IU Framework for Microcredentials, Digital Badges, and other Alternative Credentials

Reason for framework

Microcredentials, digital badges, and other alternative credentials are emerging as market-valued options for education and training, and technology solutions are beginning to easily facilitate the awarding and verification of digital credentials. This framework establishes foundational principles for the development and administration of these credentials, allowing Indiana University to leverage its student success and community service values in dynamic, adaptive, and easy-to-market ways, underpinned by robust definitions and best practices.

This framework aims to integrate such alternative credentials into the university's educational offerings, ensuring they serve as a complement and enhancement to traditional academic programs and non-credit educational offerings, not as competition to this existing work. The framework ensures academic integrity and quality in these alternative and emerging credentials. It also proposes solutions that ensure faculty governance and oversight of the academic curriculum while ensuring agility in the development and deployment of these new credentials.

A robust microcredential, digital badge, and alternative credential framework, as outlined here, also helps continue to position Indiana University as a leading provider of education and training across the lifespan.

Summary of framework

This framework governs the development, approval, and management of microcredentials, digital badges, and other non-traditional, mostly digital alternative credentials offered by campuses, schools, departments, and other units at Indiana University.

Each campus will have and publish procedures and criteria for the development, review, and administration of these credentials on their campus, which should balance the need for faculty oversight/responsibility for curriculum with the need for agile credential development able to meet quickly emerging market needs. Campuses are encouraged to work collaboratively in development of such procedures to create consistency across the university and leverage scale in efficient management of these emerging credentials.

These credentials are meant to be smaller, more agile, and more flexible than traditional credentials (e.g., degrees, certificates), usually awarded in a secure, verifiable digital format that can be used by

learners to demonstrate certain valuable skills and competencies.[1] These credentials are generally meant to be recorded and awarded when the requirements for them are completed rather than at the conclusion of an academic program, so that the learner can collect evidence of learning as they progress.[2] Such incremental credentialing can serve as a valuable retention tool.

The learning associated with such credentials could come from a combination of for-credit and non-credit work, offered to non-degree-seeking learners to reskill/upskill as well as to undergraduate or graduate certificate- or degree-seeking students to recognize incrementally learning as they proceed through traditional programs.

They provide a way for the university to recognize learning not captured by traditional credit-hour accounting on a transcript as well as to more granularly recognize specific skills and competencies developed within credit-bearing experiences. Such alternative credentials are meant to complement traditional academic offerings.

At Indiana University, procedures governing such alternative credentials differ depending on whether the credential to be issued is for assessed or non-assessed learning activities.

Assessed Learning

Assessed learning may be recognized with a microcredential or a verified skill:

Microcredential

A microcredential is a focused collection of demonstrated and valuable knowledge, skills, or competencies assessed or verified by Indiana University. The source of these learning achievements or outcomes can be for-credit, non-credit, or some combination thereof. The following parameters should govern microcredentials:

- **Size:** Both for-credit and non-credit assessed learning may be the basis for microcredentials, and as such it is not appropriate to place a credit-hour limit on the size of a microcredential. That said, there is a need for differentiation from traditional credentials, especially in articulating these alternative credentials as smaller and more focused. While the following articulates credit-hour-based guidelines, this is not to suggest that only credit-bearing courses are the basis for these credentials. Campuses should develop clear guidelines for what non-credit-based credit-hour equivalents may be to conform with these limits.
  - Upper limit: Generally less than a standalone certificate (often 12-18 credit hours). These limits vary, including by level (graduate or undergraduate). This limit indicates that microcredentials are meant to be less comprehensive than full certificate programs.

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[1] Traditional certificates may be considered as "microcredentials" in some domains including graduate and professional education for marketing and to convey their potential as steppingstones to higher degrees. This document does not supersede the established university approval process for either standalone or area certificates at IU campuses. The guidelines herein offer recommendations for approval processes to campuses for nontraditional credentials and do not apply to degrees, certificates, majors, minors, specializations, or concentrations, for which university approval processes are well established.

[2] Incremental credentialing frameworks, such as those promoted by the Credential-As-You-Go organization (see https://credentialasyougo.org/playbooks/incremental-credentialing-framework/overview/), may be useful as campuses develop alternative credentials.

- o Lower limit: At least two assessed components, of which one should be a three-credit-hour course or equivalent. A microcredential should not be awarded for the completion of a single course. This ensures that each microcredential represents a substantive learning experience rather than being too minimal or superficial.
- **Content and level of learning.** Microcredentials should clearly indicate the content and level of learning one achieves though their completion. This clarity helps in understanding the depth and complexity of the skills and knowledge encompassed by the microcredential. For example, words such as "beginner," "intermediate," or "mastery" may want to be used to indicate level of assessed learning.
- **Externally validated value:** Microcredentials should clearly align with labor market demands and/or societal needs. This value should be transparent and recognizable to learners, employers, and other external stakeholders, supported by evidence such as accreditation standards and/or labor market data.
- **Recording and recognition:** Microcredentials must be recorded in the student record (SIS), and the process for recording such credentials must be consistent across campuses. Microcredentials may be (though are not required to be) included on the academic transcript. Whether microcredentials – and which microcredentials – are transcribed will be the decision of each campus.
- **Digital badging of microcredentials:** Though microcredentials at IU could be recognized in various ways, many will want to use digital badges as a tangible, sharable means of recognition. Digital badges issued for microcredentials must be issued through IU's approved credential system (currently Canvas Credentials). They must adhere to certain guidelines in their design. In the visual design, badges issued for microcredentials will follow a prescribed design template, with a specific shape used for microcredentials. This template will include an Indiana University marketing lockup, an icon and title representing the content and level of learning achieved, information about the IU unit issuing the credential, and the word "microcredential." Metadata for the digital badge issued for a microcredential must include the specific earning criteria, including what a learner was required to do to earn it, with specificity as to the level of achievement and specific assessment mechanism(s) used; and the specific knowledge, skills, abilities, or competencies that are embedded in the microcredential. Nowhere in the digital badge design or metadata should the word "badge" be used.

Verified Skill

A verified skill is a single skill, focused set of knowledge, or competency that is a building block of a microcredential. A verified skill can be formally recognized as part of any assessed learning activity (i.e., either for-credit or non-credit).

Campuses will decide if they would like to individually recognize these building blocks and develop clear policies and procedures for doing so. Campuses are not required to recognize individual verified skills as building blocks, and they may issue microcredentials without also having to issue recognitions for verified skills.

This type of incremental credentialing can serve as a valuable retention/completion tool. But special care should be taken to avoid over-recognizing individual skills or competencies, such as by recognizing only those that as standalone credentials present clear market value; are awarded for greater than

minimal achievement, such as mastery; and/or present clear value in a larger incremental credentialing framework. The following parameters should govern verified skills in:

- **Size:** Verified skills may be developed as building blocks of microcredentials, and as such they should be smaller than a microcredential.
- **Content and level of learning.** As with microcredentials, recognition of a verified skill should clearly indicate the content and level of learning one achieves though its completion, and words such as "beginner," "intermediate," or "mastery" may want to be used.
- **Externally validated and stand-alone value**. Verified skills are designed to offer clear, standalone value, aligning with labor market demands and/or societal needs. This value should be made transparent and recognizable to learners, employers, and other external stakeholders, supported by evidence such as accreditation standards and labor market data. For example, a verified skill may be a single competency in a larger multipart accreditation framework, where each section of the framework would constitute a microcredential.
- **Recording and recognition:** Individual verified skills would not be recognized on the transcript themselves, though a credit-based source of a verified skill (i.e., a course) would be included on the transcript. Generally individual skills would not be recorded in the student record (SIS).
- **Digital badging of verified skills:** Generally individual skills will be recognized through digital badges. Digital badges issued for verified skills must be issued through IU's approved credential system (currently Canvas Credentials). They must adhere to certain guidelines in their design. In the visual design, badges issued for verified skills will follow a prescribed design template, with a specific shape used for verified skills. This template will include an Indiana University marketing lockup, an icon and title representing the content and level of learning achieved, information about the IU unit issuing the credential, and the phrase "verified skill." Metadata for the digital badge issued for a verified skill must include the specific earning criteria, including what a learner was required to do earn it, with specificity as to the level of achievement and specific assessment mechanism(s) used. Nowhere in the digital badge design or metadata should the word "badge" be used.

Non-Assessed Learning

For learning activities that are not assessed, there exists a desire to recognize minimal achievement, such as participation, simple completion of a task, or membership within a group. The university has long allowed the recognition of non-assessed learning activities (e.g., employee professional training, workshop attendance, membership in a group, etc.) through mechanisms such as certificates of completion. As such, this framework allows for the continued recognition of such activities through digital credentialing technologies. The following parameters should govern digital credentials issued for non-assessed learning activities:

- **Recording and recognition:** Non-assessed learning will not be recorded in student records nor will they be recognized via the academic transcript. Non-assessed learning activities will primarily be recognized digitally through the use of digital badges. Therefore, the recording and recognition will primarily be done via the university's digital credential system (currently Canvas Credentials). Units may also elect to record data on non-assessed learning through other means, such as registration or member databases, and they may also recognize non-assessed learning activities through other non-digital means, such as completion certificates, so long as the design

of such recognitions generally follows parameters governing design of digital badge design for non-assessed learning, described below.

- **Digital badging of non-assessed learning:** Non-assessed learning activities can be recognized via a digital badge. They must be issued through IU's approved credential system (currently Canvas Credentials). They must adhere to certain guidelines in their design, especially to distinguish them from the badges used to recognize official university digital badges for assessed learning activity (i.e., verified skills and microcredentials). For example, digital badges issued for non-assessed learning may not use badge shapes and colors reserved for use with official university digital badges used for assessed learning. In the visual design, badges should distance themselves from visual elements usually used in IU branding. For example, they MAY NOT use an Indiana University marketing lockup or IU trident and should avoid the use of the term "Indiana University" except to indicate the IU unit issuing the badge or as a descriptor (e.g., "Member, [student club] at [campus]"). Metadata for the digital badge issued for non-assessed learning activities must include the specific earning criteria, including what a learner was required to do earn it, with clear language that states that the badge was issued for non-assessed work. Badges should never use a term in visual or metadata design that would suggest it is a recognition of assessed work.

Procedures

Each campus will have and publish policies defining the procedures and criteria for the development, review, and administration of assessed credentials on their campus, which should balance the need for faculty oversight/responsibility for curriculum with the need for agile credential development able to meet quickly emerging market needs. Campuses are encouraged to work collaboratively in development of such policies and procedures to create consistency across the university and leverage scale in efficient management of these emerging credentials. Additionally, to ensure continued relevancy and market value of these credentials, campuses should incorporate into their approval processes expectations for periodic review of no more than every five years.

Once campus approval has been given for a microcredential, it will be entered into APPEAR to be sent to the ALC as an information item. Required documentation will include the Academic Program Request Change Form, which will include information about the microcredential and how it will be recognized.

If digital badges are to be awarded for assessed learning (i.e., verified skills or microcredentials), issuing units will work with the administrators of the Canvas Credentials systems on the development of an issuer account and digital badges to be awarded. The documentation used in campus approval processes and submitted to APPEAR for microcredentials will include information that will be necessary for Canvas Credential Administrators, such as badge metadata and visual design.

Recognition of non-assessed learning will require no academic approval, as recognition of non-assessed learning activity, participation, membership, etc., is a common practice already used across the university at various levels. If an issuing unit would like to award digital badges for non-assessed learning, they will work directly with Canvas Credential administrators to set up the mechanisms to do so.

Definitions

Assessed Learning Activity: A learning activity for which there is an associated assessment of learning and a clear indication that a learner has met or exceeded certain specific expectations, outcomes, or competencies. Assessments should be based on specific demonstrated learning and not for simple participation in or completion of an experience. Assessed learning activities can be within either credit or non-credit contexts.

Non-assessed Learning Activity: A learning activity for which there is no associated assessment, including but not limited to basic participation in an activity or membership in a group. Non-assessed learning activities can be within either credit or non-credit contexts, though they are usually be associated with non-credit and extracurricular/co-curricular contexts.

Microcredential: A focused collection of demonstrated and valuable knowledge, skills, or competencies assessed or verified by Indiana University. The source of these learning achievements or outcomes can be for-credit, non-credit, or some combination thereof. Microcredentials can be recognized through a digital badge or other means.

Verified Skill: A single skill, focused set of knowledge, or competency that is a building block of a microcredential. A verified skill can be formally recognized as part of any assessed learning activity (i.e., either for-credit or non-credit).

Digital Badge: Digital representation of a learning activity or experience offered by Indiana University. Digital badges can be used to recognize demonstrated and verified learning (i.e., assessed learning activities), but they can also be used to recognize completion of learning experiences (i.e., non-assessed learning activities). A badge's design should speak to its content and specific earning criteria.