

Chapter 3

Taking a Student–Centred Approach to Alternative Digital Credentials: Multiple Pathways Toward the Acquisition of Microcredentials

Sharon Lauricella

Ontario Tech University, Canada

Fiona A. McArthur

Ontario Tech University, Canada

ABSTRACT

As the acquisition of microcredentials becomes a more common practice, the authors foresee that there will emerge a variety of ways in which students can acquire microcredentials; such acquisition may manifest across multiple academic courses, programs, or experiences. In this chapter, they address how microcredentials are incorporated into and assessed across multiple pathways at their institution. These pathways include options for self-study, integrated academic programming, and co-curricular activities. The approach to both microcredentials and this chapter is student-focused. Rather than placing attention upon the revenue generation potential of microcredentials, this chapter addresses the methods through which universities can serve students in their goals to attain and demonstrate skills associated with microcredentials.

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INTRODUCTION

Most university graduates boast a framed parchment on the wall, perhaps a ring, and very often, a great deal of student debt. In the traditional higher education system, students choose a course of study, progress through the tiers of higher education, and follow a year-by-year course map. They move on to new courses after meeting prerequisites and complete stepwise course requirements. This process culminates in a degree granted by the university, bestowed upon the student and validated by the university via a transcript or official statement of degree completion.

But what if students want to take more abbreviated versions of courses that are outside their declared major? What if people who graduated years ago wish to reskill or explore new directions for learning? And what if people who don't have a degree at all wish to acquire skills and demonstrate their learning to potential employers? The digital era, characterized by a rapid pace of change, is both necessitating and welcoming alternative methods of achieving and demonstrating skills, while also recognizing the importance of meeting student needs and desires for a breadth of learning experiences and/or new and different knowledge. Microcredentials are one such way that students - at different levels and with different goals - can learn in ways that are self-directed and specific to a student's learning needs and objectives.

In this chapter, we outline how Ontario Tech University took a student-centred approach to designing and implementing a new set of microcredentials offered through the university. We address how the university facilitated three different - but student-focused - opportunities for the acquisition of microcredentials. First, we describe how Ontario Tech constructed the opportunity for students from anywhere (not exclusively students formally enrolled at the university) to choose and acquire standalone microcredentials and build their own self-designed collection of microcredentials. Second, we outline how co-curricular activities at the university can facilitate the acquisition of microcredentials. Finally, we account for how one instructor included the option for students in a traditional course to achieve microcredentials as part of the course syllabus. Rather than focusing on microcredentials as a revenue stream to the university, we focus in this chapter on the unique and meaningful benefits of microcredentials with a student-centred perspective.

A STUDENT-FOCUS ON MICROCREDENTIALS

Microcredentials are a relatively new addition to academic offerings; in 2018, New Zealand was amongst the first to formally recognize these digital certifications as part of academic pathways (NZQA, n.d.). These digitally-expressed credentials, or “badges”, offer several advantages over traditional certificates. First, ownership

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