

Chapter 2

Laying the Foundation for a Micro–Credential Strategy: Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU or University) convened a Digital Credentials Lab (DCL) team to research, design, and pilot micro-credentials. The goal was to determine if there was a demand for this type of “alternative” learning experience in the market to see if it could be sustainable within the current higher education framework at the University. Through rigorous research, including both internal and external interviews, multiple pilots, and testing, the DCL sought to answer these questions and determine if micro-credentials could add more diversity to the SNHU catalog. In this chapter, the authors offer insight and experience, including findings from various pilots and learner feedback, to help inform other institutions that may be considering offering micro-credentials.

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INTRODUCTION

With the growing movement towards microlearning, micro-credentials have become a popular topic across higher education institutions (HEI). Learners are increasingly stretched for time and faced with a rapidly evolving workforce, as well as the demand for new skills. Micro-credentials and other non-credit options are being offered by more HEIs as affordable and faster ways to gain skills that might be valued by employers (Fong et al., 2016). Hiring managers are becoming more accepting of micro-credentials and digital badges that validate skills and competencies mastered. In a 2019 study of 600 hiring managers, 90% reported they would hire candidates who could validate their knowledge using alternative certification(s) including a digital badge or completed coursework instead of a degree (Wiley Education Services, 2019). Higher education must advance to keep up with these changes and continue supporting learners with ever-increasing demands on their time as well as their need for education.

In 2019, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU or University) convened a Digital Credentials Lab (DCL) team. This team was tasked with developing a strategy for offering micro-credentials. Throughout this chapter, members of that team will share parts of the journey, and what was learned along the way, to help other institutions that may be considering launching a micro-credentials program. The goal is to provide readers with insights into the lessons learned, as well as the challenges encountered throughout the process. The chapter authors may be the storytellers, but the actual work involved teams across the university, acknowledged at the end of this chapter. Most of the information from this chapter is culled from two documents written by the DCL team: *Micro-credentials: Meeting Learners Where They Are* (Innovation Center, 2019), and *Initial Findings of the Digital Credentials Lab* (Innovation Center, 2020).

BACKGROUND

Southern New Hampshire University (2018) made a commitment in their 2018-2023 strategic plan to “deliver a broad portfolio of high-demand credentials leading to meaningful work and purposeful lives” (p. 28). University leadership believed that the exploration of micro-credentials and digital badges was an important step toward that commitment. Following earlier proof of concept work, a small team comprised of an external hire and internal experts from across the university were put together to form the DCL team. The team represented skills in academic programs and curriculum, accreditation, learning engineering, educational technology, workforce development, student support, market research, and user experience design. The internal team members were identified by senior leaders, transitioned out of their previous positions, and began working on the DCL team in March 2019. This transition was different for each person, as some employees were able to immediately leave their previous positions without any overlap in work, while others experienced a longer transition time and challenges in balancing the needs of their previous positions with their new position on the DCL team. Team members were provided a letter that assured they would have a position at SNHU if they voluntarily wanted to leave the DCL team at any time, or if the DCL team no longer existed once their work was complete.

The DCL was intentionally placed within SNHU’s Innovation Center so that members could work independently from core operations and systems, allowing them to focus on clarifying, testing, and validating micro-credentials. Led by the executive leader of the Innovation Center and sponsored by the Chief Operating Officer, the organizational structure of DCL was flat, with team members working cross-functionally based on the needs of the work. Taking a project lifecycle approach (Innovation

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