Microcredentials for a More Agile Institution

Short, stackable credentials bring key benefits to students, employers — and universities, by helping curricula keep pace with workforce trends.

MICROCREDENTIALS PROVIDE A WAY FOR STUDENTS TO LEARN new skills and demonstrate competency without having to invest in a full degree program — and if colleges and universities don't have a strategy for offering microcredentials, they risk losing market share to other institutions, according to Hannah Aldine, a solutions consultant for Pluralsight.

In a recent interview, Aldine discussed the key factors driving the trend toward microcredentialing. She also revealed how microcredentials can help colleges and universities become more agile in responding to industry trends and how campus leaders can develop microcredentials effectively.

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How do you define microcredentials?

I like to use UNESCO's definition of microcredentials from 2022, because it's a comprehensive but concise overview to work from. They see a microcredential as having four parts: It verifies what the learner knows and can do in a focused area of learning. It includes assessment based on clear standards. It can stand alone or stack with other credentials. And it meets some established standards for quality.

Why are microcredentials becoming more popular?

Many employees are looking for continuing education, whether that's motivated by the need to change careers or driven by the demands of their employer. But it's incredibly challenging for professionals to commit to earning a traditional degree. That means a full-time commitment over two to four years, or longer if the student is learning part time because they're working. Microcredentials are becoming quite attractive because they're coming from credible institutions, but they can also fit into peoples' busy schedules.

Students can take microcredential courses over a short period of time, earn a digital badge that holds value for their job right away, and then choose to stack this credential with another one as they work toward a full degree or just focus on the skills they need to learn to achieve their career goals.

Traditional students are also drawn to microcredentials for some of the same reasons. It can feel like a long road toward a bachelor's degree, but when students are earning a degree through stackable microcredentials, it feels like they're getting a sense of accomplishment through the badges they're earning along the way.

For employers, they're getting a way to encourage continuous upskilling throughout a person's career. Today, learning is incremental and iterative. It has to be, because every industry relies on technology, which is constantly changing. Microcredentials are a great way to facilitate that continuous learning.

Why should colleges consider offering microcredentials, and what are the risks if they don't?

Enrollment numbers for traditional students have been trending down for the last decade, and that's not likely to change. Many people are also questioning the value of a college degree. Universities have to consider how they can show their relevance and value. They want to make sure they can show that students are ready for the workforce, and microcredentials can do that while also appealing to non-traditional students.

We're seen a rise in non-academic providers issuing microcredentials, especially for non-traditional students. Universities can offer microcredentials to recapture this market segment of employees looking for continuing education and who might otherwise have chosen a non-academic provider.

Microcredentials should also be grabbing leaders' attention because they help universities be more agile. Many fields are changing quickly because of the rapid pace of technological change. But making changes to a traditional degree program or creating a new degree takes years. A microcredential can be developed and revised much faster to reflect those market trends.

How might colleges and universities supplement their traditional degree programs with microcredentials? What might this look like?

One way to approach this is to chunk existing degrees into microcredentials consisting of two to three courses

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that students can stack together to earn that degree. Some universities are leveraging their existing courses for the foundation of a microcredential, and then they might add a project or experience to round it out.

We're also hearing that universities are researching industry demands and then using microcredentials to address those in-demand skills. Sometimes those skills don't fit into existing degree objectives, and often it would take too long to revise and approve current degree programs to include those skills. A microcredential can be a stand-alone offering that's much faster to develop and launch.

What are the key challenges involved in developing microcredentials?

One challenge is that microcredentials often focus on niche topics. Having faculty with expertise in all those areas can be difficult. Also, many microcredentials are related to technology, which changes rapidly, and so keeping the content up to date is also challenging. Faculty are already working overtime on teaching, research, advising, and publishing. It's hard for them to find the time to upskill themselves, let alone revise their curriculum.

How can Pluralsight help institutions overcome these challenges?

We have content authors who are subject-matter experts on current, in-demand technologies. They work in the industry themselves. Our authors work with our curriculum teams to produce content very quickly in response to industry shifts.

AI is a great example. ChatGPT came out at the end of November 2022. Suddenly, everyone was talking about ChatGPT and AI more generally. We were able to release new ChatGPT and AI courses beginning in January 2023. That's just not possible to do in higher education, to have that fast a turnaround. Faculty are focused on teaching and supporting students, and so developing a microcredential on their own at the drop of a hat is really hard. We partner with universities to provide high-quality content they can integrate into their programs quickly, so faculty can focus on the actual instruction and working with students.

Microcredentials focus on demonstrable skills. Our **Skill IQs** are short, 10- to 15-minute assessments that measure someone's skills proficiency. Microcredentialing programs can use these Skill IQs as a pre- and post-test to measure students' proficiency coming in and their growth and progress over time, so they have objective data to show how well their programs are upskilling students.

What advice would you have for campus leaders as they consider how to implement microcredentials at their institution?

Do your research. What do your industry advisers see as the key skills that graduates need? What skills will get them workforce ready? Also, who is the target audience for your microcredential? Is it traditional students trying to earn a bachelor's degree? Is it working professionals who have a degree and need ongoing learning? There are many potential audiences and purposes, so it's important to have a clear strategy from the start.

Reach out to other universities with microcredential programs to learn from their experience. And think about how best to spend your time. Partnering with a company like Pluralsight can help you be more agile. It's going to cut down on the time you spend in content creation, freeing up faculty time so they can focus on engaging students and other higher-level work. ■

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