

Chapter 16

Microcredentials, Macro Learning: One University's Path Toward Unbundling

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tells the story of one university's ongoing work to explore and ultimately define an institution-wide approach for awarding microcredentials, specifically digital badges, and the discoveries this work enabled. It documents the initial badging pilot, highlighting the specific steps taken, and the challenges and opportunities they presented. From the limitations of our common academic vernacular to the benefits of effective change leadership and cross-functional collaboration, these efforts offer a real-world view of the challenges and opportunities of unbundling. Sharing and reflecting on this initiative may provide other higher education institutions (IHEs) with insights about this complex change process and factors that contribute to why new models may flourish or fail.

An Open Badge is a type of microcredential that acknowledges and validates a discrete learning event, skill, or competency (IMS Global Learning Consortium, 2022). Open badges are issued through certified Open Badges platforms such as Credly or Badgr. As digital assets, badges are shareable by the earner via social and professional networks and other electronic media, such as a digital resumé. Clicking on the digital asset enables the viewer to access detailed information about what the badge signifies, such as the entity issuing and validating it, the skills and knowledge it represents, and the specific criteria associated with earning it. Since a badge can represent learning that occurs within and/or outside of credit-bearing learning contexts, it is especially well-suited to the task of acknowledging lifelong learning events and opportunities as they occur.

Within the past decade, institutions of higher education (IHE) have increasingly embraced badging to recognize learning especially within the professional and continuing education space. As of 2016, one in five institutions with professional, continuing and online education units, offered some form of microcredential (Fong, 2016). Between 2018 and 2020, the number of earnable badges worldwide had

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increased by an impressive 82% (IMS Global, 2020). Growing discontentment with the cost of higher education, increased demand for skills-based hiring, and an acute need for reskilling or upskilling in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to the rise of microcredentials (Gallagher, 2018; Golden et al., 2021; Lorenzo, 2021; Wellspring, 2021) making them nearly impossible for observers of higher education trends to disregard, or for IHE administrators to ignore.

Early adopters such as Colorado Community College System, Illinois State University (Fain, 2016), the State University of New York (SUNY) system, and others, blazed pathways for Northeastern University and many other IHEs to follow. These early adopters, coupled with substantial research initiatives such as those by the Lumina Foundation, Strada Education Network, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), have advanced the conversation on microcredentials in higher education by highlighting their relevance to broader employment and hiring trends.

Digital badging has been a bellwether of the transformations taking place in higher education. Northeastern's ongoing, multi-year effort to implement an institution-wide approach to digital badging offers a glimpse of a global, research university engaged in the complex work of unbundling the curriculum to better serve modern learners. In documenting and reflecting on this work in progress, this chapter describes how it has enabled the university's broader unbundling. As John Dewey observed, "Mere activity does not constitute experience... When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something" (Dewey, 1916, Ch. 11, para. 1).

Northeastern's badging initiative can be examined in two distinct phases to date: the Pilot phase (between 2017-2020), and the Implementation phase (2020-present). The specific activities we engaged in during each, the themes that subsequently emerged, and the ways in which those themes shaped and informed subsequent decisions and actions, constitute the focus of this discussion. As this work is still unfolding at the time of this writing, the intent is not to assess the impact of microcredentialing, nor does this purport to be an example of "best practice." Rather, it offers a view of a university actively engaged in *unbundling* curricula from traditional modes of delivery, i.e., of defining its value proposition as one that is fluid rather than static. For readers situated in IHEs considering their own unbundled future, this chapter describes the granular aspects of that process.

BACKGROUND

What's Old is New

Northeastern University is a private, tier 1 research university consisting of 12 campuses on two continents, serving over 40,000 combined undergraduate and graduate students across 9 Colleges (Northeastern University 2021 Facts and Figures 2021, 2021). The main campus in Boston, Massachusetts was founded in 1898 during a time of unprecedented growth in the number of higher education institutions in the United States. The late 19th century was also marked by a proliferation of new academic disciplines and fields of study, which contributed to the sector's overall growth (Goldin & Katz, 1999). During the first quarter-century of its existence, Northeastern's colleges and curricula were organized and reorganized several times in response to broader societal and technological shifts that defined the era and higher education's efforts at bundling them together in ways that made sense for both scholars and students.

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