

To Stack or Not to Stack?: Examining the Relationship Between Microcredentials and the Master’s Degree

Wojtek J. Chodzko-Zajko, Dean, Graduate College, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
 Julie Masterson, Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate College, Missouri State University

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Goals/Purposes for Graduate Certificates and Micro-credentials at University of Illinois

Goal	Opportunities	Status at Illinois
To provide access to an Illinois education to a previously inaccessible cohort of learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online programs provide access to individuals who are employed full time • Online content can be stand alone (certificates, continuing education credits, MOOCS) or stackable into full degrees • At Illinois our online learners are older and more diverse than on campus students • Admit students with non-traditional academic backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 Campus Graduate Certificates (transcripted) • 70 college graduate certificates (non-transcripted) • “Stackable credentials” provide new “on-ramps” • 51 undergraduate certificates • 7 continuing education course-completion certificates
To refine the mission of the 21 st century land-grant university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land-grant universities have a responsibility to engage and inspire the broader population • Virtual programs amplify the impact of traditional Extension offices • Non-degree programs provide a mechanism to expand on our public engagement imperative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 272 non-credit courses and certificates • Gies College of Business
To empower persons to learn what, where, when, and how they want, at a price they can afford.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When implemented at scale, online programs can be provided at an affordable price point • Learners can accumulate credentials in a way that works best for them and not for us 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12.3K online degree students 5.3K new Alumni 1.6K underrepresented students 155 countries 50 states 3.3M MOOC learners

Goals/Purposes for Graduate Certificates and Micro-credentials at Missouri State University

Goal	Descriptions	Examples
<p>To recruit a unique pool of graduate students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals may want to upskill via a short-term program or try a shorter program before committing to pursuing a degree. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict/Dispute Resolution Screenwriting for Television and Film College Teaching
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborating with an external partner who provides funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elementary Math Specialist (funded by Missouri Dept. of Education) Healthcare Administration (funded by local hospitals) Advanced Literacy Training/Individualized GRCT (in partnership with local education PD provider)
<p>To provide access to graduate education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals may need additional coursework in order to be eligible for admission to a degree program Minimum admission requirements (e.g., undergrad degree) allow access for students whose GPA or other academic metrics do not meet admission criteria for degrees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparation for Graduate Study in Speech-Language Pathology Biomolecular Sciences Professional Studies and Individualized Studies... majority of students using this path are transfer athletes.
<p>To individualize or brand areas of specialization or focus within a degree</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GRCTs allow students to focus on particular areas of interest while under the umbrella of a degree At least at MSU, you must have a degree that is designed/approved to allow stackable credentials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finance, International Business within the MBA; Research Design and Statistic within the Experimental Psychology master's degree; Musculoskeletal- Spine-MRP within DPT MS in Individualized Studies- students choose two GRCTs from any that we offer and also include a course in research and a capstone project. Key is that they must be admitted to the GRCTs, so the involved director/faculty "own" them for those courses and the credential. The advisor for the MSIS works with the directors of the two chosen GRCT programs. The Master of Professional Studies- requires a core set of courses and then students choose any GRCT we offer based on their interests/career goals. The Master of Public Administration requires a core set of courses and then students choose one of four GRCTs offered by the program based on their career goals.



UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Transforming Higher Education

Taskforce Report - June 2023

Taskforce Membership

Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko, Graduate College, Chair

Kelly Birky, Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning

Daniel Bodony, Grainger College of Engineering

Nicholas Burbules, College of Education

Brooke Elliott, Gies College of Business

Sangeetha Gopalakrishnan, College of Education

Jamie Hackett, Office of the Provost

John Hart, Office of Professional Education

Meghan Hazen, Office of the Registrar

Laura Hendley, Office of the Provost

Sammer Jones, Illinois International

Drew MacGregor, Technology Services

Randy McCarthy, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Allen Renear, Office of the Provost

Katie Watson, Public Affairs

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Supplemental Material (available in a separate document)

Appendix A: Taskforce Charge

Appendix B: Taskforce Process

Appendix C: Taskforce Whitepapers

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The Opportunity

Higher Education is being challenged to transform itself in order to respond to changing societal needs resulting from the fast-paced, digital transformation of industries, societal systems, and our daily lives. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) we are reflecting on how our institution will have to change if we are to meet these challenges while continuing to lead as a preeminent public research university with a land grant mission and a global presence.

As the flagship state university, we have the responsibility to be a catalyst for the human-centric, technology-enhanced transformation of sectors such as transportation, agriculture, medicine, clean energy, and manufacturing, among others, and to provide the vision, leadership, and innovation that such workforce transformation demands. We take great pride in our longstanding contributions to developing and deploying breakthrough discoveries and innovations that have contributed to the transformation of society.

However, we have begun to realize that our institution, along with other leading research universities, will need to bring this same commitment to innovation in our teaching, curricula, and instructional programs. In short, the world is changing, our students are changing, the job market is changing, and our monopoly in the higher education space is eroding. In their thought-provoking work, *The Great Upheaval, Higher Education's Past, Present, and Uncertain Future*, Arthur Levine and Scott Van Pelt invite us to consider several new realities facing research universities of the future

- » New educational content producers and distributors will enter the marketplace, challenging the longstanding monopoly of universities and colleges, driving up competition and consumer choice, while driving down prices.
- » The power of higher education consumers will increase, giving them more options with respect to what, when, where, and how they learn.

- » Students will demand that we embrace technology that provides them with access to personalized learning experiences in a way that works best for them and not for us.
- » The knowledge economy will increase emphasis on learning outcomes and deemphasize traditional educational metrics such as time-bound degrees and on-campus programs.
- » The need for continuous reskilling and upskilling of the workforce will increase the demand for educational programs that are closely aligned with the labor market and provide certificates, microcredentials, and badges that have value beyond traditional college degrees.

At the University of Illinois, we realize that, in light of these new realities, we have an imperative to transform ourselves into a more nimble and responsive institution. We are committed to playing a leadership role in the development and deployment of new approaches to education and to renew our commitment to changing lives through learning, discovery, engagement, and economic development. The benefits of expanding our efforts in this arena will be substantial.

Addressing these new areas of need and opportunity will require a willingness to change. At the University of Illinois, much work is already underway: for example, a successful partnership with Coursera has brought an Illinois education to many thousands of individuals who are unable to relocate to Urbana Champaign. However, much more needs to be done. In Spring 2023, our university asked us to assess progress to date and consider what needs to occur in order to realize these ambitious goals. In this report we identify a number of opportunities and propose action steps that need to be implemented across nine areas of university operation if we are to be successful in seizing those opportunities.

In each of these critically important areas we outline the steps that our institution can and should take in order to ensure that we continue to lead as a preeminent public research university for the next 150 years.

Leadership

Leadership

There is an unprecedented opportunity for the University of Illinois to lead the nation in the reinvention of the land-grant university of the future, transforming and improving teaching and learning for our traditional students, while also expanding access to an Illinois education to a new and largely untapped cohort of learners. In order to achieve this goal, the university must establish a central office with overall responsibility for leading all aspects of this institutional transformation.

Action Steps:

- » Establish a cohesive and unified administrative structure to advance innovation and transformative education at Illinois (Urgent)
- » Appoint a Vice Provost to lead a campus-wide unit charged with advancing innovation and transformative education at Illinois (Urgent)
- » Provide senior leadership with impactful and inspirational talking points to share with external audiences about the centrality of online and non-traditional education to our land grant mission (Immediate)
- » Address burdensome HR policies, inefficient processes, lack of investment in number and training of staff in critical support areas that impede the pursuit of emerging opportunities (2-3 years)
- » Coordinate interactions between UIUC and various regulatory groups that have oversight and jurisdiction over on-campus, online and non-traditional programming (2-3 years)

Innovation in Teaching and Learning

Advances in technology provide us with an unprecedented opportunity to improve teaching and learning for the benefit of all of our students. Unlike many other universities who separate online programs into stand-alone administrative units, we have chosen to integrate our online courses and programs into the core missions of our academic colleges and departments.

Action Steps:

- » Ensure that innovation in teaching and learning continues to play a central role in all on-campus and online instruction (Immediate)
- » Demonstrate to internal and external audiences the ways that an Illinois education is innovative, collaborative, and accessible (Immediate)
- » Employ design-centric thinking in order to optimize student experience and support student success (2-3 years)
- » Develop guidelines for recognizing and rewarding faculty and staff for the creation of new and non-traditional programs (2-3 years)
- » Create communities of instructional practice and reform which provide support and training for faculty on technological advancements to support innovation (2-3 years)

Innovation
in Teaching & Learning

Online Programs

Online Programs

Online programs provide us with an opportunity to extend an Illinois education to a new cohort of learners while continuing to lead as a preeminent public research university with a land grant mission and a global presence. Regardless of whether our online programs provide access to full degrees or other non-traditional credentials, our online programs will be developed by Illinois departments and taught by Illinois faculty.

Action Steps

- » Ensure that online programs are designed, developed and taught by Illinois faculty and maintain the same standard of excellence associated with our on-campus programs (Immediate)
- » Provide appropriate support services for online student success, including access to mental health and other wellbeing resources (Immediate)
- » Ensure that online courses and programs meet all relevant ADA, FERPA, Copyright and Identity Verification standards (2-3 years)
- » Collect, analyze, and share career outcome data for online and non-traditional programs (2-3 years)
- » Become the most accessible online higher education platform in the world (Long-term)

Certificates and Credentials

Online badges, certificates, and other credentials provide an ideal opportunity for individuals to acquire new knowledge in a manner that does not require either geographic relocation or a long-term time commitment. These credentials can be especially attractive to individuals whose family or work obligations limit their access to education, empowering them to learn what, where, when, and how they want, at a price they can afford.

Action Steps

- » Increase access to education through the development and deployment of a comprehensive portfolio of stackable MOOCs, courses and certificates (Immediate)
- » Redesign nondegree registration policies and procedures (Immediate)
- » Offer certificates and other credentials for individuals who have yet to earn an undergraduate degree (2-3 Years)
- » Create a competitive tuition and fee assessment model to accommodate students pursuing multiple credentials across multiple colleges (2-3 Years)
- » Establish partnerships with external vendors to certify credentials in order to increase the value of certificate programs in the marketplace (2-3 Years)

Certificates & Credentials

Marketing & Communications

Marketing and Communications

Illinois has made significant progress in the development and deployment of online and non-traditional educational programs over the past quarter century. However, too few people outside of the university know of our efforts and there is an urgent need to improve all aspects of our marketing and communications in the online space. We also lack the staffing and resources to provide units with the essential market research they need to evaluate new program viability.

Action Steps:

- » Develop a campuswide campaign to communicate the value and potential of online and non-traditional education to key stakeholders, including students and other learners, faculty and staff, alumni, and policy makers (Urgent)
- » Address concerns among the faculty and staff that expanding non-traditional education at Illinois will weaken the reputation of the university as a premier research university (Immediate)
- » Increase investments in the marketing of Illinois online and professional programs (Immediate)
- » Update and improve our Illinois Online website (Immediate)
- » Provide access to up-to-date market research data to units that are considering expanding their offerings in non-traditional education (Immediate)

Policies and Procedures

Our university policies and procedures were developed decades ago to support on-campus degree-seeking students following a traditional academic calendar and requiring access to primarily on-campus support services. These policies are poorly suited to meet the needs of many online and non-traditional learners. There is an urgent need to adapt existing processes to better serve these new learners, to maintain our competitiveness in this important new market, and to realize our Land Grant mission.

Action Steps

- » Adapt the Illinois administrative systems and processes to better serve both non-traditional and on-campus learners (Urgent)
- » Provide clearer guidance to departments and colleges with respect to all aspects of online policy and procedure (Immediate)
- » Develop shared governance guidelines and best practices to help speed the approval of new and innovative programs (2-3 years)
- » Establish a coherent strategy for the assessment of tuition and fees for online and non-traditional programs (2-3 years)
- » Review faculty merit and promotion and tenure guidelines to ensure that they reward educational innovation and instructional reform (2-3 years)

Policies & Procedures

Technology

Technology

Advances in information technology and data science have expanded opportunities for individuals to participate in online education. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened the eyes of educators and learners alike to the possibilities afforded by technological advancement. The university must provide access to state-of-the-art technology and maintain technology standards that ensure safety and regulatory compliance.

Action Steps

- » Centrally fund a learning management system for non-credit bearing programs (Implemented)
- » Develop online technology standards and guidelines to help contain costs and ensure compliance with FERPA, privacy, accessibility, and procurement regulations (Immediate)
- » Develop and deploy a common student information system to track online and non-traditional students (2-3 years)
- » Update current enrollment and degree verification systems to allow on-demand verification of enrollment, tuition charges and program completion for all credit and noncredit bearing courses (2-3 years)
- » Expand and adapt current data management, structure and warehouse systems to collect and track learner profiles, progress and outcomes for non-traditional learners (4 -5 years)

Partnerships

We cannot achieve the needed transformation working alone. For us to achieve our goals, we must be prepared to lead in the development of new and transformative partnerships, working alongside our counterparts across the state and beyond. Working together we have an opportunity to build synergistic collaborations between traditional and non-traditional providers of education to provide individuals with unprecedented access to learning.

Action Steps

- » Share our online and non-traditional programs and strategy with domestic and international strategic partners (Immediate)
- » Expand online partnerships with high schools and community colleges (2-3 years)
- » Increase corporate partner relationships that enable upskilling and training of the next generation workforce (2-3 years)
- » Work with the Discovery Partners Institute (DPI) to develop an Annual Educational Summit of Illinois industry leaders to assess workforce needs (2-3 years)
- » Establish and maintain partnerships with other universities by utilizing the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) of institutions across the state (Long-term)

Partnerships

Investments

Investments

The university has a responsibility to catalyze the discoveries and innovations that will make the educational transformation we describe possible. For this to happen, we must be prepared to commit the resources needed to expand our human capital and ensure the deployment of a state-of-the-art infrastructure. This will require the establishment of a multiyear investment strategy involving the university, the UI System, the State, and our corporate and philanthropic partners.

Action Steps

- » Allocate resources to both academic colleges and central administrative units to create and implement transformative education at Illinois (Urgent)
- » Continue to invest in programs such as Investment for Growth (IFG) to provide seed funding for the development of non-traditional programs and associated infrastructure and resources (Immediate)
- » Review campus budget practices to ensure that they appropriately reward and incentivize online and nontraditional program development. (Immediate)
- » Increase the capacity of centralized services in support of non-traditional program development and launch (Immediate)
- » Increase investments in the marketing of Illinois online and professional programs (Immediate)

The Path Forward

Addressing these new areas of need and opportunity will require innovation and reform, for us and for the postsecondary education sector generally. We believe that universities like ours can lead in the transformation of higher education. We have the capacity and expertise to work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders to embrace change. At the University of Illinois, we are optimistic about the path forward...

Illinois can...

- » Lead the world in the development and application of innovative teaching and learning approaches to education
- » Harness our extraordinary research and innovation resources and expertise to lead and inspire with new approaches to teaching and learning
- » Provide unprecedented access to affordable education across the life course
- » Build synergistic collaborations between traditional and non-traditional providers of education
- » Engage with employers, industry leaders and entrepreneurs to prepare the workforce of the future and to reskill and upskill existing employees