

The St. Ambrose University Microcredential and Digital Badging Program

A Guidebook for Creating and Starting a Microcredential



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A Shift In Educational Needs

Employers and workers are seeking short, intense and focused learning opportunities to improve their skill sets and complement their current training. They want modularize courses that can be self paced and pay only for specific aspect of instruction. Many times workers already have a bachelor or a master's degree and do not want to spend multiple years earning another degree. This shift in education can be seen in the rise in online learning and boot camp learning models along with the decreased enrollment in traditional continuing education and master's degree programs, especially the on-ground, face to face model.

There is also a need for training outside what is typically provided through traditional graduate and undergraduate programs. Instructional goals may not require the length of a full degree program, the individual wants to take a few courses not the full degree, the skills desired are not typically eligible for academic credit, or the employer is seeking a specific skill that is not currently available in graduate programs.

To address this change in educational needs, Microcredentialing programs or alternative credentials beyond the traditional academic degree are being developed throughout higher education. These are educational programs that tend to be shorter in length than a degree and address a specific skill or competency. While academic credit can be awarded for completing the training, the earner will typically receive a "digital badge" that captures the requires and skills associated with the training. The training can be delivered online, face to face, or through a hybrid model to meet the goals of the training. In a 2016 study by Fong, Janzow & Peck, 94% of universities were offering some form of alternative credentials with 25% using digital certificates. There are also private companies stepping in to provide these educational opportunities Some examples are www.Lynda.com through LinkedIn and <https://www.coursera.org/> who networks with universities throughout the country.

As our regional employers evolve and demand new skills of their workforce, it is important that St.Ambrose University can provide our community with training opportunities to meet these needs now and into the future. While our current academic programs partially address the needs of our region, we need to evolve and offer other options. In order to meet these needs, we will begin offering Microcredentials and issuing digital badges. Any Microcredentials we offer will be driven by the mission of St. Ambrose University and the mission of the department or unit offering the Microcredential. Our goal is offering Microcredentials is to help our students prepare for new professions, advance in their careers, and learn new skills. Microcredentials will also appeal to a diverse group of students, some who may not have considered St. Ambrose University for their educational needs in the past.

Definition of Microcredential

There is no one accepted definition of a Microcredential. St. Ambrose University has adopted the below definition using multiple resources and national organization recommendations.

Microcredentials are training programs that verify, validate, and attest that specific skills and/or competencies have been achieved. Microcredential address an industry or profession specific competency, training towards entry-level skills, or provide a marketable skill to a student seeking career advancement. They may be offered through online, face-to-face instruction or a combination of both. Microcredentials can be designed to include credit or noncredit course work. Microcredentials have rigor and high standards, but can be completed in a timely fashion. The workload is less than an academic degree, a certificate program, or a minor.

Completion of a Microcredential goes beyond attending a conference, completing a couple of classes, and a traditional written examination. There needs to be validation that the individual has the skill. The earner should have a product, performance, or results of a practical test at the end of the Microcredential that clearly attests to the skill. Then the skill should be marketable and something that is desired by an employer or within a profession.

Essential Components of a Microcredentials

To ensure St. Ambrose University offers high quality and valued training and that Microcredential attest to the stated learning achievement and accomplishment of specific learning outcomes, St. Ambrose University Microcredentials must meet the following guidelines. These guidelines are adapted from the American Council on Education recommendations on credentialing.

Transparent

The learning achievement and how it will be assessed is clear to the student. The criteria required helps set parameters that are useful to learners, evaluators, and those viewing the Microcredential after it has been awarded. The Microcredential should be distinctive from a diploma, advanced diploma, associate degree, bachelor's degree, graduate degree, master's degree, doctoral degree, or other attestation to the completion of a course of academic study.

Modular

A Microcredential should stand on its own and clearly define the skills assessed. When multiple Microcredentials are offered around a similar topic and can be "stacked" towards a certificate, degree, or more comprehensive credential, the criteria for each level should be clearly defined and attested.

Portable

The evidence of completing the Microcredential should be curated, annotated, and distributed over digital networks under the earner's control. If credited courses make up the Microcredential, this can be captured on the students' transcript. However the evidence of earning the Microcredential should be easy to share by the student and communicate what the Microcredential focused on.

Relevant

The Microcredential must have value to the workforce and the learner. The Microcredential attests to the gaining of a skill or competency, focusing on the practical application of the knowledge gained.

Valid

The learning and instruction should link to the workforce demand of skills and competencies. The assessment of the skills and competencies should link to the learning outcomes. The competency-based assessment or evaluation has a clear relationship between the assessment and the actual application of the competency or learning in the workplace.

Equitable

There is oversight by faculty governance for quality and consistency of learning. At St. Ambrose University this means a Microcredential Review Committee and final approval by the Educational Policies Committee.

What Should Drive the Creation of Microcredentials

There are different reasons why St. Ambrose University would want to offer a Microcredential. Each has their own strengths and drawbacks.

Meeting the Need of an Employer

St. Ambrose University could network with a specific employer and develop a curriculum to meet their needs. We may already have faculty who can teach the material and have similar courses that can be used as a starting point, but this may not always be the case. It may require new course development, in a different platform, done by adjunct faculty. The advantage of this format is that it has a built in audience and can usually be done with some existing resources. The downside is once the company's needs have been filled, the Microcredential may not have value to others and the Microcredential will not be marketable. Additionally, the company may require that only their employees can earn the Microcredential.

Market and Employment Trends

Based on a study of the marketplace, St. Ambrose could identify a need for a Microcredential. We would have a list of companies or professionals in mind who would likely seek this Microcredential. Based on current curriculums and faculty, this may require additional resources to develop and implement. The advantage is that the university is going after a growing area or market. If the research was done correctly, this should draw in students. The downside is the need to hire more faculty for development and implementation if the Microcredential is outside what the university currently does. Additionally, there is no commitment or guarantee that students will enroll in the Microcredential.

Licensure Requirements

Microcredentials could be aimed at professions that require continued education for licensure. The advantage is there are audiences seeking this training out of necessity and to stay current in their discipline. St. Ambrose University has the faculty expertise to provide this level of training especially if a program is already training entry-level professionals. One challenge is the marketplace is filled with continuing education providers who have invested significant amounts of money to deliver high quality and engaging online presentations. Another challenge is each state licensure board has slightly different requirements for continuing education making the transfer of Microcredentials across multiple states more challenging.

Providing Current St. Ambrose University with Value Added Opportunities

St. Ambrose University could develop Microcredentials focused on current students to help improve their marketability. The Microcredential could give the student training in an area outside their degree program. This would be ideal for a student who may not have room in their schedule or interest in pursuing a second major or a minor. The advantage is that this is an extra value for our current students and will help them in their job search process. The downside is this form of a Microcredential will not draw more students to St. Ambrose University and not create additional revenue. These forms of Microcredential are valuable, they can be encouraged, but cannot be our only type of Microcredential.

Building From Current Academic Programs

St. Ambrose University could develop a Microcredential based on a successful degree program or a grouping of courses. Some aspect or skill set within the degree is identified and addressed through the Microcredential. The advantage of this format is the university has the content experts, curriculum and infrastructure already. The Microcredential can also be a step towards a full degree. The disadvantage is the Microcredential may not be what the marketplace or employers are seeking if the Microcredential is created out of convenience or current teaching interests in the academic program.

Classification of Microcredentials

At this time we are not classifying or categorization our Microcredentials. However, a unit or program interested in a Microcredential may want to review the The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) categories of career-readiness skills for new college graduates. These skill sets might inform the development of a Microcredential insofar as the categories could suggest aspects of learning outcomes and/or serve as guidelines for the types of evidence that could be incorporated into the metadata of a badge. The categories with descriptions can be found [at this link](#). The categories are Critical Thinking/Problem Solving, Oral/Written Communications, Teamwork/Collaboration, Digital Technology, Leadership, Professionalism/Work Ethic, Career Management, and Global/Intercultural Fluency:

Who Can Design a Microcredential

A Microcredential should be sponsored by an academic program, department, or university office. There may be situations where the Microcredential crosses multiple divisions. The creators will have to ultimately decide the leadership structure for the Microcredential. The application for the Microcredential requires the approval of the college dean or Vice President overseeing the university office.

Learning Experiences in a Microcredential

Microcredentials can be designed to include credit-based courses or noncredit courses and presentations. The learning experiences can be face to face, online and then either synchronous or asynchronous. Below are some factors to consider as you design your Microcredential.

Using Credit-Based Courses

A Microcredential can be designed in a way that the majority of the instruction comes from credit-based courses that typically make up a degree program. This can be an advantage to St. Ambrose University and the faculty because the curriculum, course outcomes, and assignments are already created. For programs that do not have full sections with degree seeking students, the addition of students enrolled in the Microcredential can help fill the class. Using credit based course will lead to academic credits in addition to the Microcredential. If the student ever decided to seek an academic degree, the Microcredential could be stacked toward the degree.

Because Microcredentials are meant to be focused learning that allow a student to demonstrate a skill or competency, the academic credits should stay at 11 credits or less. Once the credits gets to 12 or more, the courses would be better labeled as a concentration or a certificate.

Taking multiple academic courses alone does not meet the criteria for a Microcredential. First the courses must have a clear link to a marketable skill or competency that is typically

connected to profession or an employment opportunity. Second there must be a product or demonstration of the skill or competency at the completion of the courses. This is meant to demonstrate that the goals of the micro-credential are met. This final product should be something that the student can share and a potential employer might review to see the student's skill. It should be a product that a faculty member or committee of faculty review and give substantive feedback on.

As programs develop a Microcredential and reflect on how the skill will be measured, they should think about the time, effort and resources it will take to review, give feedback, and grade the assessment. This will typically not be part of an academic course and it may not be clear who in the program will be responsible for this work. Will this be added to someone's current workload? Will it require an overload contract or a per diem award? As the program considers setting the tuition for the Microcredential, there may be a fee in addition to the course tuition to cover the assessment. A possibility is setting up a Microcredential assessment course to register the student in to account for the workload and fees associated with the assessment.

Non-Credited Courses/Presentations

Some Microcredentials will include learning experiences and skills that are not appropriate for academic credit, but are relevant for a profession and the skills needed. Some Microcredentials will pull information from multiple academic courses across a degree program, but not go into the depth or breadth on particular topics that an academic course would. There may be pricing advantages to using non-credit courses as part of a Microcredential.

If non-credited courses or presentations are used, the program who sponsors the Microcredential needs to be transparent in that while the Microcredential is being awarded by St. Ambrose University, there are no academic credits awarded.

In some situations a program could allow a Microcredential based on non-credited course to take the place of a course in a degree program. For example if a degree requires an introduction to the profession course, the Microcredential could be counted towards that requirement. This would require the program going to Educational Policies Committee (EPC) and adjusting their degree program requirements.

Admissions Criteria and Requirements

Based on the design and goals of a Microcredential, there may be very specific prerequisites or criteria for enrolling in the program. For example, if the Microcredential is for an advanced skill, the student should be able to prove their competency in the basic skills. This might be through an entry level degree, experience in a field, or other continuing education courses. If the Microcredential is for a skill that is linked to a licensed profession, the student should have a valid license in the field. While Microcredentials are designed to provide students with a focused education, in many cases a foundational knowledge and skill set must be present first. Creators

of a Microcredential should address expectations of foundational knowledge through their admissions and prerequisite process.

Instructional Delivery

How Microcredentials are delivered will vary based on the goals and outcomes of the program. Programs should keep in mind that individuals seeking a Microcredential are typically looking for flexibility and convenience in their education. Some will be working full time and looking for ways to complete the requirements in the evening or on weekends.

Ongoing or face to face learning is an option, especially for skills that require more direct teaching and assessment. The instruction could be aligned with an academic course or a seminar.

Online learning is an ideal option given the needs of the learning. A Microcredential could be designed to include asynchronous, self-paced learning. This has advantages in course administration, keeping the cost of the Microcredential low, and possibly using current resources.

Hybrid is an option that would allow some of the Microcredential to be self paced and still provide opportunities for direct instruction and assessment.

No matter the mode of instruction chosen, the student has to demonstrate the skill and competency in order for the Microcredential to be completed. The program should keep this point in mind as the curriculum is developed.

Demonstrating Evidence of the Skill or Competency

Based on the design of the Microcredential, the individual will have to demonstrate they have the skills associated with the training. Ideally an employer or colleague can see the evidence. As a program is designing their Microcredential, thinking about how to showcase the evidence should be a key consideration. The evidence could be in a paper, video, website, testimony, or physical product.

Stackability of Microcredentials

Microcredentials are designed to address a specific skill or competency. They can be awarded for smaller skills and then be “stacked” or combined with other Microcredentials to demonstrate a larger and more comprehensive skill set. The Microcredentials could also be stacked towards an academic degree. As the program is designing their Microcredentials, they should consider if the Microcredential is meant to solely be a stand alone recognition or if it can be used to encourage the student to gain further skills and possibly an academic degree.

Any stackability towards an academic degree would have to go before Educational Policies Committee for approval. Programs may also have to review their policies on how many academic credits can be earned as a non-degree seeking student before applying to the degree program.

Issuing Academic Credits for Course Work Associated with Microcredentials

If a Microcredential is made up of courses that have academic credit, the class grade will be recorded on the student's transcript. Academic credit will only be given for classes listed in the University Catalog.

If Microcredentials involve non-credit courses and activities, these will not be recorded on the transcript. Programs may want to issue a certificate of completion for any non-credit courses or instruction, especially if the student would use the course completion for professional licensure. This would be separate from the digital badge issued after the full Microcredential is completed.

Digital Badges

Digital Badges, or Badges, are electronic certificates or indicators that demonstrate the individual has a certain skill or knowledge base. They are awarded after competency is achieved and state when and how the badge was earned. Badges have advantages over the traditional academic transcript and paper certificate. They contain more details and explanation of the skill set achieved through training than a traditional transcript, can be shared through multiple forms, and they are owned by the individual who earned them.

The badges are a graphic file that can be displayed on an individual's resume, website, or professional social media account. The badges are more than just an icon. They contain metadata that show the course or training that was completed, and list the testing and rubric or assessment done to demonstrate competence. The issuers of the badge have the ability to set an expiration date on the badge and even revoke the badge in certain situations. The badges are formatted in a way that allow the recipient to easily download and share across multiple platforms.

The St. Ambrose University Badge

St. Ambrose University has designed two different badges. One is for a Microcredential that includes credit based courses and another for noncredit based course. The graphic is designed to clearly communicate that it is for a Microcredential, St. Ambrose University is the issuer, and the title of the Microcredential. The orange ribbon is for credit based courses and green is for non-credit based courses. Below the ribbon is the “Microcredential” to clearly communicate what the badge is for a Microcredential. If the Microcredential is meant to be stacked or be part of the larger training program, “Level 1” or some other indicator can be listed under the word Microcredential.

Credit Based Badge



Non-Credit Based Badge



The program should put significant thought into the metadata that will be part of the badge. This is how the external audience will make a judgement on the overall value of the Microcredential. The required parts of the metadata include the following pieces of information.

- Title: 20 characters
- Short Description: 128 characters. This displays as the preview text under the badge
- Description: 1500 characters. More detail on what it represents. What were the learning experiences, what can be expected from the individual as a result of the training, the link of the Microcredential to an industry.
- Criteria: 1500 characters. How it was earned and what was the assessment. This might be a description of presentations, tests, projects and the threshold or level of performance expected.
- URL: Can insert a link to more information about the Microcredential.

Then when the badge is issued specific information on the individual can be added. This information would share actual product or demonstration of the individual's skill. This could include the following

- A testimony on the individual
- Documents
- Pictures
- A URL to more information

Strong metadata behind the badge design will communicate the importance of the Microcredential and stress the significance of training.

Issuing Digital Badge

Once the unit or program overseeing the Microcredential verifies that all requirements are met, they will inform the Microcredential Review Board and the badge will be issued. The Office of Graduate Studies will be managing the badge issuing.

Enrolling in a Microcredential

If the Microcredential involves credit courses, the student will have to apply as a Non-Degree Seeking Student. The program will also have to indicate that the student is seeking a Microcredential and this will be captured in the student's Colleague records.

If the Microcredential only involves non-credited course work, the unit or program overseeing the Microcredential will coordinate their own registration process based on the instructional method. The program will have to indicate that the student is seeking a Microcredential and this will be captured in the student's Colleague records.

Tuition, Fees and Financial Aid for Microcredentials

How tuition is set will be based on whether the instruction involves courses with academic credit.

Academic Courses

When a Microcredential is made up of academic courses, students will enroll as a non-degree seeking student. They will work with the program sponsoring the Microcredential to register for courses. Tuition will be based on the standard tuition rate for the courses unless the program proposes a different model.

If there will be an additional fee to account for the assessment of the skill or competency, this could be captured through a course fee or an additional course that is set up for the assessment of the skill or competency.

Adjusted Fees for Academic Courses

A program may want to consider allowing a student to take an academic course as part of their Microcredential training, but at a reduced rate. In these situations, the student would not earn academic credit for the course, they would only earn the Microcredential and the badge. If the student at a later date wanted to use the academic course as credit towards a degree or stack the Microcredential towards a degree, they would have to pay a transcribing fee to convert the

course to academic credit. If a program wants to use this model, a plan should be addressed in the proposal.

No Academic Credit Courses

When the Microcredential is made up of non-credited courses, the program should set the tuition and fees based on the demands of instruction and market rates.

Special Arrangements with Employers

There may be situations where the tuition is set based on negotiations with an employer. This could be a discounted rate based on the volume of employees completing the Microcredential or special relationships we have with the employer. The unit or program sponsoring the Microcredential will work out these details and present their plan in the application.

Financial Aid and Microcredentials

Students who are non-degree seeking and enrolled in a Microcredential program are unable to apply for and receive Title IV Aid. These students will typically pay out of pocket for their Microcredential program, receive funding from an employer, or can seek a private loan. If a student completes a Microcredential and chooses to stack the courses towards a degree, they can change their status to a degree-seeking student and apply for Title IV Aid.

Students who are receiving Title IV Aid as a degree-seeking student are able to enroll in a Microcredential program. Course work can be applied to the requirements of the Microcredential without any impact on their Title IV Aid.

Essentials of Curriculum and Proposal for Microcredential

As programs are developing the Microcredential the following areas and questions should be considered. These are areas that programs will be asked to address in their application.

Title of Microcredential - Should be clear and brief

Background - Why is this Microcredential needed and how does it connect to the mission of St. Ambrose University and the program offering it. Then how does the Microcredential link to employment or professional growth. How is it different from an academic major or minor.

Skill or Competency - What skill or competency is the Microcredential addressing. The key of a Microcredential is it goes beyond just knowledge, but shows that the student can perform the action.

Student Population - Who will be enrolling in the Microcredential.

Prerequisites - Are there prerequisites for the Microcredential or will the Microcredential only be offered to individuals in a certain profession with a certain professional license.

Learning Outcomes - What are the learning outcomes of the Microcredential? [Click here](#) for a nice resource on writing learning outcomes.

Curriculum - Describing the courses that will make up the Microcredential. The curriculum should link back to the learning outcomes.

Assessment Plan - How will you measure your outcomes. This is one of the most important parts since the purpose of the Microcredential is to attest to a skill or competency.

Instructional Method - What mode of instruction will be used, taking into consideration the needs of the students and learning outcomes.

Administration of the Microcredential - Who is responsible for the administration and oversight of the Microcredential. This includes assessment, tracking students, and ensuring the curriculum is updated as needed.

Submission and Approval Process

Programs will complete the Microcredential application form and submit it to the Microcredential Review Board. The application form is on the Portal Page for Microcredentials and Digital Badges. The board will review the application to ensure all components are addressed. Feedback will be given and the application may be returned for further revisions. Once the review board approves the application, it will be sent to the Educational Policies Committee for a final review. Once approved by the Educational Policies Committee, the Microcredential can begin.

Membership of the Microcredential Review Board

The review board is made up of the following members.

- Dean of Graduate Studies - chair
- Professional Development Center Coordinator/Director
- Minimum of two faculty members. Faculty members are nominated and can be self-nominated. In consultation with other Review Board members, the Dean of Graduate Studies will make the selection of the faculty members. Selection is based on achieving a balance of academic disciplines, undergraduate versus graduate teaching loads, and experience in multiple modes of instruction and assessment. Faculty terms are three years in length.

The review board will consult with Center for Instructional Design and Technology, the Assessment Committee, Records and Registration, Faculty Finance, Financial Aid and Center for Teaching Excellence as needed.

Microcredential Review Process

Each year the program supervising the Microcredential will be asked to submit a report about their program. At five years, programs will submit a report that demonstrates outcomes and includes plans for the future.

Communication and Marketing of Microcredentials

As part of the proposal process, programs should consider the marketing needs for the Microcredential. How will the Microcredential be shared with the community, especially if the Microcredential is designed for a particular population or profession? When a Microcredential is housed in an academic program that also oversees majors, minors, and/or graduate programs, the Microcredential should be embedded into the overall messaging of the program.

More Information and Contact Information for Assistance

At this time the Microcredential Review Board will be housed in the Office of Graduate Studies. The Graduate Studies Portal page houses the application and other materials to support Microcredentials. Questions about Microcredentialing should be directed to Mike Puthoff, Dean of Graduate Studies (563-333-6009, puthoffmichaell@sau.edu).