistent with an institution's mission, goals, and strategy.
- + Advocate for innovation in alternative credential development and delivery of curricula.
- + Work with all sectors of the academic organization to have these credentials recognized as part of the institution's portfolio and, perhaps, as elements in traditional degree programs (including transferable credit or advanced standing towards a degree, or as a next stage beyond a degree).
- + Demonstrate a pedagogically sound approach for the development of alternative credentials.
- + Create consistent definitions, standards, and campus-wide consensus surrounding the terminology for alternative credentials, badging, micro-certificates, and other nonstandard identifiers to describe mastery of learning.
- + Develop mainstream, internal systems for tracking and recognizing students pursuing and achieving these credentials.
- + Establish metrics that measure success and accountability.
- + Identify leadership and a central resource for effective practices, internal and external data systems, and a quality-control process.
- + Facilitate participation and accountability among administrative and academic units.
- + Collaborate with fiscal partners to develop a sustainable resource strategy on pricing, budgeting, compensation, and financial policies.

- + Devise a communication and marketing strategy for both internal as well as external constituents.
- + Develop systems that allow digital credentials to be portable across institutions and employers, particularly through the use of open badge/credential technical standards.

Why?

Alternative credentials have existed in their newest digital form for over a decade, and even long before the ubiquity of the internet. However, institutions of higher education have been somewhat hesitant to consider the use of alternative credentials as a currency to demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes. Considering how alternative credentials can legitimize skill-set learning is vital to the connection between universities, learners, and employers.

What?

To meet the expectations of today's workforce, it is critical to develop high-quality, well-defined practices and procedures that articulate noncredit-to-credit pathways, align traditional programs with skill mastery and certification, create alternative or accelerated degree paths and post-degree skill development, and permit portability with employers and other institutions.

Who and How—Implementation

Engagement

- + Engage internal and external stakeholders to articulate a vision of using alternative credentials consistently across the institution while meeting the institution's mission, goals, strengths, and strategy:
 - Establish a working network to represent all stakeholders, including internal academic and administrative units and external constituents.
 - Charge the group to align with the mission of the institution and routinely scan the external environment.
 - Present the vision broadly across the institution—providing ample opportunity for feedback and input.
- + Advocate for pedagogically sound development of alternative credentials:
 - Promote, and maintain a focus on, the academic goal of achieving learning outcomes.
 - Ensure that faculty leaders are included in the governance structure of any campus-wide alternative credential initiative, both to overcome issues of quality assurance and to encourage faculty adaptation to new credentials offered through credit and noncredit pathways.
 - Reach out to advocates within the institution's academic departments and centers of workforce development.

Strategy

- + Use national standards, when possible, or otherwise create consistent definitions, standards, approval processes, and campus-wide consensus surrounding the meaning of alternative credentials and all nonstandard identifiers that denote mastery of learning:
 - Develop an institutional language in collaboration with national standards efforts, employers, and stakeholders to determine definitions and standards.
 - Establish or adhere to an academic governance structure that provides academic credibility and guidance.
 - Disseminate and promote alternative credentials throughout the university for input and agreement—including all administrative levels, the faculty senate, and student organizations.
- + Establish metrics to measure success and accountability:
 - Set transparent metrics based on capacity, growth and access goals, and internal and external expectations.
 - Survey colleges and departments to determine instructional capacity, resource needs, and academic strengths and priorities. Identify targets of opportunity that might be key to launching or extending alternative credentials within the institution.

Leadership

- + Identify leadership and a central resource for effective practices, internal and external data systems, and a quality-control process:
 - Identify or create an office or unit to serve as the lead, even transitionally, in driving this initiative. Create ownership and ongoing commitment. While a professional and continuing education unit might incubate these programs, there needs to be an ongoing review to see how best to lead and organize a sustained effort within the institution.
 - Define the locus of responsibility and its relationship within the academic affairs sector, and recognize this unit as the campus hub for effective practices, oversight of alternative credential awards, metadata structure, and technological considerations of digital credentials for consistency across the institution.
 - Ensure that appointed leadership is empowered and resourced to establish plans and protocols for the initiative.
- + Promote the benefits of alternative credentials for students and employers:
 - Illustrate how those who participate may enhance their current employment through promotion, or position themselves for future career opportunities.
 - Promote collaboration and new partnerships among academic units and employers.
 - Articulate—and even celebrate—the advantages for students when departments and colleges collaborate through use of alternative credentialing. Demonstrate how an alternative credential provides a competitive advantage for students in the workplace and enables the university to bolster workforce development.

Sustainability

- + Facilitate usage and accountability among administrative and academic units:
 - Propose the fee or tuition within both a university and market context. Consider what the fee might be for a learner who is interested only in an alternative certificate, not a corresponding degree program.
 - Develop a strategy of quality assurance.
 - Develop a method by which alternative credentials are tracked and verified.
- + Work with fiscal partners to develop a sustainable resource strategy:
 - Dedicate a portion of the revenue stream for marketing, program development, statutory regulations related to licensure, curriculum revisions, technology infrastructure, and faculty development. Create an investment fund to grow and enhance program offerings.
 - Work with the registrar and others to integrate these learners within the university's information systems.
 - Build a model for proposing and researching new alternative credentials.

Communication

- + Establish a communication and marketing strategy for internal as well as external constituents:
 - Manage both internal and external spheres of influence—across the full range of stakeholders.
 - Establish a website or portal to share communications, events, and recognitions related to alternative credentials.
 - Widely disseminate updates, policies, and procedures internally and externally as appropriate.
 - Consider other indirect communication channels that serve the cause. Events such as faculty development workshops and the establishment of best-practice examples support the communication of the overall strategy.
 - Sustain a communications strategy to promote the understanding of alternative credentials among internal stakeholders. This requires engaging and persuading others to support these initiatives and to cooperate in their integration.

Assessment and Evaluation

- + Advocate for innovation in alternative credential development and delivery of curriculum:
 - Use analytics to drive decisions related to credential development, infrastructure needs, and support systems.
 - Develop quality-assurance standards for assessment strategies.
 - Report findings and advocate for change, resources, and innovation based on results. Establish habits of openness, self-criticism, and continual improvement, so that analytical tools fuel ongoing quality enhancement and confidence across university leadership.

Key Performance Indicators

- + Legitimacy in leadership and organizational structure.
- + Powerful data analytics that drive decision-making and promote accomplishments.
- + Policies that address instructional capacity, enrollments, university infrastructure and systems, acceptance by external stakeholders, and financial sustainability.
- + Cooperation and respect among the colleges and administrative units for alternative credentials.
- + Legitimacy and visibility throughout the university community.
- + Increased faculty participation in using alternative credentials to recognize learning mastery and develop articulation agreements and co-marketing strategies that bridge noncredit and credit programs, alternative credentials and traditional degrees.
- + Growth in enrollment accompanied by effective messaging to the external community, illustrating the institution's commitment to enhancing the current workforce—and preparing them for the future.

ENTREPRENEURIAL INITIATIVES

Goal

The emergent nature of new credentials requires experimentation and agility. Universities will need to take managed risks to move into this space and account for necessary strategic and tactical resources.

Alternative credentials are designed to meet various emergent needs, including:

- + The rapid invention of new jobs and categories of work.
- + Multiple careers that can span sixty years and involve numerous job changes across many distinct areas.
- + Varied credentials that provide immediate value in jobs.
- + Local, regional, national, even transnational occupational needs.

The regulatory hurdles and institutional requirements for maintaining for-credit credentials (undergraduate and graduate degrees) make noncredit offerings ideal for experimentation with new credentials. Many professional and continuing education (PCE) units already offer certificate programs, CEUs, and other unique learning experiences that provide rich opportunities to test new credentialing formats. Many PCE units pioneered alternative credentials, external partnerships, and industry designations over the past several decades, and are poised to expand these efforts in a variety of directions.

Key Elements

- + Build a culture that thrives on entrepreneurship and innovation.
- + Create dedicated capacity for finding, creating, and executing new ideas.
- + Act on ideas—and brave the risks—for new ventures.
- + Work directly with employers to determine their needs for new forms of credentials, showcasing new possibilities.
- + Collaborate with other regional and national institutions, governments, and NGOs to develop new forms of multi-institution credential frameworks.
- + Create open and sustainable platforms that encourage sharing and portability to accelerate innovation.
- + Ensure these open platforms protect learner privacy so that digital credentials represent an ethical and consensual use of the individual's data.
- + Articulate a value proposition to test on learners with employer support inside their company.

- + Assess campus infrastructure, including systems with the capability to display badges and other digital credentials (e.g., some learning management systems have internal capabilities or easy connectivity to third-party options).
- + Set aside an annual discretionary budget expressly for new credential infrastructure and development, and require ongoing commitment to risk-taking.

Why?

The rapidly emerging workforce needs of the future require a seamless connection to employers and other institutions. Employers seek more granular data about the competence of potential new employees. Alternative credentials will provide a more detailed view of an employee's capabilities and serve as an advance signal for an individual to retool or update skills.

Furthermore, national credentialing organizations in finance, technology, sustainability, and other sectors are developing more of their own courses and certifications. For the university, navigating this realm requires communication and partnerships with professional and industry associations, receptivity to market changes and new credential needs, and an understanding of the competitive position of the academic institution, its reputation, and its power to capitalize on new opportunities.

What?

Goal Identification

What does the institution wish to achieve?

Alternative credentials provide an opportunity to create new educational programs; connections to various industries, professions, and employers; and sophisticated means of bundling educational components both within the academic institution and on behalf of learners throughout their lifetime.

For whom is the institution creating value?

As part of goal-setting, it is important to understand how a new audience might be similar or dissimilar to existing audiences. Consider partnerships and programs targeted at corporations, nongovernmental organizations, other universities, governments, industry associations, and foundations.

Is campus leadership aligned, explicitly or implicitly, with the goal?

Institutional leadership buy-in is essential—sharing more granular data about students will require challenging conversations among the faculty, registrar, and those in academic affairs and information technology.

Brand Alignment

What critical brand attributes are needed for an entrepreneurial project?

Each undertaking should achieve enough institutional brand alignment to be recognizable and responsive to internal stakeholders and external reputation. Ventures that fail to align with the brand and understood domains of the school run the risk of internal resistance, marginalization, or eventual elimination.

Strategically, alternative credential initiatives should enhance and not compromise the institution's overall mission. On a tactical level, the presentation of alternative credentials should be clear, graphically and verbally consistent, and aligned with university brand attributes.

How does the institutional fit influence the selection and design of an alternative credential project?

Alternative credentialing efforts should reflect the institution's strengths. A comprehensive institution might focus on broadly applicable credentials while a more professionally focused institution might develop specialized, industry-oriented credentials.

Market Research

What type of market research is necessary?

A rapidly evolving landscape requires ongoing analysis and updating. Current, relevant data can inform the scope of early projects and determine effective communication plans. In some cases, these programs will seek to create a market, rather than serve an existing market, which makes market research more speculative.

Consider the following:

- + Trends—what is occurring in the workforce in particular regions?
- + Size of perceived market—is demand large enough, even if a project is successful?
- + What are the current knowledge gaps employers see when hiring? Can those gaps be closed with more specialized, focused credentials?
- + Workforce demographics—which industries face a surge of retirements and may need to identify and accelerate learning opportunities for newer workers?
- + Insights from existing networks—what are colleagues observing in an industry?
- + Local industry and professional associations—are there opportunities to address the needs of their members?
- + Format—can industry-specific credentials be tied to existing university programs and expertise in meaningful ways for learners and employers?

Idea Generation

How does a university organize to develop new ideas?

Ideas for new offerings can come from:

- + Internal stakeholders—faculty, registrar, academic affairs, professional and continuing education, and campus leaders may all have ideas about using new credentials to improve student outcomes.

- + External stakeholders—employers, alumni, and external partners are essential clients of new credentials.
- + Foundations, military and government agencies, professional associations, local chambers of commerce, and other community or neighborhood organizations can provide insights into how new credentials can improve their constituents' lives.

Ideas are easy to generate (particularly when there is ongoing interaction with external constituents), but vetting and evaluating them requires discipline and focus. Entrepreneurial universities have ways to channel ideas into meaningful action. It is essential to prioritize the most promising early-stage ideas so that quick wins encourage and finance further experimentation.

What kind of ideas should be generated?

As many ideas as possible should be generated in order to go through an assessment process. Initially, there are neither bad ideas nor an excess of possibilities—even an unrealistic idea can evolve into something tangible and compelling. Ideas should always address a specific problem, serve a growing market need, consider (but not be constrained by) current resources and expertise, and encompass everything from redesigning existing credentials to developing new forms of credentials.

Idea and Opportunity Assessment

What attributes are used to evaluate ideas?

Many entrepreneurial tools exist to help evaluate ideas. Key questions to ask:

- + Who is the market and what is the value proposition?
- + How will this fill a gap in current credentials?
- + Does the proposed idea fit the mission, values, integrity, and vision of the institution?
- + How will start-up financing and ongoing expenses be managed?
- + Are there partnership opportunities to help design, finance, and market this new venture?

When does an idea become an opportunity?

Simply identifying a viable idea is not enough to green-light a project. Once an idea has been vetted and fully envisioned, evaluating it for market-fit may be necessary. Focus groups, discussions with potential employers, and labor-market analyses can all lead to vital information. While this may be enough for a low-cost, low-risk initiative, as stakes, investment, and entrenchment increase, so, too, should self-scrutiny and caution. The amount of due diligence correlates to the potential risks and costs of a new venture.

Alternative Credential Project Planning

An idea that has been given the green light should meet baseline brand and goal criteria. The next phase is to develop a project plan that anticipates the steps necessary for launching the new offering.

Marketing

Creating new credentials must be accompanied by an effort to build excitement about the possibilities for students and employers. Both public and university-to-business programs require a recruiting strategy that encompasses marketing and communication, sales, and inquiry management. This is especially demanding when exploring a new, and often undefined, marketplace for learners. Working directly with partner organizations can provide an initial pipeline of new learners. Helping employers understand these new credentials will give learners an ongoing advantage when it comes to hiring and promotion.

University Readiness

Are all of the required university players on board? If this effort is testing new credentials for nondegree offerings, the professional and continuing education unit may have the expertise needed for experimentation. If, however, new credentials are credit-bearing or create degree pathways, then faculty, registrar, and the rest of the administration will need to participate in determining common goals.

Other University Services

Services across the university need to be incorporated into new initiatives. A project plan should have a communication protocol that notifies others on campus of the particulars within a program and how they will be handled. “New” ventures are more likely to launch successfully when existing templates and precedents exist that can provide models for how various responsibilities will be addressed. A program that appears unprecedented creates far more complexities to administer in the university context.

Launch Date

Putting a date on a calendar and committing to it are powerful management tools that allow energy to be harnessed and focused. Building excitement through a public launch that includes marketing and communication is one approach. A soft launch of new credentials may be safer if the initial project is small or the risk is high. Even soft-launch projects benefit from a formal calendar with a clear launch date to keep them on track.

Resource Allocation and Business Planning

Capital is essential for success, regardless of whether this taps university or external resources. Underfunding a project can result in missed opportunities and wasted resources. The long-term budget should anticipate future resource needs and how they will be funded. All new ventures divert energy and thus have an opportunity cost, which must be considered in how an enterprise will spend its finite time and money. Finally, the potential for failure must be anticipated with an agile strategy for either stopping or scaling back to a more modest undertaking. Even the most promising new credential initiative requires an exit strategy.

Who and How—Implementation

Dedicated Project Team

Each new initiative needs a small group of highly regarded experts tasked with bringing the project to fruition. This team should represent a cross-section of stakeholders. Individuals on the team should share an excitement about launching a new venture and be able to navigate potential

university roadblocks. Whether ad hoc or more regularized, the project team should be formally charged, motivated, and empowered to work expeditiously through the normal protocols of the university's operations. Ideally, this team would include veterans of past projects, as well as individuals with cautious, prudent perspectives. They should be given ownership of day-to-day decisions, while remaining nimble enough to modify plans as a situation demands. The project team is ultimately responsible for orchestrating all moving parts of the initiative from concept development to launch. As a program assimilates into the infrastructure of the institution, this team can relinquish oversight.

Faculty and Faculty Governing Bodies

At many institutions, faculty are directly responsible for the academic offerings of the university, including credential oversight. Having representative faculty on the project team is highly recommended, but might need to be supplemented by external subject-matter experts. If the faculty senate has responsibility for credential standards, it is critical to allot appropriate time to work through concerns and the approval process with this body.

Registrar

The registrar is the official holder of university records, including student transcripts, and often serves as the institutional conscience for consistency and regulations. Even if the initiative is starting in a professional and continuing education unit, keeping the registrar engaged and informed is essential. Creating a generic template with clear and consistent standards and terminology, with established precedents, can expedite future projects.

Campus Information Technology

While the registrar might be the process owner for university records, they are often using systems supported by campus information technology. The digital nature of new credentials means that integration with other systems, student digital privacy, and knowledge of software requirements is essential. As with any educational program offered by an accredited academic institution, all national standards and legal requirements will need to be observed and carefully monitored.

Marketing and Communication

The marketing and communication team needs to be mobilized to develop strategy, copy, materials, and promotion for the new initiative. Alternative credentials are unknown territory for many companies and university constituents. A clear communication strategy can demystify novel programs while enhancing excitement and clarity. Messaging should explain the rationale of new credentials in a manner that is responsive and reassuring to prospective learners and also sensitive to the larger university context. No launch of a small program ever justifies a threat to the university's reputation or to other existing degree programs on campus.

A "sales" strategy also needs to be in place—whether this is supported by internal staff or through outside vendors, companies, or associations—to manage the message, portray the program clearly and accurately, and address inquiries.

Specialized Vendors

An institution may not have the necessary infrastructure to meet the ambitious goals of a new

initiative. If that is the case, a range of educational vendors can serve as capacity-building agents on an institution's behalf. These vendors need to be thoroughly vetted, trained, and managed, particularly since these white-label companies are acting in the name of the university. Outsourcing is not without costs of time as well as money—no vendor will be entirely turnkey or effortless. The long-term advantages of insourcing—ethical as well as financial—need to be weighed against the convenience of outsourcing. One short-term solution is to rely on outsourcing or revenue sharing as you finance and build an infrastructure on campus so services can eventually be brought in-house.

Systems for storing, maintaining, and developing digital credentials are often new to university infrastructure. A number of companies now offer hosted solutions or will develop custom internal solutions for universities. Other vendors might include those who can develop digital “wallets” or “backpacks” for students to own and manage their own credentials.

Campus Leadership

Depending on the size and ambition of a particular initiative, key campus leadership can serve as active supporters and ambassadors of a new venture, particularly in securing campus cooperation and external advocacy. Often, university alumni in key corporate positions can provide access and opportunity that helps propel new ventures.

Key Performance Indicators

Affirmative answers to the following questions would indicate success:

- + Did the project meet its desired enrollment and revenue goals at various milestones? Was the institution able to garner additional financial resources? Has the initiative expanded the institution's market share? What were the immediate lessons learned from the initial launch?
- + Are learners logging in and accessing their digital credentials? Are they sharing these credentials with employers and on social media?
- + Do graduates report improvements in hiring outcomes? Can they serve as ambassadors for future program offerings?
- + Do employers report improvements in hiring and recruiting?
- + Did the existing university infrastructure adapt to offering new credentials?
- + Did the initiative increase institutional capacity and provide a clear road map for additional projects?
- + Was the institutional brand protected, or even enhanced? Will the project, over time:
 - Increase the institution's visibility in targeted markets?
 - Create positive media attention?
 - Result in conference presentations, published papers, or other public scholarship?
 - Reinforce expertise in emerging areas that might be leveraged in future ventures?
 - Show unanticipated, positive outcomes that accrued to the institution or other programs?
- + Were faculty and staff engaged in a way that strengthened internal community and collaboration?
- + Did the initiative reveal new funding opportunities for the units involved?
- + What lessons were learned that will help propel future initiatives?

UNIVERSITY- TO-BUSINESS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Goal

Alternative credentials run the risk of spending scarce labor and financial capital on curriculum development, instruction, administration, and marketing, resulting in less-profitable educational offerings. Alternative credentials will minimize their margins unless the institution identifies process improvements to lower delivery costs, ensure integration with higher-margin degree programs, or increase the volume of offerings enough to overcome their lower per-unit expense. As more universities enter the alternative credentials market, competition may limit opportunities to increase volume.

Universities can realize the entrepreneurial potential of alternative credentials, while minimizing their financial risk, by diversifying buyers so that multiple market segments (individual students, industry sectors, government agencies, and even other universities) purchase or license them. This approach allows universities to invest more confidently in the creation and distribution of a rich menu of alternative credentials.

University-to-business stakeholder engagement helps universities achieve diversification goals. Universities tend to be adept at responding to the needs of individual students, historically their most important stakeholders. Universities are less nimble when responding to the variable and volatile educational demands of businesses, whose requirements vary by company and change more rapidly due to market conditions, mergers, and leadership turnover. And, even when universities are adroit at gaining financial support from the private sector, such financial support is unevenly distributed among institutions—some get more support than others. Not all boats are lifted by a rising tide of company support for universities.

University-to-business stakeholder engagement can augment an institution's traditional strengths in reaching individual student stakeholders.

Why?

University-to-business stakeholder engagement can ensure that companies, in addition to individual students, purchase lower-margin alternative credentials, thereby securing greater financial viability for universities entering the alternative credential marketplace.

What?

University-to-business stakeholder engagement is a subset of standard stakeholder engagement, which includes the following steps:

- + Form advisory councils representing multiple sectors in order to learn from employers which alternative credentials they value now and which they might value in the future due to anticipated changes in technology, regulations, business processes, employee skills, and market growth.
- + Use focus groups of bulk and individual buyers of alternative credentials to further refine and articulate the demand for such credentials and to test university ideas with a knowledgeable group of consumers.
- + Participate with, and within, government workforce development agencies and forums to find a market niche for alternative credentials, to identify possible government start-up funding via grants, and to minimize redundant offerings among educational institutions.
- + Engage professional and industry associations to explore needs and partnership opportunities.
- + Listen to existing students about which alternative credentials they value and would be willing to purchase.

University-to-business stakeholder engagement has five key components. Note the emphasis on validating market research before any investment is made in developing alternative credentials:

1. Research the alternative credentials that are acceptable to companies in a given region or industry.
2. Validate research findings about company demand for alternative credentials.
3. Find anchor tenants to buy the alternative credentials in open-enrollment or customized delivery modalities (including on-site programs).
4. Design alternative credentials as stand-alone educational products for companies' workforces but also as stepping stones to university degrees.
5. Continuously listen to companies about their alternative credential needs.

Who and How—Implementation

1. Research Alternative Credentials that Companies Might Value

Reach out to large employers from all of the key industry sectors in a university's region to determine which alternative credentials they do and do not recognize in their hiring practices. Some may not accept any alternative credentials, relying only on traditional degrees in their hiring process. Others may have embraced alternative credentials as a means of acquiring the technology-savvy workforce they need. It is better to have this market research in hand before scarce program development funding is spent to develop or expand a menu of alternative credentials.

Step one is best handled by a professional and continuing education unit or similar entity at a university comprised of senior leadership, a market researcher, and a manager of business outreach.

2. Validate Research Findings about Company Demand

Increase university credibility by meeting with individual companies in one-on-one and group meetings (e.g., advisory councils) to share valuable aggregate data about the regional private-sector demand for alternative credentials. Validation is useful to refine the findings and increase willingness to invest in employee education.

The university team can also share its ideas about delivery modality for the alternative credentials—online, in-person, on-site at one or a set of companies, or some kind of blended modality. Feedback received can help ensure that the alternative credential is delivered at the time and place (virtual or actual) most likely to meet client needs.

3. Find Anchor Tenants to Buy the Alternative Credentials

Steps 1 and 2 ideally allow a university to build both the business relationships and the credibility to attract one or two company bulk-buyers of alternative credentials before curricula are fully developed. This substantially minimizes the university's sunk costs in developing a credential. Companies may pay for the development cost of an alternative credential in return for a customized version that is offered to their employees. If this is the case, negotiate with the company to establish that the intellectual property is either owned by the university or shared by the university and company. This allows the university to sell a modified version of the alternative credential to other companies or as an open-enrollment program.

The optimal company partner will incorporate the university's alternative credentials into their in-house training menu for employees.

4. Design Alternative Credentials as Both Stand-Alone and Stackable

Companies often prefer to have a few, proven providers of educational products, reducing the number of vendor relationships they have to manage. Ideally, the educational provider will meet more than just one of the firm's workforce development needs. Some employees will also want degrees, so it is valuable to build clear pathways from smaller to larger university credentials.

Also consider the merits of partnering with another university's professional and continuing education unit if they have already developed a suitable course or program that would meet company demand. A university does not always have to bear program development costs if there are better means of responding more quickly to industry needs. Alternatively, source existing alternative credentials from vendors if this matches the university's practices and standards.

Make use of the data and feedback collected during the validation of research findings to allocate scarce program development funds. For example, if data indicates demand for online alternative credentials beyond a single customer, allocate funding towards video production, instructional design labor, and other resources for program development.

5. Continuously Listen to Companies about Their Alternative Credential Needs

A university menu of alternative credentials needs to adjust to changes in companies and workforce development trends. A strong communication channel with anchor tenants will ensure the university stays abreast of changes going on inside a company (leadership, locations, new products) and the workforce development implications of these changes.

Key Performance Indicators

To assess the successes (and failures) of university-to-business stakeholder engagement it is ideal to construct a simple management dashboard comprised of both leading and lagging indicators. Sample indicators include:

- + Number of individual and group meetings with regional companies about alternative credentials.
- + Number of contracts with companies to provide alternative credential programs and their dollar value.
- + Number of companies that have integrated alternative credentials into their in-house employee development offerings.
- + Number of company employees who have taken an alternative credential as a stepping stone to a university certificate or degree.
- + Number of annual changes made to alternative credential menu as a result of company conversations.
- + Percent of total alternative credential revenue attributable to company buyers as opposed to individual buyers—a measure of a mixed-revenue alternative credential portfolio.

THE FACULTY EXPERIENCE

Goal

Alternative credentials do not always align with traditional university teaching. There are a wide range of individuals with subject-matter expertise who facilitate learning through course design, lectures, workshops, laboratories, and experiential models. These educators need a commensurate range of support to ensure instructional quality.

Key Elements

- + Institutional mission and priorities.
- + Systems and policies that support faculty, students, and the overall university.
- + Accreditation standards and guidelines.
- + Strategies to identify, hire, and cultivate talent.
- + Opportunities to ensure ongoing faculty learning and engagement.
- + Evaluating success for faculty and learners.

Why?

Why is the Faculty Experience Important in the Alternative Credential Space?

In their roles on the front lines, faculty exemplify the university to learners and to the community. What they say and do, and how they say and do it, impacts the reputation and brand of the university in a way that no communication or marketing strategy ever could—or ever could overcome.

Learners in the alternative credential space have a wide range of intentions and goals. Perhaps they are considering changing careers, perhaps clarifying a specialty, or perhaps validating years of work in a field that has evolved since their formal degree. As standard bearers and assurers of quality education, faculty should create a learning environment that is inclusive of this variety of objectives.

Those who teach in programs generating alternative credentials must straddle two distinct worlds, bridging workplace and university. They must combine the qualities and standards of traditional faculty, the attributes and credibility of practitioners, and the broad understanding of the skills and knowledge needed in their industry. Since programs leading to alternative credentials are much shorter than full degrees, individual faculty impact is significant. Their importance should never be underestimated—nor should the responsibility to select, train, support, and evaluate these faculty be taken any less seriously than another component of the instructional corps of a university.

What?

An appropriate title can serve to create credibility and identity by building on existing vernacular. New titles dedicated to this unique role and class of alternative credential faculty extend the spectrum of the traditional titles of lecturer, assistant, associate, and full professor. All faculty need to have a clear sense of place within the institution. This is only possible when titles, job descriptions, systems, and processes facilitating learning align with the mission and priorities of the institution.

Who and How?

Institutional Mission and Priorities

The head of a program represents the values of an institution, and must ensure that these values align between institution and instructor. Translating the larger vision of the university into concrete, program-specific goals and expectations is a necessary first step in this communication. In the space of alternative credentials, institutional leaders must:

- + Set the tone to support learners across a lifetime.
- + Link mastery to definitions of quality education.
- + Include alternative credentials that support student goals and the institutional mission in the operating priorities.
- + Ensure that systems, policies, and funding support high-quality alternative credentials.

Systems and Policies that Support Faculty, Students, and the Overall University

Institutional practices and beliefs either drive the interpretation of policy or they evolve out of it. To the extent possible, the faculty handbook of the institution should represent all traditional or practitioner faculty teaching in alternative credential programs.

- + Recognize teaching in alternative credential programs as pertinent to the mission of the institution, not simply as an extraneous, overload endeavor.
- + Highlight the balance and diversity that practitioner faculty provide for learners who seek to experience all types of faculty across the curriculum.
- + Recognize the work with alternative credentials in the standards and practices for faculty evaluation and promotion.
- + Administer workload policies and standards in a manner that accounts for accelerated or non-traditional scheduling.
- + Adjust policies to enable practitioner faculty to access resources such as the library, bookstore, software, and community events.
- + Include non-traditional faculty in professional development opportunities, award programs, and grant opportunities.
- + Advocate for the opportunity to pursue some type of comprehensive compensation model that could include benefits such as retirement, healthcare, and insurance.
- + Develop consistent policies for reimbursing traditional faculty who teach (or serve as subject-matter experts) in programs that lead to alternative credentials when this work extends beyond their contractual teaching load. Extra service compensation or reduced teaching load are two ways to ensure fair compensation.

Accreditation Standards and External Roles

Accrediting bodies establish standards and guidelines within a field of study or industry. Faculty also must be mindful of the expectations of employers and the institutional priorities of scholarship and community engagement.

- + Verify requirements of accrediting bodies specifically in relation to faculty oversight for practicums, internships, field work, and other types of experiential learning.
- + Ensure that faculty are current with changing industry requirements and technologies.
- + Involve faculty in the collaboration with industry associations and employers.
- + Create direct linkages between working practitioners and discipline-based scholars to further institutional capacity in responding to evolving trends and needs of employers.

Strategies to Identify, Hire, and Cultivate Faculty Talent

A holistic institutional approach to academic and professional talent leads to a robust and innovative learning environment.

- + Actively engage in identifying, developing, and reinforcing faculty talent to ensure quality instruction.
- + Establish a variety of entry points to support discipline currency and diversity.
- + Create pathways that enable practitioners to not only become alternative credential faculty, but also to explore transitions into full-time faculty positions (and vice versa).
- + Develop externships for traditional tenure-track faculty to work inside of an organization in order to inform the degree-based curriculum and yield an understanding of, and ideas for, alternative credentials.
- + Advocate for orientation and onboarding that includes faculty in alternative credential programs.

Opportunities to Ensure Ongoing Faculty Learning and Engagement

If learning over a lifetime is critical for our students, and maintaining discipline currency is critical for all working professionals, then faculty working in the alternative credential space must also maintain currency and connectivity in communities of practice.

- + Expand centers for teaching and learning to serve as the hub for connecting discipline-based faculty and practitioner faculty.
- + Ensure that professional development seminars and workshops scheduled for daytime hours are also delivered evenings, weekends, or online.
- + Create learning communities focusing on effective pedagogy in accelerated or experiential formats.
- + Host gatherings for all types of faculty to inspire connectivity and creativity among them, and to build capacity for intra-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary credentials.
- + Add awards for innovative faculty teaching in alternative credential programs in order to raise awareness and normalize alternative credentials as part of the academic portfolio.

Evaluating Success for Faculty and Their Learners

Including alternative credentials in baseline data is critical to normalizing models of alternative instruction, as is ensuring assessments and evaluations of curriculum, faculty, and learner outcomes within an alternative credential program.

- + Ensure that alternative credential programs, like all degree programs, have syllabi, learning objectives and outcomes, and curricula that have been through institutional processes for review and approval. Encourage constant revision to maintain currency and relevance within the program.
- + Align qualification standards for instructional faculty with the processes for evaluating faculty in all programs.
- + Implement post-assessments of alternative credential programs in order to understand how efficiently learners are putting knowledge and skills into practice, how soon after completing the credential they are promoted or increase their salary, or how likely they are to stack on other credentials or pursue another degree.

Key Performance Indicators

- + A presence on campus such that traditional faculty consistently seek out opportunities to develop new credentials and new models, and that their work is recognized and rewarded in all forms of faculty evaluation and visibility.
- + A cultivation of practitioner faculty to expand their role and help broaden the faculty at large.
- + An instructional capacity to offer multiple iterations of credentials, including evenings, weekends, weekdays, boot camps, institutes, and online or hybrid modalities.
- + Breadth and depth of faculty such that programs providing credentials needed in the workforce do not cancel due to the lack of qualified instructors.
- + University systems and policies that accommodate non-traditional faculty with access to resources, opportunities, and benefits.
- + An expansive view of university culture that promotes reciprocity in learning and growth among traditional theorists and subject-matter practitioners. Alternative and traditional programs are valued by their institution and legitimized by their faculty. Exchanges among those teaching in these different contexts enrich and connect programs and faculty across the institution.
- + A virtuous cycle where previous learners become future faculty, and successful alumni see teaching in alternative credential programs as a meaningful way to engage with their alma mater.
- + An institutional culture that appreciates that having successful practitioners in the classroom provides other students with opportunities to connect with employers, job opportunities, and role models and mentors.
- + A faculty motivated to develop programming that supports students in their quests to differentiate themselves in a crowded job search, advance their skills with a focused approach, return to formal education over the course of their lifetime, and stack credentials in a manner that furthers their professional goals and opportunities.

THE LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Goal

Individuals who pursue alternative credentials often have different objectives than those who seek degree programs. These learners are specifically looking for something less time-consuming and less expensive than a traditional academic program. These career-focused individuals are turning to shorter, more focused workforce-relevant programs that will help them stand out in the marketplace. They are seeking a credential well-aligned with the skills that they need, that will allow them to quickly gain those skills and demonstrate them to an employer. To reach their goals efficiently, they will need clear pathways and straightforward guidance in the form of resources and support that is timely, uncomplicated, and high quality. In offering alternative credentials, universities will need to stretch their current administrative processes to accommodate these new models and to ensure the success of this achievement-driven constituency.

Why?

Whether pursuing an alternative credential as a supplement to a current degree program or solely to advance their career, these learners focus on practical skill attainment. They are goal-driven, but also likely committed to numerous personal and professional obligations. As such, the university will need to adapt by offering programs that are focused on skill development, quick-paced and nimble enough to meet the needs of this demographic and the ever-changing demands of the twenty-first century workforce.

- + The types of learners who choose an alternative credential are wide-ranging. They may be first-time college students seeking professional development while also pursuing a degree; individuals returning to college in order to gain access to entry-level positions in a high-demand field; or mid-career professionals looking to advance their standing in their current company.
- + Alternative credentials might be completely optional for some, while required for others. Some learners might choose to pursue an alternative credential with the aim of boosting their résumé and standing out in the workforce, while others may be required to gain a new skillset in order to keep pace with current workplace demands.
- + Employers often require their employees to complete trainings or obtain certification; therefore, the obligatory nature of some of these programs should be taken into account when considering the needs of learners.
- + No matter who the student is in terms of age, education-level, or career point, and regardless of their reason for pursuing alternative credentials, it is critical that the university keep these learners supported, engaged, and motivated to completion. All learners need opportunities to tap support structures to ensure their success.

When learners have a positive experience while pursuing an alternative credential, they might want return to the university when additional re-skilling and upskilling needs occur.

What?

Communicate a Value Proposition

- + If a university is offering alternative credentials for the first time, it is critical that the purpose and benefits of this new type of credential are conveyed to learners. Learners (and all stakeholders) will first need to know what micro-credentials are, and how these differ from other credentials.
- + It is also important to convey how these credentials can be earned, how they can be shared, how learners will benefit from them, and what their value is to employers.
- + Each alternative credential will require its own value proposition that conveys the purpose and benefits of the program, and the skills that will be gained.
- + It is important to be transparent regarding the specific skills that will be gained, so that learners are able to decide definitively if the program fits their goals. While the value of the alternative credential must be communicated, it is important not to mislead learners or over-promise results.

Communicate Pathways

Alternative credentials are often achieved in small modules that are part of a series or stackable toward larger programs.

- + For programs that are part of a series, ensure that learners know what additional opportunities are available to them.
- + If the alternative credential fulfills requirements of a larger program, such as a certificate or degree program, provide clearly articulated pathways into that larger program.
- + Implement supports early on—through advisement and assistance in applying for financial aid, for example—so that matriculation is a seamless process for those learners who are interested in advanced opportunities.

Communicate Requirements

- + Clearly communicate the criteria required to earn the alternative credential, including the curricular requirements, time to completion, and expected daily or weekly time commitment.
- + Experiential components in the form of internships, applied projects, and capstone experiences need to be conveyed upfront, so learners can decide if the program is the right fit for their needs and schedules.

Communicate Costs

It is critical that costs and payment options are clearly communicated, and that there are no hidden fees.

- + Learners who pursue fee-based programs, in most cases, will not be eligible for financial aid. Whenever possible, universities should provide options such as payment plans, flexible payment due dates, and internal scholarships.

- + If the program includes credit-bearing coursework then the cost will likely be standard tuition-based. Prior to offering alternative credentials that are credit-bearing, the university's financial aid office should be consulted, and care should be taken to make sure that relevant information is accurately communicated to the learners.

Provide Opportunities for Interaction and Collaboration

Since these programs might be delivered online, or in the evenings or on the weekend, and for short amounts of time, learners who pursue an alternative credential may not be integrated into the campus community and might wish for further interactions with peers and faculty.

- + Incorporate opportunities for collaboration into the program design, via cohorts, team-building assignments, and group projects.
- + Encourage relationship-building outside of the program by creating private social media groups and organizing networking events.
- + Ensure that learners who pursue alternative credentials have the opportunity to join student groups and clubs.
- + Coordinate office hours and meeting times with faculty and advisors that occur after regular business hours (such as evenings and weekends) or through alternative methods such as web-conferencing.

Provide Easy-to-Access Information

Although some may be spending little-to-no time on campus, learners seeking alternative credentials will need easy access to information pertaining to various practical matters, such as registration, payment, procurement of course materials, and, in some cases, where to park or how to receive assistance with required technology.

- + A one-stop web page with all of the essential information needed to register, make payments, and access course content is highly recommended.
- + The university should provide a single point of contact, such as a program coordinator, for learners pursuing alternative credentials, so they know who they can go to if questions arise. A university is a complex institution that is difficult to navigate; an individual who has limited time and is seeking a program that flexes to meet their schedule will become frustrated if obstacles concerning administrative or technical issues arise. Ideally, the point of contact will be available through multiple methods such as web conference, text chat, phone, and email.

Provide Learners with Access to University Systems

- + Universities have established processes in place to release transcripts, post grades in the LMS and SIS, and issue diplomas. Ideally, alternative credentials become subsumed into these existing processes and systems.
- + A learner who enrolls in an alternative credential program should be provided with the necessary permissions (such as a university ID) to access the university's registration and learning management systems, the university library, and other resources.
- + By incorporating alternative credentials into current systems, the university will be able to track enrollments and completions, maintain accurate records, and conduct reporting pertaining to this non-traditional constituency. Moreover, this integration will allow learners who are pursuing alternative credentials to be better connected to the institution through access to campus

email, announcements and newsletters, and, after completion, opportunities and events available to alumni.

Awarding Alternative Credentials

- + Alternative credentials should be listed on a learner's transcript. Some institutions leverage the academic transcript for this purpose, while others are adopting expanded transcripts, such as a "comprehensive learner record." In either case, by documenting alternative credentials on a university transcript the institution conveys that these credentials are as legitimate and valued as traditional credentials.
- + Completion of alternative credentials should be celebrated. While alternative credential earners are unlikely to walk the stage with cap and gown, they should have the opportunity to participate in graduation ceremonies; consider announcing their names at convocation, listing their names in the commencement program, or engaging in special celebration activities.
- + Many universities issue alternative credentials as digital badges and digital certificates issued through a third-party platform or through blockchain technology. Digital credentials contain metadata that allows the viewer (a potential employer, for example) to see more information than what can be provided via a grade or a paper-based transcript. For example, most digital badges and certificates include an artifact of learning that shows what the learner can do as a result of the program.
- + If using a digital credential platform, it is important to provide earners with step-by-step directions for signing up for an account (if necessary), logging into the platform, and sharing the credential to social media sites or on their résumés. This information is often made available by the vendor, but creating university-branded videos and other how-to documentation will help the learner feel more closely connected with the institution.
- + Resources for using digital credential technology could be developed in collaboration with a career services office. Engaging other offices and units on campus in developing supports for alternative credentials will help to integrate these new models into the institutional culture.
- + By supporting learners in communicating the skills that they have gained, and providing ways for them to share their alternative credentials in digital spaces, the university is investing in the success of these students—and their programs. Learners proud of their credentials will more likely share them in a wide range of settings, often via multiple social media channels. Credentials disseminated in digital spaces have the potential to be seen by thousands of viewers, and can therefore serve as powerful promotional tools for the university.

Who and How—Implementation

- + A designated coordinating office is recommended, especially if alternative credentialing is a university-wide initiative.
- + Implementing alternative credentials university-wide will require effort from numerous offices, including university communications, the registrar, enrollment management, career services, decanal units, and others.
- + New approaches and collaboration between continuing education leaders and academic affairs will be necessary. This type of collaboration will help to promote cohesive communication and consistency in student support strategies, ensuring that all learners pursuing alternative

credentials have access to high-quality resources and the guidance that they need to be successful, regardless of their matriculation status.

- + Whenever possible, faculty and administration should engage current learners in the design of programs—through focus groups and student surveys, for instance—to ensure that the programs being offered are aligned with learners’ needs and expectations.
- + Innovative program design should be iterative and comprise a cycle of product improvement. By engaging learners in the design of alternative credentials, inviting feedback, and even creating circumstances for them to craft their own credentials, universities will be able to meet the objective of offering opportunities for more personalized learning. This will not only enable the university to diversify its portfolio, but will also lead to increased learner satisfaction.
- + Learners who are satisfied with the experience of earning an alternative credential will share their experience via word-of-mouth promotion and through digital means such as social media channels, and can serve as ambassadors for future students.

Key Performance Indicators

- + Alternative credentials should demonstrate a clear value proposition that aligns with relevant workplace skills.
- + Marketing is transparent in terms of time commitments, curricular requirements, and costs.
- + Learning pathways link short-form credentials with additional learning opportunities.
- + Learning is interactive and collaborative.
- + Learners report high levels of satisfaction with the learning experience.
- + Assessments align with learning objectives and send appropriate feedback to learners.
- + Employers report strong alignment between the credential and competency.
- + Credentials are sharable and discoverable.
- + Credential accomplishments for learners are recognized and celebrated.
- + Alternative credentials are integrated into current systems and processes for learner documentation.
- + Credentials are tracked both for the number awarded and by their uptake on digital platforms.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Goal

Regardless of their names and context, all alternative credentials will inevitably be digital credentials. There are several imperatives that drive the technological future of alternative credentials, and several advantages to a purely digital approach to credentialing.

Credentialing strategies exist in the wider ecosystem of learning, skills, and employment; the technology standards that define and communicate credentials; and the wider context of employment, educational pathways, and an individual's lifelong-learning record.

Key Elements

- + Appreciate the drivers behind the digital credential movement and the opportunities that standardized digital credential formats can unlock for learners, education providers, and employers.
- + Advocate for academically rigorous, technically complete, and fully descriptive metadata in digital credentials.
- + Understand the technological context for existing and emerging systems that use digital credentials.
- + Promote the benefits of standardized digital credentials that encapsulate learning achievements and effectively transmit and translate students' skills and educational achievements to employers.

Why?

Adult learners are expected to leverage their knowledge and work experience when applying learning outcomes and skills to rapidly changing contexts and concepts. These expectations also increase the pressure to supply agile continuing and professional education within the ever-evolving education marketplace.

The unbundling of degrees and higher education's advance toward more market-responsive short forms of learning have dramatically increased the importance of communicating clear learning outcomes through all types of credentials. Today, there exists a much wider range of credential signals—accompanied by the challenge of differentiating what is meaningful from the noise. Standardized, digital credential formats have emerged to solve these communication problems.

Tomorrow's learning credentials are likely to be:

- + **Digital:** The range of education, employment, and life records necessitate a digital format.
- + **Standardized:** The information contained in the credential must meet minimum standards for information transfer and structured metadata related to learning achievements and outcomes.
- + **Learner-Controlled and Interoperable:** Learners own their digital credentials and have full control over their learning-related, interoperable information.
- + **Verified:** The rise of personal and professional networks in which individuals can assert their own accomplishments and capabilities raises the specter of identity fraud and misrepresentation. Digital credentials reflecting knowledge and skills must be secure, un-hackable, and backed by trusted learning authorities. They should be able to age gracefully, expire, and be renewed—or revoked—with changes reflected securely across networks.
- + **Machine-Readable:** Technology enables lifelong learners and pushes them to become their own advocates in showcasing knowledge, skills, and abilities. From job sites to registrar's offices, the intersection where trusted learning data meets opportunity will be facilitated by systems that can automatically make sense of the data in machine-readable credentials.
- + **Valued:** The institutions whose alternative credentials best serve their learners will be those that demonstrate real-world value across the landscape of opportunities—helping learners certify their qualifications for employment and community service, complete or supplement a degree, or pursue lifelong learning and advanced credentials.

What?

What is known as an "Open Badge" defines the structured metadata and related technical specifications to create learning outcomes in a consistent digital format owned by learners who control whether and where to share their credentials. Open Badges also provide a means to verify each credential, increasing its trustworthiness.

Digital credentials that use the Open Badge format represent the full spectrum of learning: individual competencies and skills, bundles of skill sets, multi-course program certificates, professional certifications and licenses, and even complete degrees.

By using the Open Badges technical standard for describing learning outcomes via metadata, each credential tells its own story, including answers to these questions:

- + What is the name of the achievement?
- + What did this learner accomplish? What do they know, and what can they do?
- + What skills are packed into this achievement?
- + What assessment was used, and what criteria did the learner satisfy to earn this recognition?
- + What evidence did the learner produce while demonstrating this competency?
- + What accrediting body or standards validate quality outcomes?

Who and How—Implementation

- + Avoid academic jargon and describe achievements in ways that consumers of the credentials will understand, whether employers, alumni, or learners themselves.

- + Brand the institution and credentials accurately and consistently:
 - Digital credentials reflect the relationships a university has developed with employers and others (co-branding credentials and authorized issuing provide additional opportunities to showcase partnerships).
- + Seek endorsements from organizations who think highly of the institution's credentials to showcase value in context.
- + Design these credentials as part of a wider system of alternative credentials, with pathways, stackability, and credit crosswalks and bridges in badge metadata.
- + Anticipate that learners will take unexpected journeys and experience diversions.

Related Technology Standards: Stacking Credentials, Transcripts, and Learner Records

Open Badges fit into a larger continuum of competency frameworks, comprehensive learning records, and digital credentials. Learning management systems, content management systems, and student information systems must all be considered. [IMS Global](#) is the organization that certifies badge systems to ensure alignment with quality standards and interoperability with other educational technology systems.

Interoperability

Digital credentials may be integrated with other university systems. Consider the wider context, and how alternative credentials will interact with other digital record formats:

- + Registrar systems.
- + Learning management systems and learning experience platforms.
- + Assessment tools.
- + Learning data and analytics.
- + Human capital management systems (talent sourcing, recruiting, onboarding/training, talent management and teaming/talent heat maps and skills gap analysis, occupational taxonomies and frameworks, and career coaching and pathing).
- + Job boards for employment and career solutions.

Benefits of Connecting to the Outside World with Standardized Digital Credentials

- + For learners:
 - Individualized lifelong learning records promote prior learning recognition, reuse, stacking, and progression of learning.
 - Self-sovereign identity delivers more control to learners over important aspects of their personal and professional qualifications.
 - Machine readability enables each individual to discover new opportunities for learning, career development, and better jobs. AI agents will personalize the process for each learner, helping to identify relevant next steps.
- + For employers:
 - Standard digital formats are the focal point for higher-impact collaboration with universities, providing more input on program design and skills-gap goals.

- Talent sourcing is easier, providing employers with access to a pool of qualified workers with employer-specified knowledge and skills.
- + For institutions:
 - Universities that employ digital credentials enhance brand building, marketing, and program awareness as learners share credentials across social and professional networks.
 - The same tools that employers use to access talent enable universities to identify a qualified pool of engaged adult learners.

What is the Ecosystem of Stakeholders Served?

- + How will a technical platform offer support to learners in discovering jobs, career paths, and future learning?
- + Will the platform provide opportunities for a university to connect to partners, employer advisory groups, and commercial credentialing programs?
- + Can potential learners be sourced from the platform’s pool of badge earners?
- + How will the credentialing platform interact with other campus systems?

Key Performance Indicators

The success of implementing the digital component of alternative credentialing will be determined by:

- + Ease of use (including configuring the system and training users).
- + If integrated with other university systems, facility of assimilation and efficiency in workflow.
- + Positive feedback from users (badge issuers and badge earners).
- + Extent to which learners interact with the system by claiming and sharing credentials.
- + Degree to which viewers engage with shared credentials via clicks to view metadata, as well as views on the university’s website response pages.

EXTERNAL ADVOCACY

Goal

Until such time as there are well-defined and well-understood national norms, external engagement and advocacy is key to articulating the value proposition of alternative credentials and promoting their successful adoption among learners and employers. Thus, a critical best practice for institutions is to create a singular, transparent lens through which external constituencies can view the quality, substance, and application of alternative credentials issued by the college or university. Additionally, within the broader higher education community, there is an opportunity to lead the development of national standards and establish our institutions as primary sources of high-quality, highly credible credentials.

Key Elements

- + Promote general awareness and understanding of alternative credentials as credible educational qualifications.
- + Represent the institution's vision for alternative credentials, publicly and authoritatively, and their place in the institution's portfolio.
- + Convey to prospective learners and employers the nature and value of these credentials.
- + Promote learner uptake and sharing of digitally issued credentials.
- + Influence the acceptance of alternative credentials by external constituencies, including employers, workforce development agencies, professional associations, business groups, and client organizations.
- + Cultivate strategic alliances and partnerships to strengthen the link between university-issued alternative credentials and industry.
- + Advocate as a higher education community for the establishment of quality standards and best practices for alternative credentials.
- + Position universities as primary sources of high-quality, high-value alternative credentials.
- + Gain recognition of alternative credentials within traditional academic strongholds.

Why?

The proliferation of alternative credentials in recent years, absent a national accreditation framework, has contributed to inconsistency across and within institutions, and a general lack of understanding among learners and employers as to their value proposition. Considering how such credentials might legitimize skill-set learning and improve the link between higher education and hiring, external stakeholder engagement and advocacy is a critical best practice for achieving the

promise of alternative credentials as credible educational and workforce qualifications. In today's dynamic credentialing landscape, there is also opportunity for collective advocacy as a higher education community to promote standards of excellence and position universities as primary sources of high-quality credentials.

What?

External engagement and advocacy with key external stakeholders are critical to informing the vision and demand for alternative credentials, as well as promoting their acceptance and adoption as credible educational qualifications that link higher education to industry. In practice, this encompasses four key areas of activity:

- + **Engagement:** Direct engagement with key external constituencies through advisory boards, networking, interviews, and focus groups promotes dialogue with employers, professional associations, industry organizations, and workforce investment and economic development agencies.
- + **Communications:** A communications plan provides the road map for awareness and adoption among the array of external constituencies through clear, specific messages with measurable results.
- + **Strategic Alliances:** Alliances with key strategic partners strengthen the relevance of alternative credentials to workforce needs through industry endorsements, co-branding, collaborative marketing, and other forms of partnership that promote adoption.
- + **Advocacy:** Advocacy with the media, government, and higher education interest groups establishes alternative credentials as credible educational qualifications, promotes standards of excellence, positions universities as primary sources for alternative credentials, and influences policies to promote access and equity.

Who and How—Implementation

Engagement

- + Conduct an external stakeholder analysis to map the relevant constituent groups. Consider those that may help to inform the institution's overall vision and strategy (e.g., workforce boards, economic development agencies, chambers, and other business groups) as well as credential-specific stakeholders (e.g., employers, professional associations, and industry organizations).
- + Establish a working network to guide the considerations of alternative credentials desired by major employers/industry sectors looking for innovation solutions.
- + Create program advisory boards to guide on curriculum, skills and competencies, case studies, and assessments to ensure credential relevance and promote industry buy-in.
- + Leverage existing external networks to increase awareness and acceptance of alternative credentials, e.g., chamber of commerce events, professional association meetings, business roundtables, and other venues.

Communications

- + Develop a communication and marketing strategy for external constituents:
 - Manage external spheres of influence across the full range of stakeholders.

- Establish a website or portal to share communications, events, and recognitions related to alternative credentials.
 - Sustain a communications strategy to promote the understanding of alternative credentials among external stakeholders. This requires engagement through ongoing, multiple approaches to persuading others to support these initiatives and cooperate in their integration.
- + Designate a representative to speak on behalf of the institution’s vision, standards, and strategy for alternative credentials, as well as its overall approach to the continuum of learning needs in a modern economy.
 - + Leverage the institution’s existing employer outreach efforts via sales/B2B channels to educate employers. Draft key messages and provide collateral materials for sales and outreach teams.
 - + Use the launch of each new credential program to advance a broader understanding of alternative credentials as an emergent and valuable part of the academic landscape.
 - + Highlight student and employer success stories to illustrate and reinforce the value of alternative credentials.

Strategic Alliances

Consider strategic alliances to strengthen the relevance of alternative credentials to workforce needs through industry endorsements, co-branding, collaborative marketing, and other forms of partnership.

Stakeholder groups to consider for partnerships or alliances:

- + **Employers:** Consider working with key employers in the institution’s region to map credentials to their skill demands, and establish a direct recruitment pipeline for graduates.
- + **Government:** Explore opportunities for partnership with government agencies to embed credentials as desired educational qualifications in their classification and promotion systems (e.g., personnel departments), and to qualify alternative credentials for public-funding streams.
- + **Professional and Industry Associations:** Professional associations are not just potential marketing communication channels for targeted exposure to learners, but also potential business partners to co-create/co-brand credentials of interest and value to membership. Business arrangements may encompass discounts for members (as a benefit), programming for associations (as a client), or strategic alliances with revenue sharing (as a business partner).
- + **Alumni Association:** In a rapidly evolving economy, alumni are a primary target for career-enhancing credentials to demonstrate the institution’s commitment to its graduates’ career resilience. Consider partnering with the Alumni Association to co-create and co-brand credentials of value to alumni. Alumni may also be ambassadors for the institution’s alternative credentials with employers.
- + **Foundations:** As an emergent faction of higher education innovation, foundations with demonstrated interests in workforce development or higher education may be sources of funding to pilot or scale novel credentialing initiatives.
- + **Peer Institutions:** With technology companies and other non-university providers also engaged in alternative credentialing, another way to set higher education apart is to explore cross-institutional partnerships that broaden exposure and achieve strength in numbers. Consider

collaborating with system-wide peer institutions with similar disciplinary strengths to co-create credentials, or align credentials to create pathways.

Also consider incorporating high-quality, industry-issued credentials from recognized organizations into the institution's own academic programs.

Advocacy

- + Position universities as premier sources of high-quality, reliable alternative credentials, and leaders in credentialing innovation.
- + Leverage external communications to reinforce the value and credibility the university brings to the alternative credentialing landscape.
- + Engage in UPCEA and other higher education professional organizations with an interest in advancing the quality and rigor of university-based alternative credentials.
- + Advocate with elected officials for public investment in workforce development and the eligibility of alternative credential programs for financial aid and other student supports that promote access and equity.
- + Educate the institution's government affairs team on the issues concerning alternative credentials and potential policy reforms.

Key Performance Indicators

- + Increase in awareness and understanding of alternative credentials.
- + Earned media coverage in general media and trade outlets.
- + Presentations made to stakeholder groups.
- + Employer involvement in advisory boards.
- + Growth in perception among the external community of the institution's commitment and effectiveness in preparing the future workforce and enhancing the current workforce.
- + External partnerships and alliances.
- + Enrollment in alternative credentialing programs.
- + Objective evidence of student outcomes for these programs.
- + Evolution of national standards for university-based alternative credentials.

PROFESSIONALISM

Goal

Idealistic standards for professionalism and integrity enable the thoughtful development of new types of credentials—enhancing trust for stakeholders in the marketplace and deterring criticism from parties who may be skeptical about new programs, constructs, and approaches that are non-traditional and perhaps even threatening.

Credential innovation and issuance has a wide and lasting impact on employers, industries, and their clients and stakeholders. Professionalism is crucial to ensuring the trust of these parties. Because the vast majority of new types of credentials certify professional competency, there is a special imperative that they be closely aligned with the careers, ideals, skills, and standards of those professions.

Key Elements

- + Employ sound quality-assurance and assessment practices.
- + Ensure that credentialing strategies and actions are thoughtful and earn the confidence and commitment of faculty, staff, and other constituents.
- + Reflect academic integrity in the credential development process through explicit standards and measures of excellence that adhere to university standards.
- + Ensure that new credential programs are relevant and aligned with job market needs—evidenced by data—and strive to achieve and verify student competencies and skills that aspire to the highest ideals of their fields.
- + Establish processes to ensure ongoing currency and a frequent self-critical validation of credential curricula, given frequent shifts in skills demands, and commit to tracking credential-holder outcomes to ensure value.
- + Commit to frequent evaluation and validation with external stakeholders, in the absence of the typical checks and balances that would exist for traditional degrees.
- + Create clear lines of accountability and relationships to other areas of the institution and subject these to ongoing audits and reviews.
- + Secure and deploy appropriate record-keeping and transcribing so that credentials can be appropriately verified and recognized across a graduate's lifetime.
- + Carefully manage technology systems related to credential documentation to provide safeguards for student privacy and transcript accuracy and authenticity.
- + Clearly distinguish the relationship of new credentials to other academic degrees to ensure that learners understand and make decisions based on the credential's market value, transferability, and positioning within the home institution.

- + Pursue and include external validation through employers and other quality-assurance entities wherever and whenever possible.
- + Commit to sharing lessons learned and standards achieved to shape the development of the new credentialing landscape across academe and industry, and help pave the way for inter-institutional, national, and international standards.
- + In working with third parties, model ethical behavior with outside partners and ensure ultimate university ownership and leadership in program decision-making—and build exit strategies for when ethical lines are breached.
- + Secure institutional endorsement and support for new credentials, offer transparency to those in the university, and build internal control systems that reflect guiding principles for administering these credentials.
- + Invite oversight, review, and feedback, such as through faculty governance participation.
- + Negotiate stackability and noncredit-to-for-credit pathways as opportunities to evaluate and convey the academic worthiness of these credentials.
- + Consider the equity impact of credentialing and the ability of credentials to promote economic and social mobility as a key aspiration in the mission driving the creation of new credentials.
- + Place idealism above materialism—always and relentlessly—and be willing to walk away from business opportunities that jeopardize the standards of the university and the professional integrity of the credentials offered.

Why?

This exciting “wild west” period of experimentation and growth in credential offerings elevates the need for professionalism—to earn and sustain the trust and confidence of those within the university community and in the broader marketplace.

What?

- + Developing and offering innovative credential programs that are high quality, valued in the job market, transparent in their competencies, recognized by the institution, and grounded in sound academic practices.
- + Charting a course for the field and future standards through continuous evaluation, reflection, quality improvement, and sharing with peers.
- + Seeking to provide long-term value to learners and to their professions and employers by creating enduring models for educational programs and credentials that meet and exceed their immediate objectives.

Who and How—Implementation

- + Credential Conceptualization and Overall Operations
 - Engage the entire institution to overcome any seemingly siloed effort.
 - Play a leadership role in the institution’s overall credential innovation strategy.
 - Maintain consistency across credential processes and standards.

- Practice environmental scanning to understand changes that occur within the field of alternative credentials.
 - Demonstrate a thoughtful balance of risk-taking and prudence, and between an active pursuit of business opportunities with caution and care within the larger context.
- + Program Development
- Engage academic experts, faculty, and employers in the credential design process.
 - Employ consistent rubrics and sound assessments.
 - Use competency-oriented design and ensure transparency outcomes.
 - Ensure faculty/academic/institutional ownership of decisions and accountability for credentials relative to the role of outside partners.
- + Program Approval and Launch
- Operate visibly across the institution and secure all necessary approvals.
 - Validate program curriculum, learner assessment tools, and outcomes externally where possible.
 - Maintain explicit lines of accountability.
 - Clearly and accurately represent the credential, its relationship to other credentials, and its potential outcomes and value in marketing messages and materials.
 - Inculcate appropriate values and priorities and create appropriate incentives for staff and vendors.
- + Ongoing Leadership, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement
- Analyze enrollment and outcomes data, and test market relevance, through student evaluations, alumni surveys, and other customer feedback.
 - Solicit and secure frequent employer and market feedback and commit to implementing it.
 - Establish a clear timeframe for refreshing curriculum.
 - Build in audits and reviews as if these programs are undergoing the equivalent of an accreditation process.
 - Share best practices, lessons learned, and standards established with peers in the higher education community.

Key Performance Indicators

- + Acceptance and trust of new credential offerings with academic leaders, faculty, staff, students, and employers.
- + Recognition among internal university constituents and external stakeholders.
- + Evidence of positive job-market value and economic impact for credential completers: job placement, career advancement, salary growth, and well-being as measured through alumni surveys.
- + Evidence that the promises and claims of the educational program are realized in the capabilities and performance of graduates.

- + Integration of innovative credential programs into more traditional, formal credentials and academic pathways.
- + Increases in faculty recognition of alternative credentials as indicators of subject-matter mastery.
- + Strong performance on internal quality-assurance assessments and external evaluations.
- + Evidence of students pursuing stackable credentials as these credentials achieve industry status.
- + A willingness to forego short-term revenue in favor of long-term integrity.
- + Enduring and growing recognition of these credentials as measures of achievement and abilities. Institutionalization and market acceptance will be the ultimate measure of lasting success.

CONCLUSIONS

Universities have long prepared students for the workforce and responsible citizenship. Over centuries, degrees from accredited institutions emerged as trusted indicators of knowledge, skills, and capabilities, conveying the mastery and competency of those applying their education to future settings. The university-issued credential is central to the role and responsibility of higher education institutions in contributing to society and to a well-functioning job market. All learners, regardless of their field of study, look to demonstrate their skills in their chosen area of work. Associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral degrees define the standard, expected outcome of a college or university experience.

Credentials beyond a traditional degree, whether for credit or not, can make a candidate more competent and employable, boosting the confidence levels of both the prospective employee and the potential employer.

Nondegree programs, from certificates of course completion to credit-bearing programs of considerable substance and duration, are not necessarily new to academe. With a rising interest in short-form learning there has been a proliferation of new educational credentials such as badges, specializations, Nanodegrees®, MicroMasters®, and others. Sitting largely outside the accreditation framework, these emerging credentials are institutionally designed and branded—without a common set of standards or taxonomies.

When we define alternative credentials as any type of award, beyond traditional degrees, that signifies or certifies mastery, then awards for achievement, micro-degrees, digital badges, apprenticeships, other forms of certification, and even credit for prior learning are part of the alternative credential conversation. Alternative credentials often build upon, or lay a pathway to, formal degrees—but do not replace them. In fact, for employers, alternative credentials can differentiate, and even qualify, a candidate. In the increasingly automated world of human resource management, alternative credentials provide clear, human- and machine-readable ways of helping learners convey mastery. The promise of alternative credentials is that they offer students stackable, bite-sized chunks of knowledge that increase career prospects while decreasing overall cost and debt.

These relatively new credentials are achieving acceptance among external stakeholders, who recognize them as an alternative form of currency in employment, advancement, professional compensation, and certification or licensure. Employers promote alternative credentials because they are less expensive, more focused, and more immediate than traditional degrees. At the same time, these alternative credentials must demonstrate similar attributes—and aspire to the same credibility—we have come to expect from traditional degrees.

Alternative credentials hold both promise and peril for universities, whose legacy systems, tuition rates, and public images were built for the creation and distribution of larger, longer, and perhaps-less-convenient degree programs. Alternative credentials help universities retain existing students and attract new ones. Most importantly, alternative credentials demonstrate a university's responsiveness to changing public demands for educational programs that are less expensive and more convenient.

At the same time, these alternative credentials exist within an unregulated and dynamic educational space. We have yet to develop government-, accreditation-, or association-led standards that define, monitor, or sanction these innovative credentials. There is a growing proliferation of different types of credentials, and many of these constructs and terminologies are unique and sometimes even proprietary rather than industry-wide or academically grounded. Especially because of this lack of oversight, leaders in professional and continuing education units (who have driven much of this innovation and experimentation) are, through their work, setting the pace and the standards for higher education as a whole.

The growing market for new types of credentials is still in its infancy. The American university's portfolio of programs and forms of recognition are evolving to address the needs of learners across their lifetimes. New systems are emerging to support these credentials through digital transcripts and social media.

By their very nature, new types of credentials involve experimentation, imagination, and risk-taking. Special care must be taken to ensure that novel university-based credentials are reliable signals of learner competency and accomplishment—and held to standards similar to what we would expect of traditional academic degrees.

Credential issuance, as a privileged activity of higher education institutions, comes with inherent responsibilities that redound to the university and its social mission and public credibility. In an essentially lawless environment, those creating and delivering new forms of credentials must establish their own principles, practices, and constraints. Within a dynamic period that could be easily exploited and abused, those pioneers in this emerging arena must hold themselves to even higher ethical and academic standards.

Those developing and delivering innovative credentials should neither wait for nor take advantage of this lack of oversight, but instead should employ rigorous, explicit values of excellence and ethics. These will be tested over time by the temptation to generate revenue in ways that might not be educationally sound. Professionalism should always opt to forego income in favor of integrity. Professionalism requires a longer-term and larger view far beyond immediate rewards.

A culture of professionalism will enhance and strengthen the stability and success of innovation in credentialing—and help achieve an authority in the marketplace for the powerful role that universities can play in creating new credentials and setting industry standards. In this still-nascent area of higher education—where there remains skepticism and ignorance about the purpose and value of new credentials—the challenge for leadership is to ensure credibility, idealism, and an array of services and standards so students, academic leaders, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders will embrace new credentials as both valuable and virtuous.



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