

Chapter 17

Unbundling Credit to Non-Credit: A Framework for Developing Alternative Credentials

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of higher education is moving in a direction of greater variation, leaving traditional academic institutions at risk of obsolescence amidst the myriad of accessible, responsive, flexible learning opportunities increasingly represented in the global learning market. Declining confidence in the value of a college degree forces the higher education industry to open to expanded audiences and diversification of learning opportunities—including embracing the value of alternative credential programming as an institutional priority. This chapter depicts a streamlined model for generating high-quality skills-based microcredentials and professional development offerings with limited resources. To do so, a step-by-step process for identifying opportunities to leverage existing academic content to create more flexible, skills-based learning experiences will be described. The chapter will provide a framework for unbundling credit to non-credit offerings that can be adapted and replicated by other institutions seeking the same outcomes.

The landscape of higher education is moving in a direction of greater variation, leaving traditional academic institutions at risk of obsolescence amidst the myriad of accessible, responsive, flexible learning opportunities increasingly represented in the global learning market. Declining confidence in the value of a college degree forces the higher education industry to open to expanded audiences and diversification of learning opportunities – including embracing the value of alternative credential programming as an institutional priority. Professional and continuing education divisions providing non-credit education are becoming more prominent with increasing interest in alternative credentials and skills-based learn-

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ing as a shift in organizational dynamics. As institutions of higher education (IHEs) seek to expand in the alternative credential marketplace, producing content at a fast pace to meet supply is frequently a barrier within slow-moving academic paradigms. As a path forward, this chapter depicts a streamlined model for generating high-quality microcredentials and professional development offerings with limited resources. To do so, this chapter will describe a step-by-step process to identify opportunities to leverage existing academic content to create more flexible, easily-consumable, skills-based learning experiences in a non-credit format – hereby referred to as “unbundling” curriculum. The goal of this approach is to maximize institutional resources to deliver alternative credential content to expand programming to provide greater access and to increase revenue through a diversified learner audience. The chapter will provide a framework for unbundling credit to non-credit offerings that can be adapted and replicated by other institutions seeking the same outcomes.

THE ADULT LEARNER AND RISE OF ALTERNATIVE CREDENTIALS

Between 2010 and 2020, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) reports higher education lost 2.7 million participants (Fong, 2021). These declines can be partly attributed to economic circumstances of the 2020 pandemic and the decreasing number of college-aged students, but other factors and causes are at play such as rising tuition, income limitations, concerns regarding job placement, and perceived lower return on investment (Fong, 2021). Historically, colleges and universities in the U.S. depend on enrolling the traditional student aged 18-22 pursuing a credit-bearing degree for tuition revenue, yet demographics show our society is much more diverse and non-traditional students—adult learners—are a higher proportion of the education demographic (Fong, 2021). While postsecondary providers beyond community colleges are beginning to recognize the potential of the adult learner demographic, many IHEs still inadequately resource professional and continuing education divisions and downplay non-traditional learners and non-credit offerings within the institutional priorities and mission (Fong et al., 2021a). To quickly adapt to the current workforce and learning landscape, IHEs need to provide education today that can apply immediately. In this context, notoriously slow-moving IHEs are at a disadvantage delivering a desirable “product.” As a result, employers and adult learners are often going elsewhere for education and training (Craig, 2020). For this reason, professional and continuing education and workforce-focused divisions providing alternative credentials that recognize acquired knowledge and skills are the ideal innovation incubators for IHEs to champion.

In a 2021 report published by the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), seven in ten college leaders say microcredentialing could boost enrollment and revenue (UPCEA, 2021). Yet many colleges and universities are not well-positioned to quickly deliver these innovative forms of education and training (Fong et al., 2021a). Unbundling credit courses is a logical approach for IHEs to pursue because it leverages existing resources to provide adult learners with fast and useable options for career advancement through targeted alternative credentials and acquisition of new skillsets. To implement unbundling realistically and quickly, academic administrators and faculty must work together to evaluate opportunities for developing alternative credentials without a significant investment of additional institutional resources. In this chapter, the importance of unbundling credit content to non-credit offerings is discussed and a process for creating new alternative credentials is proposed. When this “unbundling” credit-to-non-credit approach is effectively implemented, IHEs can meet the needs of today’s learner – and be positioned to attract the learners of the future.

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