Chapter 15
Implementing a Digital Microcredential Strategy at the University of Washington Continuum College

Bryan Blakeley
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1961-5158
University of Washington, USA

Rovy F. Branon
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5545-3678
University of Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the emergence of digital microcredentials and describes how the University of Washington's Continuum College is participating in the iterative design of infrastructures and approaches to support these new forms of credentials. The authors explore the current landscape of digital credentials, including the possible benefits, nascent research, and offer a brief introduction to some of the coalitions and formative work underway in many settings. The chapter details a three-pronged strategic approach at the University of Washington's Continuum College. Each of the three efforts is intended to help both the local context served by Continuum College and a new digital credential ecosystem. The three project areas at Continuum College include using digital credentials for university employees, digitally badging the college's extensive portfolio of non-degree programs, and offering digital credentialing as a service to other university departments. The authors describe these ongoing projects, their current state, and implications for further work in digital credentials.

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Opportunities to access formal higher learning are evolving rapidly. We intentionally use the term higher learning, rather than higher education, because the connotation of the current higher education system limits understanding of an increasingly complex and emergent set of systems that are evolving to meet societal needs beyond secondary school. These emergent systems are generally separated from more traditional forms of higher learning and treated as discrete entities. Historically, corporate or military training, apprenticeships, trade schools, and traditional colleges have coexisted with little or no ability for learners to seamlessly demonstrate their learning across these entities. Though specialized services and colleges have emerged to help learners get credit for engagement across these education providers, these services are not evenly available to all learners and offer limited interconnectivity while requiring significant effort on the part of the learner.

A National Student Clearinghouse report (Causey et al., 2022) notes that 39 million Americans have some college credits but no credential as of 2022, up from 36 million in 2019 (Shapiro et al., 2019). As defined by the 2019 report, a credential includes not just bachelor's degrees, but associate degrees and certificates as well. Completion of a credential continues to provide important short term and long term benefits, including a substantial wage premium, particularly for bachelor's degree holders (Abel & Deitz, 2014). Yet a meaningful credential remains out of reach for many learners, in part because of life circumstances that prevent them from effectively studying at traditional institutions. Given that 74% of learners attending college in the United States have at least one characteristic that identifies them as a 'non-traditional' student (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), perhaps this should not be surprising.

Furthermore, completion of a single credential is unlikely to provide the formal learning needed over a lifetime in which current 18-year-old students have a better than 50% chance to live longer than 100 years and will therefore need to work for close to 60 years before retiring (Gratton & Scott, 2017). The mix of learning requirements and opportunities are likely to diversify and blend over this longer life. Learners will create new pathways to and through degree programs as well as other forms of learning programs. The signaling function of paper-based credentials is limited as a detailed means of describing what learners know and can do in this increasingly complex environment. Providing an institution name and degree major on paper are important but not sufficient data about learner capability.

Digital credentials are one crucial component in an evolving ecosystem of higher learning built to serve people over a lifetime, and not just during the traditional formative years of young adulthood. When credentials become digital, they can become more granular and descriptive of what learners know and, more importantly, can do. These digital credentials, when based on open standards, become flexible, unbundled, individualized, equitable pathways allowing everyone to thrive in a globalized, ever-changing world.

DIGITAL CREDENTIAL LANDSCAPE

What is a digital credential? Terminology is still evolving and overlaps in meaning with other learning completion signals. In its Hallmarks of Excellence in Credential Innovation (2020), the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) notes that a broader term, alternative credentials, "includes certificates, micro-credentials, digital badges, or micro-certificates— [and they] signal specific competencies, certification, and sometimes licensure" (p. 1).

The UPCEA (2020) definition of 'alternative credentials' elucidates the broadest landscape of credentials outside of traditional undergraduate and graduate programs, regardless of format. For this chapter,