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## EXPANDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN CREDENTIAL INNOVATION THROUGH A CONSORTIUM APPROACH

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# Introduction

Over the past two years, UPCEA has collaborated with Walmart to conduct a multi-phase initiative aimed at accelerating the development, implementation, and sustainability of employer-engaged, non-degree credentials in higher education. This report, the third in a trilogy of strategically aligned efforts, represents the culmination of a journey that began with benchmarking and foundational research, expanded through institutional capacity building, and now concludes with tangible implementation outcomes and sustainable practices.

The first report, [\*Alternative Credentials: Business and Program Models \(December 2023\)\*](#), provided a comprehensive survey of the higher education landscape, establishing baseline data on the adoption, design, and financial models of non-degree credentials. The findings underscored a strong institutional interest in microcredentials, badges, and noncredit certificates, but also revealed widespread inconsistencies in program strategy, employer engagement, and business modeling.

Building on these insights, the second report, [\*Building Capacity, Expanding Pathways: A Higher Education Playbook \(August 2024\)\*](#), shifted from analysis to action. Through the creation of a 10-institution consortium, the project explored how institutions could move from exploration to execution in their partnerships with business and industry. With the support of customized market research, facilitated peer connections, and one-on-one guidance, participating institutions began to lay the groundwork for localized, workforce-responsive credential initiatives. The resulting playbook offered promising practices and strategic recommendations, emphasizing the importance of institutional alignment, employer co-design, and sustainable financial models.

This third and final report, focused on the 2024–2025 project year, documents the transition from planning to implementation. It follows seven of the original 10 institutions as they began to enroll their first cohorts, operationalized their credentialing infrastructure, and scaled their internal capacity to sustain innovation. The report not only captures observations across the institutional case examples but also identifies insights about business partnerships, governance, faculty engagement, systems integration, and the evolving role of online and professional continuing education offices in leading innovation across campus.

Together, these three reports represent a holistic arc: from research and readiness to strategic planning and now to execution and sustainability. Through this work, UPCEA affirms that successful employer-engaged credentialing encompasses both creating new programs and transforming the culture, operations, and partnerships that enable institutions to meet the evolving needs of learners and employers. The consistent throughline across all phases has

been the critical role of employer engagement, including but going beyond advising and validating programs, to co-creation, funding, and partnering to drive outcomes.

The learnings from this initiative are clear: meaningful progress requires multifaceted and sustained partnerships between higher education and employers, a strategic ecosystem of support, and institutional leadership willing to innovate. As the field of higher education continues to evolve under economic, demographic, and political pressures, these three reports offer a roadmap for how institutions can adapt, respond, and thrive.

## Background

Enrollment in certificates, badges, microcredentials, and other non-degree credentials continues to top the list of growth areas in higher education.<sup>1</sup> This is especially important given the context that first-time student enrollments have shown a continual decline in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Partnering with local, regional, and statewide businesses is key to developing and delivering high-quality employer-engaged credentials and other programs. To support institutions in these efforts, Walmart provided funding to UPCEA in 2023-2024 for a one-year “proof of concept” project.<sup>3</sup> As part of that project, 10 institutions from across the country worked with the UPCEA team, including one-on-one discussions with an UPCEA Strategic Advisor, to develop employer-engaged credentials in collaboration with local, regional or statewide businesses in their community.

Because of the success of those collaborations, a follow-up, grant-funded project was initiated in July 2024, also funded by Walmart, consisting of two components: building capacity for employer engagement through a “train the trainer” model with Peer Learning Leaders and continued support for the consortium of 10 institutions to move from planning to implementation. This report focuses on the completion of the second component of the 2024-2025 project in which the same UPCEA Strategic Advisor continued to work with seven of the original 10 institutions to help them implement the employer-engaged credentials planned during the proof-of-concept year. Lessons learned focus on the implementation and sustainability of an institution’s ability to deliver workforce-directed credentials.

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<sup>1</sup> National Student Clearinghouse, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://upcea.edu/migrating-the-headwinds-of-higher-education-how-upcea-partnered-research-helps-guide-the-way/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Building-Capacity-Expanding-Pathways\\_A-Higher-Education-Playbook\\_August-2024.pdf](https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Building-Capacity-Expanding-Pathways_A-Higher-Education-Playbook_August-2024.pdf)

The seven institutions participating in this year's project are listed below. Each is summarized in the Appendix as a brief case study example.

- Kansas State University
- North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
- Schoolcraft College
- University of North Texas
- University of Maine System
- Vanderbilt University
- Virginia Commonwealth University

## Summary of Outcomes

### Successful Implementation Across Diverse Institutions

Seven institutions advanced from planning to implementation, developing employer-engaged credentials designed in partnership with local and regional businesses.

- Five institutions successfully enrolled their first learner cohorts, with cohorts completing credentials at two of the five.
- Two institutions are set to enroll learners in late summer/early fall 2025.

### Strengthened Institutional Capacity

All participating institutions reported significant visibility and growth in their capacity to support and sustain credential initiatives:

- All seven institutions reorganized their online and professional continuing education units to increase capacity to offer and support credentials.
- Three institutions restructured reporting lines to better integrate these offices with central administration, signaling institutional commitment to workforce innovation.

### Operational and Governance Challenges Addressed

Institutions encountered—and addressed—key barriers to providing non-semester based and noncredit bearing credentials:

- Underestimated resource requirements for faculty and departmental engagement.
- Legacy systems posed operational challenges, particularly in LMS and CRM integration.
- Most institutions created parallel systems or adapted existing processes rather than overhauling core infrastructure.

## **Deepened Employer Engagement**

The most successful partnerships moved beyond advisory roles for businesses to active co-design and curriculum development. These collaborations generated not only relevant programming but also new funding and enrollment pipelines.

## **Key Learnings and Takeaways**

### **1. Employer Collaboration is Essential and Multifaceted**

Strong multifaceted partnerships with employers drive program relevance and sustainability. Successful collaborations involved:

- Co-creating curriculum aligned with specific industry needs
- Leveraging employer expertise even in cases without direct financial investment
- Generating robust talent pipelines that benefit both institutions and regional economies.

### **2. Institutional Agility and Support are Critical**

Programs required:

- Adaptable governance structures that allow for timely credential approval
- Flexible operational models to serve nontraditional learners outside standard academic cycles
- Active support and advocacy from central leadership to align institutional priorities and resolve ownership tensions.

### **3. Evolving Roles for Continuing Education Units**

The growing role of professional and continuing education units as catalysts for innovation underscores the importance of their integration into institutional strategy. Their success demonstrated the value of positioning these units as strategic drivers rather than peripheral service providers.

### **4. Addressing Legacy Systems and Faculty Engagement**

Adapting legacy systems remains a universal challenge. Incremental solutions (e.g., supplementary system features, parallel workflows) often emerged as pragmatic approaches. Faculty engagement required careful balancing of incentives, workload, and governance to align

traditional academic cultures with agile, workforce-focused initiatives. Sustainability will require integrated rather than ad hoc solutions.

## **5. Broader Implications for Higher Education**

The work highlights a paradigm shift toward lifelong learning and modular education pathways, supporting upskilling and reskilling in response to dynamic labor market demands. Institutions willing to embrace nontraditional formats and employer partnerships are positioned to lead in this evolving landscape.

This project illustrates that building employer-engaged credentials is not merely a technical or curricular challenge, but an institutional transformation. For UPCEA member institutions, these insights reaffirm the need to:

- Foster deep, multifaceted partnerships with employers
- Empower continuing education units as central innovation hubs
- Build governance and operational frameworks that support flexible, responsive programming for all types of learners

These efforts collectively advance higher education's capacity to meet workforce needs while creating new pathways for adult learners.

Readers interested in exploring some of these lessons in more detail are encouraged to reach out directly to the institutional contacts listed within the following case examples. Direct conversations can provide the opportunity to learn the nuances, contours, and dynamics of how challenges and opportunities were approached.

## **Conclusion: Steps towards the Future**

Today's world requires a workforce that must be continually upskilled and reskilled, and higher education should play a role to meet these upskilling/reskilling needs. A significant challenge remains for institutions of higher education: how to appropriately engage local, regional, and statewide businesses and communities in the development and implementation of their employer-engaged credentials.

Over the two years of this project, UPCEA has found that productive university/business partnerships go beyond having business and community representatives sitting on advisory boards. Partnerships should also include program ideation, curriculum development, and instruction. Employer engagement is significantly more likely to generate the right programs for the right audiences. In addition, engaging businesses and communities in the broader ways identified above have the practical advantage to generate enrollment pipelines and funding

opportunities. Strong and multifaceted partnerships between institutions of higher education and businesses/communities are truly win-win: Businesses and communities gain ever-more skilled employees and institutions gain new learners and additional stakeholders invested in the institution's success.

This project supports a vision of higher education's evolution in which the vast majority of learners, throughout their lives, "unbundle" and "rebundle" their education and combine it with workforce training, in order to meet personal and professional goals<sup>4</sup>. Institutions embracing this evolution are finding opportunities to thrive within a higher education enterprise that is under considerable financial, demographic, and political pressure.

Higher education, as a field, has slowly changed in response to the evolving needs of the workforce and society by adapting its offerings and supports to better meet these needs. However, higher education, as a field, is not adapting quickly enough.

Institutions do not operate in a vacuum, and they cannot do their work alone. Institutions need benchmarking research, a network to share best practices and learning, and guidance to encourage them to stay on the right track. Institutions also require tools that allow them to self-organize and assess their own strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, institutions will require resources and support from state and federal government, from foundations and other philanthropic efforts, and from higher education-focused professional organizations and accrediting bodies. Helping the field of higher education adapt to the rapidly changing needs of employers for workforce training will require a strategic ecosystem of support.

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<sup>4</sup> Brower & Specht-Boardman (2022), *New Models of Higher Education: Unbundled, Rebundled, Customized, and DIY*. <https://www.igi-global.com/book/new-models-higher-education-unbundled/286666>



## Appendix - Institutional Case Examples

### Kansas State University

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Kansas State University Salina (K-State Salina) successfully developed and launched the Walmart Consortium Project Industry Partnership for the technical writing noncredit microcredential by completing a series of strategic activities. The partnership with industry stakeholders was formalized with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. A targeted outreach plan was implemented to engage current employees, professionals in related industries, and transitioning military personnel. A comprehensive needs assessment guided the development of the curriculum which was created in collaboration with subject matter experts and finalized with input from instructors and industry partners. Qualified instructors, including K-State Salina communications faculty and industry professionals, were selected and trained in the curriculum and teaching methods. The microcredential received institutional support and is still awaiting final approval.

The necessary infrastructure and resources were secured on the K-State Salina campus. Marketing efforts were launched across multiple platforms, and registration was opened with clear instructions for participants. The program officially launched in April 2025 with a successful inaugural event. After the initial offering of each course, they will undergo ongoing evaluation, using feedback and outcome data to support continuous improvement to ensure that this initiative has effectively addressed identified skills gaps and supported talent development within the aerospace and manufacturing sectors, reinforcing K-State Salina's commitment to workforce innovation and industry collaboration.

### Challenges Faced This Year

- **Utilizing Credit Faculty to Teach Non-Credit Courses** - Breaking down the traditional silos between credit and non-credit programming has long been a strategic goal for the K-State

Salina campus. Technical writing emerged as an ideal area to pilot this effort, given its relevance to our aerospace and technology-focused degree programs. With the recent hiring of a new technical writing faculty member who established a strong rapport with our industry partners, we were optimistic about building a bridge between academic instruction and workforce training.

However, challenges quickly surfaced. The faculty member struggled to adapt academic content into competency-based training formats that aligned with industry expectations. Developing non-credit coursework requires a distinct approach, emphasizing applied skills and immediate workforce relevance rather than traditional academic outcomes.

- **Collaborating with Industry Partners Who Wanted Influence Without Financial Commitment** - The initial development of the technical writing program was prompted by a request from an industry partner who was relocating their technical writing operations from California to Salina, Kansas. In response, we developed a comprehensive curriculum and training proposal that included a funding request to support program implementation.

However, despite their expressed interest and the critical need for properly trained employees, the industry partner ultimately chose not to provide financial support. While they declined to fund the initiative, they still expected to have significant input into the curriculum design and training approach. Balancing the partner's desire for influence with the lack of financial commitment created significant challenges in advancing the program.

- **Navigating Departmental Oversight Within a Multi-Campus University System** - Being part of a larger university system brings valuable resources, but also unique structural challenges. At the K-State Salina campus, we do not offer our own English degree program and therefore rely on the English Department on the Manhattan campus for certain academic oversight.

Initially, we understood that non-credit microcredentials could be developed independently to respond quickly to industry needs. However, we later learned that offering microcredentials, even for non-credit courses, required approval from faculty governance structures, including input from the Manhattan-based department.

While we were not required to seek approval to offer the non-credit courses themselves, the awarding of microcredentials triggered a need for broader institutional alignment. The English Department expressed interest in shaping, and in some cases controlling, aspects of the curriculum. Due to the specific expectations and commitments, we had with our

industry partners, we were limited in our ability to incorporate suggested changes. This created a tension between maintaining academic oversight and preserving the responsiveness and flexibility that non-credit, industry-aligned programs demand.

### Overcoming Obstacles

- **Aligning Faculty Expertise with Industry Needs** - Our initial efforts to involve a credit faculty member in developing non-credit, competency-based training revealed a mismatch in approach. While their academic expertise was valuable, the course design leaned heavily toward traditional credit-based instruction, resulting in content that was too comprehensive and misaligned with the streamlined, skills-focused needs of industry training.

To address this, on this project we included a newly hired faculty member with both academic credentials and prior experience as a technical writer for an oil company. This individual brought a unique ability to bridge academic rigor with practical, industry-relevant training. Additionally, we partnered with a subject matter expert (SME) from the aerospace technical writing field to collaborate directly with the faculty members. This partnership resulted in a well-rounded, responsive program that balanced academic quality with the specific competencies sought by our industry partners.

- **Leveraging Industry Expertise in Place of Financial Support** - Although the industry partner chose not to provide financial support for the technical writing program, they expressed a strong interest in having input on its design. While this initially created tension, we found a productive path forward by inviting their team to contribute directly to the curriculum. Specifically, we asked their employees to develop two modules within the program.

This approach allowed the partner to ensure their employees would be trained in the specific software and processes they use, while also enabling us to benefit from their expertise in a meaningful, non-monetary way. Involving them in content creation not only addressed their desire for influence but also strengthened our partnership — particularly valuable as they transition their technical writing operations to Salina, Kansas, where our campus is located.

### Navigating Ongoing Collaboration with an Academic Department

While we found creative ways to engage the industry partner in the technical writing program, challenges with internal collaboration, particularly with the English Department on the Manhattan campus, proved more difficult to fully resolve.

Despite multiple meetings, we were unable to reach a lasting agreement regarding oversight of the microcredential. In response to our efforts, the English Department developed their own microcredential proposal, which then required our campus's approval. This opened the door for more productive conversations, and an informal understanding emerged: mutual support for each other's microcredential initiatives.

However, this tentative agreement faced setbacks. The English Department initially withdrew their support, later reversing their position after intervention from a vice provost. While some progress was made, tensions over authority and oversight persist, and this challenge continues to impact the development and expansion of the technical writing program today.

The challenges experienced by K-State Salina in navigating the space between an academic department's desire to oversee industry training and the need to be agile and respond to industry needs has helped us see that we need to refine our microcredential approval policies and processes. We are going to work on this process over the summer.

## North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Contact: Shayla Doyal, STEAM Program Manager, Extended Campus  
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The Extended Campus, in collaboration with the Department of Business Information Systems and Analytics with the College of Business and Economics, developed the Excel for Storytellers project to create four micro-credential courses that strengthen skills in data visualization and financial forecasting within the banking sector. The primary objective of this initiative was to address the skills gap identified in these areas. The expected outcomes included enhanced job performance among current employees and increased employability for future job seekers.

This initiative supports the strategic goals of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, including fostering inclusive excellence, promoting workforce readiness, and expanding professional development opportunities. As a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and land-grant institution, North Carolina A&T State University is committed to meeting the educational and economic needs of its community.

### Partnership and Collaboration

North Carolina A&T State University initiated this effort by conducting outreach to the business community in Greensboro, NC, to gain a deeper understanding of regional workforce training needs. Based on the feedback gathered, the University collaborated with Symbiosis Education Consultants and Carter Bank to design the Excel for Storytellers micro-credential. The partnership was strengthened through a series of strategic planning meetings launched in Fall 2024, which included a thorough assessment of the learning needs of the target audience.

### Needs Assessment

To inform course design, a needs assessment survey was conducted with Carter Bank staff—the study aimed to identify current Excel usage patterns, skills gaps, and training priorities. The feedback provided critical insights into both the strengths and weaknesses of existing skill sets, highlighting opportunities for instructional intervention.

### Key Feedback Themes:

1. **Assumption of Prior Knowledge**  
Many questions presumed familiarity with specific Excel functions and terminology which posed challenges for beginners and entry-level users.
2. **Overemphasis on Financial Context**  
While Excel is heavily used in financial roles, many respondents use it for project tracking, HR, and operational functions, indicating the need for a more balanced instructional approach.

### 3. **Ineffective Use of Open-Ended Questions**

Open-ended survey items did not yield actionable data. Participants recommended using multiple-choice questions with examples for clarity and insight.

### 4. **Mismatch in Excel Versions**

Differences in Excel versions created confusion, as the course content needed to align with the software currently used by bank associates.

### 5. **Manager Awareness Gaps**

Some managers lacked awareness of the value and scope of advanced Excel skills, making it difficult for them to assess staff proficiency or training needs.

## **Course Delivery Format**

The resulting course series is comprised of four asynchronous, self-paced mini courses designed for working professionals. The estimated completion time is 20 hours. Upon successful completion, participants will automatically receive a certificate of completion that recognizes their skills in Excel-based data visualization and financial storytelling.

## **Post-Implementation Review**

After the initial course launch, a post-implementation review was conducted to assess both the training outcomes and the project's development process. This review included feedback from stakeholders and internal reflections by the project team.

## **Key Successes**

- Successfully mitigated early delays due to Subject Matter Expert (SME) turnover across stakeholder organizations.
- Symbiosis independently developed all instructional content, which was later validated and approved by Carter Bank SMEs.
- All four mini courses met stakeholder expectations and were approved for release.

## **Areas for Improvement**

- Strengthen communication and feedback mechanisms during the planning and design phases to ensure effective collaboration.
- Create a more structured collaboration timeline to ensure consistent SME engagement and timely input.

## **Recommendations for Future Projects**

To improve future course development efforts, the following strategies are recommended:

### 1. **Establish Clear Communication Channels Early**

- Initiate alignment meetings with all stakeholders (SMEs, project leads, instructional designers) to set expectations and timelines.
- Designate a single point of contact per organization to streamline communication and decision-making.

## **2. Implement Agile Development Practices**

- Utilize iterative content development cycles with regular reviews (e.g., bi-weekly sprint meetings) to facilitate faster revisions and a more responsive design.
- Present smaller content modules for review to reduce review fatigue and improve quality.

## **3. Document Key Decisions and Approvals**

- Maintain a shared digital workspace (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Asana, Google Workspace) to track progress, approvals, and stakeholder contributions, which is particularly beneficial during transitions or absences.

## **4. Build in Flexibility for SME Scheduling**

- Identify alternate SMEs and reserve review time in advance to mitigate risks associated with SME unavailability and ensure continuity.

## **Conclusion**

The Excel for Storytellers: Visualizing Financial Insights for Banking project delivers a high-impact, competency-based learning solution tailored to the evolving demands of the banking sector. Despite initial setbacks, the collaboration between North Carolina A&T State University, Symbiosis Education Consultants, and Carter Bank resulted in a professional development experience that effectively bridged critical gaps in Excel usage and data visualization. This project not only enhances individual skill sets but also reinforces N.C. A&T's commitment to lifelong learning and workforce development.

## Schoolcraft College

Contact: Amy Jones, Senior Director of Workforce Development  
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**Schoolcraft College's Electrified Mobility Certification Program** (formerly EV & Battery Fundamentals) short-term training was designed to meet the skills gaps for both reskilling existing technicians and technologists, as well as new entries into the workforce. The focus of the training/re-training was in the following areas:

- EV Mobility Introduction (Hybrids, EVs, Fuel Cell, EV Propulsion System Overview)
- EV High Voltage Battery (Cell Types, Applications, Battery Management System, Safety)
- EV Propulsion System and Components (Inverter, Motor, Power Distribution, DC-DC Converter, Safety)
- In-person, hands-on program to build an educational EV vehicle from Switch Lab to build, test, and program a modern EV propulsion system
- EV Thermal Management (Battery, Inverter, and Motor Thermal Management System)
- Connectivity and Software (Connectivity, Over the Air Update, Embedded Modem, Big Data, Cybersecurity)
- EV Charging (Level 1 & 2 Charging, DC Charging, Charging Management System, Safety)

During the in-person, hands-on component of the program (Switch Lab), participants will apply the knowledge gained in the other training courses to fully immerse themselves in the key battery and hybrid electric vehicle technologies. This includes wiring, assembling, testing, troubleshooting, and programming, leading to a drivable vehicle.

### **Year-end outcomes/success**

Continuing facilitation of the development of course content, with flexible design and delivery, working with industry partners (including, but not limited to Bosch and Roush Performance) and research institutions. Using the initial insights gained, consultation with industry partners, Schoolcraft College has a robust strategy to meet the skills gaps for both reskilling existing technicians/technologists, along with new entries into the workforce.

- Started development of a hybrid EV certification program in collaboration with University of Michigan Electric Vehicle Center and an advisory team from Bosch and Roush, two major mobility companies. This program provides the required skills for flexible deployment of workforce to employers participating in product development, manufacturing, and service.
- Added an additional module, Module #8 entitled "Hydrogen Fuel Cell System Introduction (Electrolyzer, Fuel Cell Stack, H<sub>2</sub> production)."



- At the time of this report, three modules have been completely developed and launched. Three additional modules are under development, while the final two modules are in the planning stages.

The first session of non-credit training will be launched in Winter 2025 and will be replicated throughout the life of the grant and beyond. Our goal is to develop a traditional credit pathway after we have had the opportunity to test market the content and gauge the demand.

### **Training Update**

- Launched training in December 2024 ahead of the Winter 2025 goal.
- Registered 50 Roush technicians, with 45 currently engaged in various training modules as of 5/16/25:
  1. SWITCH EV Lab -39 completed/47 total (83%)
  2. High Voltage Battery – 32 completed/45 total (71%)
  3. Introduction to Electrified Mobility – 26 completed/45 total (58%)
  4. Charging System – Launches in May
  5. Thermal Management – Launches in June
  6. Propulsion System & Components – Launches in July
  7. Connectivity and Software – Launches in August
  8. Hydrogen Fuel Cell Introduction – Launches in August

### **Implementation Updates**

For reference, Schoolcraft College is a community college in southeast Michigan, serving over 8500 credit students in the Fall 2024 semester. Thirty-four percent of our students are considered non-traditional (ages 25+). We have over 130 different academic majors and programs leading to a skills certificate, certificate, associate degree, or post-associate certificate, and unlimited opportunities on the non-credit side. Our mission is to provide a transformational learning experience designed to increase the capacity of individuals and groups to achieve intellectual, social, and economic goals.

### **Challenges/Outcomes**

- Schoolcraft College has historically not embraced utilization of Blackboard Ultra Learning Management System (LMS) for non-credit training. It was essential that Schoolcraft College leveraged the LMS for consistency and branding, therefore, we challenged our IT department to be able to onboard non-credit students into the eight course Electrified Mobility Certification Program. Our IT department recognizes the importance of non-credit training for the College, and therefore has begun a manual process of providing access for non-credit students, for the purposes of the Electrified Mobility program. We have met regularly over the last six months and will continue to

meet until our goals are achieved. Our IT department is developing a process to support all non-credit training at the College, which will support not only the Workforce Development area, but also our Continuing Education area as well. This project will likely take a year to complete; however, it will open many opportunities for the College and the community we serve.

- Secondary to being able to use the LMS for non-credit training, the Workforce Development division pushed the needle a bit further, by serving as the first pilot for the College in awarding online badges for successful completion of each course and the Electrified Mobility Certification Program. I am happy to share that this was a huge success!
- Roush Performance received a training grant to cover the cost of upskilling 53 technicians via the Electrified Mobility Certification Program by September 2025. To meet this deadline, we launched the training early, and have made a few adjustments along the way; however, we have an aggressive schedule to make it happen. In the end, Schoolcraft College has developed a cutting-edge, employer driven Electrified Mobility Certification Program available in a flexible delivery model.
- Sustainability is always a big concern, after a substantial investment is made. The following efforts are underway for driving future enrollment and demand for the Electrified Mobility Certification Program:
  - Pursuing additional grant funding opportunities to help support collaboration in SE Michigan. This would support the program staff and ideally help offset future equipment needs, curriculum updates and/or training costs for incumbent worker training. It is important to note that Schoolcraft College was fortunate to have several funding streams which we were able to braid to launch the Electrified Mobility Certification Program. This includes but is not limited to Detroit Drives Degrees Community College Collaborative (D3C3) and Wayne County Talent Pipeline funding.
  - Working with our local employer partners to identify training needs for their employees. For example, Roush has expressed interest in training additional technicians, and we are in conversation with 2-3 more employers.
- Marketing to companies how they can utilize a creative braiding of MNJTP funding and other local funding incentives (i.e., Going Pro Talent Fund and other programs available thru our state unemployment agencies) available for employers.
- Offering as Open Enrollment courses, through the College's Personal and Professional Learning (PPL), which is our continuing education department, to attract high school students and unemployed/underemployed individuals looking to upskill through professional development opportunities.

- We have started the process of evaluating the feasibility of integrating the curriculum into a traditional credit program. As part of this process, we will conduct an environmental scan of forecasted jobs, hiring needs, etc. We are also evaluating our current Electronics Technology and Mechatronics Technology credit curriculum program pathways to determine if content in the Electrified Mobility Certification Program could/should be integrated into current courses, developed into new courses, and/or a standalone Mobility program pathway be created.

## University of Maine System

Contact: Claire Sullivan, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Innovation in Digital Badges and Micro-credentials  
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The University of Maine System's (UMS) Micro-Credential Initiative began developing micro-credentials (M-Cs) in 2019 as a strategic priority of the Board of Trustees to expand workforce development opportunities. M-Cs are mentioned in the Maine Economic Development Strategic Plan and the Governor's Economic Recovery Plan. Initial work resulted in setting a series of goals that were met during a pilot period. We decided early on to adopt a systemwide, collaborative, and competency-based approach, aligning with the spirit of unified accreditation. All of our micro-credentials follow the same three-level framework, incorporating an applied learning experience at Level 3. This has helped to decrease the confusion about what a UMS micro-credential represents. We began with non-credit learning opportunities and are presently expanding into the credit-bearing course context. We also offer micro-badges for increased flexibility. These badges can stand alone or be embedded within a micro-credential pathway. Our micro-credentials and badges are not formal University of Maine System credentials. Instead, they verify what a learner knows and can-do using assessments, ensuring quality standards are met.

The goals of the UMS Micro-Credential Initiative align with the actions and objectives outlined in Building a Foundation for Our Future: University of Maine System Strategic Plan, 2023-2028. Our goal for the UPCEA Consortium grant was to provide every UMS student with the opportunity to access at least one micro-credential on their campus. The goal helped us strengthen our multi-campus ecosystem by developing policies and infrastructure to scale our initiative.

### **Outcomes during the Reporting Period: June 1, 2024 - May 30, 2025:**

- 1,219 badges were issued to 972 learners with maine.edu emails (UMS faculty, staff, and students). Of these, 950 badges were issued to 810 UMS students across all Universities.
- Each of the seven universities within UMS implemented at least one M-C for students in a course or co-curricular program, up from five of the universities the previous year.
- UMS students earned 41% of the total badges issued and represent 52% of the total learners who earned at least one badge during this time period.
- 70 different badges were earned. Of these, 48 different badges were earned by UMS students.

## Tasks/Activities

### **Create a tracking system for micro-credential (m-c) implementation**

We inventoried the badges and M-Cs implemented for UMS students and created a spreadsheet to track learner data received from faculty and staff. We then cross-referenced this data with the reports produced by our badging platform and reconciled any discrepancies.

### **Meet with micro-credential developers to learn about what is going well and the barriers impeding growth.**

The M-C Initiative team met with M-C developers throughout the year. We learned that marketing and campus web page development, compensation for developers' time, administration, and the overall business model were some of the challenges and barriers faced.

The M-C Initiative team took several steps to lessen the barriers. A great deal of time was spent exploring various business models, cost structures, and compensation strategies. UPCEA aided this process by providing an example spreadsheet for our use. We also enhanced our website template to support campuses in their marketing efforts.

Our model works best when there is an overall M-C administrator whose job description includes M-C tasks such as tracking learners and setting up their cost structure. We continue to work on building out our infrastructure.

### **Conduct Zoom information (Lunch and Learn) sessions on a variety of m-c topics to increase awareness.**

Four Lunch and Learn sessions were offered during the fall 2024 semester. Highlights:

- 134 registrants; total of 119 participants
  - Overall average rating 4.3 out of 5 for helpfulness.
  - Our chosen one-hour, bite-size sessions were appreciated (versus a longer half- or full-day session).
  - All sessions were recorded and linked via our website for broad access to the information and repeated viewing.
  - We kept an interest list and followed up with these potential new developers.

### **Develop new micro-credentials to fill known gaps.**

Several new micro-credentials and badges were added to our badging platform during this time period on a variety of in-demand topics. These included:

#### **Climate Change/Sustainability**

- Climate-Ready Community Engagement Micro-Credential (6/7/24)
- Planning for Habitat Protection Micro-Credential (6/7/24)

- Community Preparedness for Flooding, Sea Level Rise, and Storm Surge Micro-Credential (7/25/24)
- Sustainable Building Sciences Micro-Credential (7/25/24)

#### **Advanced Structures and Composites**

- Polymers: Processing and Properties Micro-Credential (6/10/24)
- Metrology Micro-Credential (6/11/24)

#### **Marine/Aquaculture**

- Marine Touch Tank Technician Micro-Credential (7/19/24)

#### **Business and Finance**

- Finances in a Flash micro-badge (12/2/24)
- Business Resilience in a Flash micro-badge (5/8/25)

#### **Agriculture**

- Plant Disease Diagnostics (12/6/24)

#### **Accessibility**

- Accessible Digital Content Micro-Credential (1/14/25)

#### **Health Care**

- Nursing Education Micro-Credential (1/28/25)

#### **Career Exploration**

- 4-H Foundations of Maple Sugaring Enterprise Micro-Credential (2/19/25)
- UMS Career and Self-Development micro-badge (3/17/25)
- UMS Career Technology micro-badge (3/19/25)
- UMS Professionalism micro-badge (3/19/25)

Additionally, several M-Cs are undergoing significant revisions, and many more are in various stages of development.

#### **Develop an M-C marketing plan. Develop necessary guides, toolkits, and/or training modules.**

- In our approach, we ask each development team to work with their campus website designers to add information about the micro-credential from a learner's perspective on all appropriate websites. We are also working with campuses and programs to develop a webpage for all their associated micro-credentials and badges. Templates are provided.
- During this period, we revised our badging platform and style guides. We are also developing an Instructional Design guide and revising our development training.
- An Implementation Checklist was created to aid developers in understanding the steps required to launch.

- Governance has been a priority over the past year. We are creating governance documents to move beyond our pilot registration system and to develop a policy, as we expand further into the academic context (Cluster Micro-Credentials within credit-bearing courses).
- Marketing was conducted through mass emails and website development.

## **Challenges and Solutions**

### **1. Manual issuing and tracking**

The labor-intensive manual process for issuing and learner tracking has been a challenge.

- Tracking UMS students' digital badge attainment by semester and by university proved challenging due to the breadth and variety of learning contexts used throughout the system, along with the obstacles described below.
- Currently, our badging platform does not automate badge issuing within UMS' learning management system. Since we have multiple badge issuers, it was important for us to develop a consistent timeline for tracking badges earned. We decided that all admins with issuing permissions would backdate badges to the date they were earned, rather than the date they were issued. This allows us to track badges earned within semesters.
- We have found it challenging to track earners who complete badges within co-curricular activities and non-credit learning experiences. We decided that it is helpful to know where UMS students are engaged in learning, whether on campus or off, and the context of the badging experience, whether earned in academic courses or non-credit learning experiences. Our current tracking method is not scalable and is prone to error. The Narrative section in the badge meta-data, although useful, gives incomplete information. The platform's analytics lack robust reporting functionality, such as tracking the attainment of multiple badges by a single learner within a specified date range.

We are currently evaluating badge platform solutions that integrate with the D2L Brightspace learning management system. This integration will enable us to award badges directly from a course shell's gradebook when the earning criteria are met, reducing faculty and staff administrative tasks and ensuring badges are issued in a more timely manner.

### **2. Registration system**

The UMS Micro-Credential Initiative is part of a core group of volunteers working together to implement a system-wide e-commerce registration system for non-credit learning opportunities. During this period, we continued to experience functionality issues, necessitating several workarounds that required a significant amount of administrative time and support.

Documenting governance processes and developing efficient scaling strategies is an ongoing process.

### **3. UMS students earning badges**

The UMS Micro-Credential Initiative began with embedding badges in non-credit learning opportunities. This past year, we piloted a cluster micro-credentials model, bundling 3-4 academic courses into a cluster. We are currently developing policies and processes specific to cluster M-Cs. This new addition will allow us to expand our offerings not only to UMS students but also to open up more opportunities for non-degree learners.

We will continue to work on expanding opportunities for learners to complete a micro-credential pathway. We are especially interested in tracking learners' competencies developed in applied learning experiences.

Overall, mapping skills within credit-bearing courses will enable the UMS M-C Initiative to help learners articulate the skills they are learning within those courses. We have developed a standardized language template to be added to syllabi, as well as resources for both learners and faculty/instructors.

This year, after consulting with the M-C Steering Committee and the UMS Career Services leaders across the system, we revised our Career Prepared Micro-Credential. We have added three National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies to the badge-earning criteria. The three NACE competencies mapped to the Career Prepared M-C include: Career and Self-Development, Career Technology (both earned at Level 2), and Professionalism (earned at Level 3). Career Services personnel often refer to the eight NACE Career Ready competencies when working with students. We are in the process of setting up a structure to implement the revised micro-credential this fall.

### **4. Engaging employers and communities (Business-University Partnerships)**

Employer engagement in development and implementation of micro-credentials introduces multiple challenges and barriers.

- The needs of employers and the mission of universities can be out of sync. For example, customized training for a few employees is not a scalable model since M-Cs need broader application to meet overall state and learner needs. Universities were not designed to compensate faculty for building courses outside of the traditional format and timeframe.
- Keeping up to date with technological and content changes, investment needs, and staff turnover poses numerous challenges. Some campus champions transition to other positions, which can impact employer relations.



- Navigating existing systems for learning management, registration, and payment for both non-degree and matriculated students presents multiple challenges. Challenges include integrations, reporting, tracking, training, troubleshooting, onboarding, and development of manuals and toolkits, to name a few.
- Determining the true costs for development and implementation for all stakeholders can be challenging. Developing a cost-sharing structure that is equitable across multiple missions and development goals is crucial to agree upon. UMS continues to develop a business model and infrastructure.

Over the past year, M-C staff focused efforts on engaging more employers and industries in the process of developing and implementing micro-credentials. We revised our mini-grant application and required development teams to submit proposals that clearly connected workforce and economic development, including employer demand and labor market data. Letters of support from employers or industry partners, addressing the project's need and commitment, were required. Since all UMS M-Cs require an applied learning opportunity, we wanted to ensure that learners had access to these high-impact experiences. We also included links to Maine state economic reports, setting high-priority areas on in-demand topics. Furthermore, employer engagement, in the form of payment for employees to enroll in M-C courses, was included in a draft Policy document.

We are working to develop an agreed upon set of industry and career categories to facilitate the easy identification of suitable learning opportunities for targeted learners. We also developed a taxonomy of various types of micro-credentials and badges that can be created, depending on their purpose, and provided corresponding definitions. We aim to involve employers at the onset to help determine needs and to advise on assessment strategies.

M-Cs can respond to employer needs more quickly than developing a new certificate or degree program. Our Nursing Education Cluster M-C pilot is an example. The team surveyed employers and employees about their needs and preferences and was able to launch the M-C in about nine months. This resulted in the development of a policy, currently under review, for M-Cs embedded in credit-bearing courses.

Building strong relationships through collaboration is a key component for effective university-employer partnerships. UMS aims to build trust by utilizing a standardized framework and built-in quality assurance.

### **Opportunities**

In navigating these challenges, the strengths of our approach have become increasingly apparent, and numerous opportunities have emerged. We initiated this project in 2019 with a concept. We believe our competency-based, workforce-focused, system-wide approach is the

key to our success. We took our unified accreditation to heart and began our process with consistency and collaboration in mind, reducing competition between campuses and strengthening relationships across the seven campuses. Our efforts align with our strategic plan and complement other initiatives, such as the UMS TRANSFORMS Student Success & Retention Initiative and the UMS Early College program.

Our framework includes an experiential learning opportunity that helps ensure our M-C earners can apply what they have learned and demonstrate competency in real-world situations. This approach helps to build employer trust that the M-C earners are career-ready. Working through the challenges requires flexibility, clear policy and process development, and ongoing collaboration within a continuous improvement model. We believe we are well-positioned to scale and continue making an impact on Maine's workforce

## University of North Texas

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The University of North Texas (UNT) sought to strengthen its professional learning ecosystem and microcredential portfolio through three key objectives. First, the university would hire an Assistant Director of Professional Learning to oversee the strategic and operational direction of non-credit, adult-serving microcredentials within the Division of Digital Strategy and Innovation (DSI). Second, DSI would design and launch three new microcredentials targeting adult professionals, working in partnership with academic units and faculty subject matter experts. Third, DSI would secure at least three organizational “anchor tenants” which would agree to purchase one or more of these microcredentials, either off-the-shelf or in a customized format.

### Year-End Outcomes

DSI successfully hired Rhiannon White as Assistant Director of Professional Learning, fulfilling its first major objective and significantly enhancing internal capacity to support and grow adult-serving microcredentials.

DSI also made important strides toward its second goal: designing and launching three new microcredentials for adult professionals. These offerings span high-demand workforce areas and reflect the university’s strong partnerships with faculty across diverse academic disciplines:

- **Workplace Writing Essentials**, developed by Dr. Erin Friess (Department of Technical Communication), is a 30-hour asynchronous online microcredential designed to strengthen written communication skills among adult professionals. The course is intended for subject matter experts in a wide array of fields seeking to write more clearly and persuasively in professional settings.
- **Professional Selling**, developed by Dr. Majed Yaghi (Department of Marketing), is a 16-hour asynchronous microcredential scheduled to launch in August 2025. Targeted at working adults in the Dallas–Fort Worth metroplex—one of the largest B2B markets in the country—it focuses on key strategies in business-to-business sales, including SPIN selling, relationship building, and sales pipeline development.
- **Introduction to Advanced Air Mobility**, developed by Dr. Kamesh Namuduri (Department of Electrical Engineering), will enter development in summer 2025. This microcredential explores the rapidly evolving sector of urban air mobility, including air taxis and cargo drones—by covering core technologies such as airspace management and autonomy, alongside social dimensions like community acceptance and privacy. It builds on UNT’s national leadership in AAM research and anticipates collaboration with aerospace and telecommunications firms.

While UNT did not secure organizational “anchor tenants” for these microcredentials during the reporting period, DSI Enterprise, which oversees DSI’s Professional Learning program, expanded its existing partnership with the Professional Golfers’ Association of America (PGA) to co-develop custom professional learning programs. This collaboration exemplifies UNT’s strategic pivot away from individual consumer outreach and toward deeper employer partnerships.

### Implementation Challenges

Despite strong institutional support and clear initial momentum, we encountered two primary challenges during the implementation phase:

- **Strategic ambiguity and stakeholder confusion:** Designed for flexibility, UNT’s microcredential program encompassed both credit and non-credit options and served both current students and adult professionals. However, this breadth created confusion among faculty about priorities and purpose, and diluted DSI’s internal efforts to build strength in any one area—especially as the term “microcredential” itself meant different things to different stakeholders.
- **Ineffective direct-to-consumer marketing:** Our attempts to attract adult professionals through digital outreach yielded disappointing results. Moreover, while the term “microcredential” resonated with current students, it lacked traction with employers and working adults.

### How We Responded

In response to these challenges, DSI adopted several targeted strategies to improve focus, increase internal alignment, and strengthen external engagement:

The University developed a formal program division that separated student-facing microcredentials from professional learning offerings. This clarified internal priorities, improved communication with faculty and partners, and enabled more focused decision-making across both streams.

- **Hired an Assistant Director of Professional Learning** to lead adult-serving offerings and increase DSI’s capacity to support employer engagement and develop workforce-aligned programs.
- **Pivoted away from a direct-to-consumer (UtoC) strategy** and toward a university-to-business (UtoB) approach, prioritizing employer partnerships over individual recruitment.
- **Expanded an existing partnership** with [Redacted because details are not yet public as of May 30, 2025] to co-develop custom professional learning opportunities, laying the groundwork for deeper industry collaboration and potential future microcredential offerings.



## Vanderbilt University

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Vanderbilt University's Office of Learning Innovation (OLI) partnered with Urban Housing Solutions (UHS) in Nashville, TN to develop an alternative credential program aligned with workforce needs. A brief needs assessment conducted among UHS employees identified trauma-informed care as a critical area for professional development.

This pilot initiative aimed to design and deliver a trauma-informed care curriculum in collaboration with the Vanderbilt School of Nursing (SoN), with the broader goal of establishing a scalable model for future industry partnerships. Key objectives included co-developing the curriculum, defining a sustainable faculty funding model, drafting a financial framework for alternative credentials, and creating a standardized playbook to guide future efforts. Success in this pilot would pave the way for repackaging the credential for other sectors, expanding the School of Nursing's reach and revenue potential, and laying the foundation and framework for other Vanderbilt schools to engage in future alternative credential development.

### Outcomes

The collaborative project between Urban Housing Solutions and the Vanderbilt School of Nursing resulted in several significant outcomes aligned with the project's goals of addressing critical training needs, developing sustainable models, and setting a foundation for future credential initiatives. A primary achievement was the successful design and development of a trauma-informed care curriculum tailored to UHS employees. Informed by the needs assessment survey and senior leader input, the curriculum addressed specific challenges faced by UHS staff in supporting vulnerable populations, ultimately equipping them with practical strategies and competencies to foster trauma-informed practices within their organization. UHS and the SoN agreed that short-form modules (ranging in length from 30-45 minutes) on a variety of topics was the most practical format for working professionals, ensuring accessibility and minimal disruption to daily responsibilities.

In parallel, the project team established a faculty funding model that balanced faculty time, instructional quality, and financial sustainability, creating a replicable approach for supporting future course development and delivery within the School of Nursing. Utilizing professionals in the workforce who were also graduates of Vanderbilt provided an ideal blend of practical application and theory when designing content.

Feedback on each of the modules in the curriculum will be collected after employees have successfully completed them to inform ongoing refinements to the curriculum, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness.

Financially, the project yielded a preliminary for alternative credentials, outlining revenue streams, cost structures, and scalability consideration serving as a foundational tool for evaluating the viability of similar programs with other industry partners, and synthesizes operational best practices, positioning the School of Nursing to expand its reach through new collaborations, enhance access to professional development, and diversify revenue streams. Overall, the project not only addressed an immediate training need at UHS but offers a pathway for broader impact through scalable, industry-responsive credential offerings.

## **Lessons Learned**

**Identifying Subject Matter Experts:** As the project kicked off, it became difficult to gain buy-in from full-time faculty in the School of Nursing to serve as subject matter experts (SMEs). Despite offering financial incentives, the faculty expressed their frustration with adding an extra task to their to-do list. While faculty in general were supportive of the initiative, they simply could not commit to creating additional content during the school year. After several conversations and efforts to think creatively with the School of Nursing, we landed on an alternative solution to engage Vanderbilt SoN alumni to serve as subject matter experts. Ultimately, we believe pivoting to this model worked in favor of both UHS employees and SoN as it provided an opportunity to bring in real-world experience and expertise from individuals with both a Vanderbilt degree and backgrounds in social work and the police force.

- To address future limitations with faculty commitment, Vanderbilt will begin to establish networks and connections with alumni in various fields who may be interested in creating and/or delivering content in the non-credit space. Utilizing our existing relationship with the Alumni Engagement team and the Corporate Partnerships team, we could integrate tags into our alumni database that would indicate individuals who may be willing to contribute.
- Furthermore, OLI will consider timing of projects that are unrelated to academic for-credit content development. Utilizing summer months, when faculty may have more bandwidth, could be advantageous. Additionally, OLI could offer cohort models with financial incentives to encourage participation during the summer months. This would provide faculty and/or external SMEs with a community approach to learn from each other.

**Establishing Faculty Funding Models:** As mentioned above, the central challenge in establishing a faculty funding model for the alternative credential initiative was balancing faculty workload with compensation and incentives. Unlike traditional academic programs, alternative credential courses often fall outside standard teaching assignments and may not align with existing workload policies or credit-bearing structures. This raised questions about how to fairly compensate faculty for curriculum development and delivery without overburdening them or requiring uncompensated time. In short, because this pilot initiative was launched with UHS with no revenue expectations, the Office of Learning Innovation provided upfront funding to SMEs. While this model can be lucrative for schools as they don't need to provide upfront investment, it is unlikely sustainable for the Office of Learning Innovation and will require us to think strategically about future projects.

- Vanderbilt should consider scalable, shared-cost funding models that may include a variety of financial compensation approaches. This could include revenue-share agreements, up-front development costs, course release arrangements, unrestricted funding for other faculty related research/projects, travel cost allocations etc. We should also explore tiered development models where initial seed funding is tied to clear milestones or projected ROI of courses/offerings.
- Another model that could be explored is for the Office of Learning Innovation to seek and secure external grant funding for alternative credentials specifically. At the core, these types of offerings are geared towards supporting education and training with external partners and broader workforce development. By establishing pipelines and funding through external funding sources (e.g., local government, exclusive organizations) it would take the financial burden off Vanderbilt and may encourage more participation from faculty.

**Sustaining Momentum with Collaborative Partnerships:** In a generally decentralized university, the Office of Learning Innovation operates as a centralized unit to provide support to academic units in digital and lifelong learning. With this model and initiative, OLI played a small role in the project timeline and coordination which posed several challenges when trying to sustain momentum, including turnover at every position associated with the project in the SoN causing several delays in determining the final curriculum with UHS. It is also challenging for a central team to provide support and guidance when not directly managing the external partnership. Additionally, approval from Vanderbilt's legal team delayed the project for months, leading to general lack of interest and desire from UHS and SoN to move the credential forward.

- For future partnership projects where OLI has a vested interest and stake (i.e., financial commitment or overall responsibility for project success) we will require academic units to sign partnership agreements and adhere to OLI's project management structures.



This will help streamline communications and operations to ensure accurate tracking and progress of goals and timelines and mediate and resolve critical issues.

- As a next step, OLI will work with relevant campus partners to establish standardized external partnership toolkits. These toolkits could include pre-approved partnership agreements and MOUs, project charter templates, and legal documentation (for internal and external parties). We believe this may alleviate the back and forth with internal legal teams and facilitate quick turnaround for external partners.
- The Office of Learning Innovation has also recently established a digital and lifelong learning community of practice. We can use this group to bring in team members from offices like the Office of the General Council, Corporate Partnerships, and Alumni Engagement to discuss challenges and bottlenecks, provide regular status updates on activities, and have a shared understanding around university-wide initiatives and goals.

### **Curriculum**

- Foundations of Trauma Informed Care
- Vicarious Trauma: Understanding, Preventing, and Managing Secondary Stress in Helping Professions
- L.E.A.P. Into Action: Trauma-Informed Communication for Suicide Prevention
- Meeting People Where They Are: Trauma-Informed Approaches to Motivational Interviewing
- Trauma-Informed Conflict Resolution: Building Trust and Safety in Community Care
- Recognize. Respond. Refer: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Human Trafficking
- Staying Safe, Speaking Up: Risk Reduction Strategies for Staff
- Understanding Harm Reduction Strategies: Effective Communication for Compassionate Conversations
- Supporting Survivors: Addressing Domestic Violence with a Trauma-Informed Approach
- Supporting Vulnerable Populations: Addressing Elder and Child Abuse

## Virginia Commonwealth University

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Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) built a framework for continuous employer engagement for the development of micro-credentials that meet the needs of employees and address specific skills gaps. The aim is to generate sustainable and productive growth in micro-credentials, whether for-credit or noncredit initiatives. Our desire is to align curriculum development efforts with our various and distinct academic schools and units.

In August 2024, VCU Continuing and Professional Education (CPE) began a partnership with the Department of Philosophy to develop an online, noncredit Ethics of AI course. The 3-week, asynchronous online course was developed within five (5) months and released for open enrollment, with the course beginning in March 2025. Once the course was developed, the time to market was close to eight weeks prior to the course start date. Upon successful completion of the course, participants received a university-branded Ethics of AI digital badge. For the purposes of this project, from Fall 2024 to Spring 2025, VCU CPE was seeking to identify and implement methods and strategies related to engaging business and industry and appropriate target audience(s) for this newly developed noncredit credential.

### Stated Goals

- Establish strategies and methodologies for engaging employers.
- Develop a business model for working with Business & Industry to include covering associated development and delivery costs.
- Determine a viability scale within the credential development phase.
- Craft a marketing strategy to enhance engagement.

### Tasks/Activities

- Created and distributed targeted surveys to industry associations, HR professionals, and VCU CPE's larger distribution list
- Developed a business model for partnering with academic units within the university for noncredit courses to incorporate both course development and delivery costs
- Utilizing this new course as a case study, we participated as a capstone partner for a VCU graduate program to assist us address a strategic dilemma. One deliverable included a program feasibility assessment tool that can be tailored for future new program or course development.
- Developed a marketing strategy, including leveraging academic/institutional partners to amplify marketing efforts through their channels (social media, website, etc.) and

created and refined a template for landing pages for new courses to include what specific information is required

- Added milestones and deliverables required for effective marketing to the overall course development process timeline to expand the project management process to identify and support a comprehensive market acquisition strategy

### **Implementation Challenges**

- The survey generated did not accumulate a healthy number of respondents.
- Although a general audience for the credential was identified, we lacked specific personas and outlets to reach those targeted audiences
- Deficit in the process and tools to collect and analyze data related to market trends and needs
- The revenue generated from the registration fees garnered from open enrollment did not exceed the development and delivery costs, which included compensation to the faculty developers, instructional design costs, and costs associated with course delivery.

### **Overcoming Challenges**

We identified methods to overcome the obstacles faced and make adjustments. With the ability and fortitude to fine tune methods and adapt to changes as needed, course registration reached close to 30 participants within a period of seven and a half weeks.

- We developed an interest list as a method for prospective participants to indicate interest in the course, prior to course registration launch and provide contact information for those interested. in the course. This allowed for monitoring of interest and discerning which marketing channels may have aligned with interest list submissions.
- All of the unit's standard marketing channels (social media, e-campaigns, website, and University communications) were utilized to market the course. Additional marketing methods included contacting previous businesses or organizations that had received custom training from our unit to share the learning opportunity with their staff, and leveraging existing relationships to have the course amplified through other channels, outside our unit. Outreach included attending industry and academic tabling events to promote the course as well.
- A short promotional video was created by the unit's multimedia specialist, utilizing and building upon the intro video created within the instructional design stage, which saved production time and allowed the video to be created on an accelerated timeline and launched and shared within the unit's standard marketing channels.
- As part of the partner agreement, a stipulation was added to the financial management of the course to account for the deficit in gross revenue, as the expenses incurred for

the development and delivery of the first iteration of the course exceeded the revenue garnered through course registration fees. The outstanding balance (deficit) will be carried forward so that additional revenue generated in future course sections will be applied to the expenses already incurred to calculate the revenue-share between academic and institutional partners. After the second course offering, it is expected to generate a positive sum of net revenue which is shared among academic partners involved in the development and delivery of the noncredit course.

Additionally, the Continuing and Professional Education's unit website is currently undergoing a major website redesign process which will include features to enhance navigation and elevate user engagement. Plus, with the recent addition of a digital content specialist to the marketing team, regular blog articles are being released, including one highlighting the noncredit Ethics of AI course and its focus on examining the technical foundations and ethical implications of the use of artificial intelligence in the modern workplace.

### **Conclusion**

The course generated much positive feedback from participants and challenged them to think about the benefits and challenges of AI in ways they had never considered. Participants noted that the content was applicable to their careers and that with a better understanding of AI, they now feel equipped to shape their company's AI policy and strategy. With the interest and impact shown in the first offering of the course, this same noncredit course will be offered again in the Fall 2025 term.

Further, this noncredit credential led to a new, proposed initiative from University leadership to develop a free, interactive learning experience for VCU alumni and others, centered around the topic of artificial intelligence. Due to the development and launch of the Ethics of AI noncredit credential, our unit was well positioned to respond to this request by formulating a development and delivery team that had been previously worked together on the noncredit credential. In light of our involvement and engagement, our office is now central to convening University stakeholders to produce this new, free initiative, as well as- future free, learning experiences.

UPCEA is the online and professional education association. Our members continuously reinvent higher education, positively impacting millions of lives. We proudly lead and support them through cutting edge research, professional development, networking and mentorship, conferences and seminars, and stakeholder advocacy. Our collaborative, entrepreneurial community brings together decision makers and influencers in education, industry, research, and policy interested in improving educational access and outcomes. Learn more at [upcea.edu](https://upcea.edu).

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