

## Chapter 4

# The Complex Case of Noncredit Credential Innovation in Public Universities: An Organizational Leadership Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Four-year public institutions of higher education (IHEs) face increasing pressure to innovate with noncredit credentials. The chapter aims to develop leaders' mental models for navigating unique complexities associated with offering programs that do not award academic credit. First, a review of noncredit literature and organizational science principles explains that noncredit programming is often unaligned with IHE organizational culture and structure. Then, two metaphors for leaders' roles in overcoming barriers to innovation are introduced and critiqued: Buller's organic leadership concept and Christensen and Eyring's higher education DNA concept. Complexity leadership theory is next presented as a mental model to understand three complementary leader roles for fostering innovation with a complex organizational environment. Finally, the chapter's case features three vignettes from public IHE continuing education leaders that exemplify the complexities related to pursuing noncredit credential innovation. Strategies and discussion questions are included.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Innovation challenges are classic struggles for most organizations, and institutions of higher education (IHEs) are no exception. The considerable literature exploring reasons and solutions for barriers to innovation can be dizzying for higher education leaders hoping for practical lessons to apply in their own IHE. A cottage industry of higher education innovation literature demonstrates continuous pressure to adapt to disruption as well as the unique inertia present in IHEs due to their characteristic organizational structure and culture. While change and innovation of any kind routinely meets cascades of brick walls of resistance, such efforts become extra difficult when the potential change impacts an organization's core business processes and challenges its organizational culture. In academia, the central operational and culture paradigm is the design and implementation of credit-based credential programs such as associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees. Nonetheless, efforts to pursue *noncredit* credentialing programming exist as IHEs seek to bolster revenue, diversify their student base, serve learners across the adult lifespan, and equip society's workforce for a changing economy. While two-year IHEs typically offer some noncredit programming, this chapter addresses a nontraditional context for credentialing innovation: noncredit programming within four-year public universities.

A number of pressures particularly motivate public four-year IHEs to consider noncredit credentials (Arena, 2013). First, from a mission standpoint, noncredit training is an opportunity to serve a wider demographic with learning experiences not suited to the financial and time investment typical of credit-oriented programs. Noncredit programming is typically associated with workforce and economic development efforts that require focused skills-oriented learning (Van Noy et al., 2008). Federal and state programs subsidize such skill-based trainings to retrain dislocated workers and bolster the labor force in particular domains, although those subsidies are often reserved for two-year institutions. Secondly, noncredit programming holds potential for four-year IHEs to counter the contribution of credit-based degrees to social stratification, as outlined in *The Credential Society* (Collins, 1979/2020). Offering programming that is on average lower-priced, less time intensive, and directly connected to employable skills provides four-year IHEs a method to be accessible and provide value to audiences in a manner degree programs cannot. Thirdly, leaders within four-year public IHEs are witnessing the proliferation of competition from for-profit actors in both credit and noncredit domains, as described in *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (McMillam Cottom, 2017). While many such actors provide rigorous and useful programming, others saturate the training and education market with subpar education and predatory pricing. This phenomenon suggests there is a market to provide noncredit training, and participation in noncredit programming may not only be financially sustainable but can provide a willing market high-quality training under the comparatively trustworthy brand of a university. In short, four-year public IHEs ought to be able to compete in and even disrupt the noncredit training and development industry.

Noncredit credential innovation, however, has a considerable obstacle to overcome within IHEs as it, by definition, is in direct opposition to the fundamental organizing paradigm: the student credit hour. The history of the academic credit hour demonstrates that this "American innovation" (Shedd, 2003, p. 5) was created and promoted in part to standardize the education system's fundamental unit of production, serve a business model, and even classify faculty eligibility for pensions. In discussing the ubiquity of credit hour as a barrier to innovation, Ehrlich (2003) wrote, "In public institutions, particularly, the credit hour is embedded in regulations about courses, residency requirements, academic calendars, and budgeting systems that collectively become huge obstacles to overcome" (p. 34). Even in the recent book

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