

Strategy Document

Graduate education,
certificates, and
micocredentials

Prepared by

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Executive Summary





This document was prepared by members of the CU Denver Faculty Assembly and the University Curriculum Committee in service to the university and its mission to provide high-quality programming in support of student success, cultivate institutional growth, build a university for life, and strengthen shared governance. The recommendations below present strategies and principles that can help CU Denver reach these goals while optimizing resource use and mitigating risks. We thank interim Provost Jansma and her team for their time and consideration.





Risks and constraints




-  **University resources**
Budget deficit; employee workload, retention, productivity; expertise gaps (retirements), etc.

-  **Elevated political risk**
Federal-level changes; CO higher ed funding; AHEC.

-  **Elevated economic risk**
Rapid technological innovation, price/rate volatility, recession, demographic cliff, etc.

-  **Existing policies, including Regent Law**

-  **Low-trust, low-morale institutional environment**

Strategic principles



The strategic principles below can help us align our goals and values with constraints and risks.

Sequencing and Synergies

Stage/sequence research tasks, policy development, and engagement processes to unlock efficiencies and make steady progress.

Identify synergies across tasks, partnerships, and goals, ensuring that resource expenditures do “double” or “triple” duty.

Adapt the plan transparently with partner input, to maximize responsiveness to new risks and opportunities.

Strategic Resource Management

Inventory and build upon existing programmatic strengths, including successful community and workforce partnerships

Leverage existing infrastructure for efficiency and political legitimacy

Utilize targeted workload interventions and sequenced roll-outs to maximize ROI and program quality

Engagement and Shared Governance

Notify shared governance partners early and often about new plans, risks, and opportunities. Solicit and use their input and feedback, and do research to answer questions.

Utilize existing shared governance networks and leverage prior recommendations to run efficient engagement processes.

Build engagement processes into the plan/schedule, with partners specified in advance, providing advance notice of upcoming opportunities

Ethical and Data-Informed Decisions

Align decisions and program rollouts with existing policy, strategic plan, ATWG recommendations, workforce and market data, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and budget/finances.

Conduct research and speak with partners to to ensure adequate knowledge of campus conditions, strengths, and constraints.

Draw on the institutional knowledge and experience of expert faculty and staff, workforce partners, and accreditors.

Three issues, two stages, one plan



ISSUES

No. 1 Role of Graduate Council in academic programming

No. 2 Certificate approvals and CAP 1001s

No. 3 Microcredentials



STAGES

A Reviews and Approvals of Graduate Programming

B Microcredentials



Stage A: Reviews and Approvals of Graduate Programming

Challenge 1: Legitimacy, compliance, lack of engagement

The role of Graduate Council has been in dispute since spring 2022 when the former Provost dissolved the Graduate School without notice and in apparent disregard for APS 1015, which prescribes a process for discontinuation of academic units that was not followed in this instance. The Office of Graduate Education, and its Graduate Council, were then created without notice or consultation, and their roles may change after CGS visits. The faculty have grave concerns about the role of these bodies in matters related to academic curriculum, credentials, and programming, a role contrary to Article V of the Regent's Laws.

Challenge 2: Grad Council bylaws

The Graduate Council has no bylaws, which, in theory, would describe and legitimize its roles and powers with reference to system- and campus-level policies, despite FA's frequent requests and recommendations that bylaws be set out and vetted through the standard review process. Because neither the Provost's Office nor the Office of Graduate Education are academic units, and because the Graduate Council is not a faculty governance body, the Graduate Council's current role in academic programming is contrary to Regent Law.

Challenge 3: CAP 100Is is outdated and unhelpful

CAP 100Is, which governs the development and approval of new degree programs, does not specify a similar process for certificates or other microcredentials. Faculty Assembly has repeatedly requested a revision to CAP 100Is to better support certificate development, as well as new policy developed in collaboration with faculty to cover other kinds of microcredentials that do not currently exist on campus.

Challenge 4: Continued exercise of unclear powers

On Thursday Feb. 6, despite having no bylaws and with no existing campus policy that authorizes its role, Graduate Council voted to approve a graduate certificate and microcredential (a "mini-certificate", a credential that does not exist in policy and which entirely circumvented shared governance processes), citing guidance and a workflow diagram from the Provost's Office based on CAP 100Is.



Stage A: Proposed Solutions

General idea

The solutions articulated below would stabilize the approval process for graduate courses and certificates at a time of transition and change for the university by drawing on the existing infrastructure within and political legitimacy of the University Curriculum Committee. It would also legitimize and concretize the role of the Provost's Office in the approval process for new credentials. It would further ensure compliance, strengthen shared governance, and build trust across campus constituencies.

Temporarily suspend the powers of the Office of Graduate Education and Graduate Council over academic programming

Given that their current role in academic programming exceeds the powers afforded to these entities by Regent Law, we strongly recommend a temporary suspension of the Office of Graduate Education's and Graduate Council's work on activities related to development, approval, evaluation, and dissolution of courses, microcredentials, certificates, and degree programs until a mutually agreed and compliant solution to ongoing issues in graduate education is reached and except as personally requested on an *ad hoc* basis by the Provost.

Leverage existing infrastructure to create efficiencies, build trust and morale, follow Regent Law

Campus level graduate course and credential review should happen just like campus level undergraduate review—via UCC, an established, experienced, and reputable faculty-led curriculum review body in existence since 2017—until such time as another arrangement is made and found acceptable by campus and s/c administration and faculty governance bodies. UCC, which would be properly funded and staffed to take on these new duties, would perform duplication reviews for graduate courses and graduate certificates, with microcredentials also possibly falling under their purview after proper policies are developed and vetted. A vetted Provost memo alongside engagement with the Registrar to ensure CIM compatibility could likely establish this mechanism soon, with UCC bylaws revised subsequently.

Adapt policy to support opportunities, leverage shared governance expertise to minimize risk and cost

CAP 1001s should be revised by UCC, EPPC, and the Provost's Office to reflect the role of the UCC as the duplication reviewer body, and to clarify the role of the Provost as a necessary approver of both new degrees and new certificates. A codicil could be added to hold a place for similar guidance regarding other kinds of microcredentials, like badges or micro-certificates (see below). The policy would then be vetted via the campus shared governance review process.



Stage B: Microcredentials

Challenge 1: Innovation, novelty, risk, and uncertainty

Existing research on microcredentials contains a variety of findings that indicate the need for a well-developed and detailed strategy that holistically incorporates a variety of goals, considerations, and concerns, including: relatively low current student demand alongside a massive supply increase; broad uncertainty among academic leaders and educators about the quality of microcredentials and the negative impacts poor quality offerings may have on students and the reputation of the university; the tendency for certain kinds of badges to undermine the success of certain student populations; the tendency for badge offerings to fail to meet revenue expectations owing to internal competitive dynamics and faculty workload constraints; and, the relative ignorance of such credentials and what they signify among employers. CU Denver does not currently have a holistic, integrated microcredentials strategy.

Challenge 2: University resource pressures and constraints

The university's budget crisis has led to increased interest in and pressure on faculty and academic units to develop new microcredentials, but has also, paradoxically, made strategic resource management all the more important. For faculty, whose ranks are thinning and growing more insecure, increased work in one arena now translates directly into decreased work in another, meaning that microcredentials rollouts that do not consider resource constraints may jeopardize the university's core mission. A similar zero-sum game seems to also pervade university resource decisions more generally and will likely remain so in the near future.

Challenge 3: Shared governance and campus engagement

FA, EPPC and school/college faculty governance bodies, which have been faithfully and collaboratively engaging in conversations with administrative partners on microcredentials since August 2024, have asked a lot of questions and raised major concerns about the rollout of microcredentials proposed by the TIPS office. Thus far, most of questions—including about CU Denver's strategic and business strategy for microcredentials, market and workforce demand, quality control, competition with existing programs, duplication, and resource constraints—remain unanswered or have not been answered in the detail required to make good decisions of this magnitude and importance.



Stage B: Proposed Solutions

General idea

The ideas proposed below can help to minimize the financial and political risks and costs associated with a rollout of new microcredentials while maximizing their positive impact on students and the financial and reputational benefits for the university. These solutions also facilitate trust, shared governance, and may help boost employee morale. Generally, we understand our campus to be in a moment in which every dollar spent must achieve multiple campus goals at the same time. We think that setting our sights on short-term revenue generation to the exclusion of quality, workforce relevance, shared governance, trust, and employee morale is shortsighted and likely detrimental to the general welfare and future financial position of the university. Our recommendations are also consistent with Chancellor Christensen's vision of CU Denver becoming more adaptive in response to changing workforce demands.

Engagement with faculty governance

Administrative units should continue to engage with faculty governance about non-certificate microcredentials. The scholarly literature, as well as advice from accreditors and universities that are 'getting it right', indicates that the concerns raised by faculty, especially EPPC, are both warranted and critically important to consider in order for our joint efforts to be successful (see Appendix B for EPPC Qs, Appendix C for a partial literature review). We are demoralized to have found that all of our efforts to support microcredentials were ignored and that our administrative partners circumvented collaboration and shared governance. But we'd like to keep trying.

Integrate Budget Office

The Budget Office should be brought into conversations about microcredentials in order to ensure that our path forward is consistent with the university's broader strategy for budget and resource management. Duplication, competition for marketing dollars, poor quality programming, and cannibalization of existing programs are among many microcredential issues that may have significant, negative revenue implications.

Don't reinvent the wheel

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), CU Denver's major accreditor, has since 2023 been developing frameworks and guides for building strategy around microcredentials, an evidence-based framework that focuses on workforce development and partnerships with local/national employers and other community organizations. We recommend adapting their scaffold (partially reproduced in Appendix A), which involves a step-wise approach that encourages us to focus on and build from our existing strengths, an approach that is well suited to the mini-max criteria set out above (i.e., minimize risks and costs/maximize student impact and university returns).



Stage B: Proposed solutions, continued

Learn from and build on existing strengths and partnerships

Focus attention on and emulate and build from successful and innovative workforce development programs we already have on campus, including SEHD's ASPIRE to teach program, CEDC's first-ever apprenticeship program at CU Denver, the Business School's supply chain leadership training program, and the forthcoming affordable housing certificate to be offered jointly between CAP and SPA in partnership with community organizations and city and state offices.

Lean on past recommendations to capture engagement efficiencies

Be mindful of insights from the ATWGs, developed collaboratively by faculty and administration over the course of the past 18 months and designed to help guide decisions around major initiatives like microcredentials. For example, the ATWG on workload parity recommends that all people and offices on campus who create work be attentive to workload management concerns.

Engage faculty governance to create supportive policy

In parallel to these critical strategizing and information-gathering activities, develop a microcredential policy with EPPC, engage the faculty, and vet it properly through the review process.

Develop targeted incentive programs that help roll microcredentials out strategically

The Provost's Office can work with the faculty to determine how to roll out microcredentials strategically. As noted above, we think an initial, limited focus on workforce-relevant microcredentials grounded in community and industry partnerships are a good place to start. Incentives could be tailored accordingly. E.g. The Provost's Office could, for example, pilot an incentive program to encourage innovation, while also managing duplication risks and addressing faculty workload. The new credentials incentivized could be those identified via HLC's recommended strategic inventory and research process.

Look for double- and triple-duty opportunities

Programming opportunities and incentive structures can be developed to meet multiple goals at once. Targeted incentives that focus on development of workforce-based microcredentials can be designed to reduce competition for resources and duplication, boost morale and compensation for faculty, and support IRC professional development. As another example, we could seek out partnerships with entities that are interested in investing in facilities on the Auraria campus, as a way to ensure that future AHEC development helps meet CU Denver's goals. And so on.

Microcredential Partnerships with Purpose

Analysis and Planning Tool for Employer and Community-Based
Partnerships for an Institution's Microcredential Strategy

About this Resource

Collaboration is essential when designing learning programs – particularly when developing a strategy for offering microcredentials to prepare learners with on-ramps to additional educational opportunities and off-ramps to employment.

Collaborative, symbiotic partnerships with employers, industry organizations, regional workforce boards, community-based organizations, other educational institutions or providers, and others are critical to ensure that microcredentials not only support learners in career and educational advancement but are also aligned with the current or future needs of employers.

Purpose:

This analysis and planning tool provides college and university representatives with a framework to identify and design employer or community-based partnerships for strategic microcredential initiatives.

Designers:

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Melanie Booth, *HLC's Credential Lab*

Help Improve this resource:

This tool will be continually updated and improved by HLC's Credential Lab. Feedback and case studies may be shared with HLC at: lab@hlcommission.org.

Using The Tool

Before launching a new employer or community-based microcredential partnership, these activities may be helpful to ensure a strategically purposeful design for the highest impact for learners, partners, and institutions.

The phases of analysis may not occur chronologically, but instead may overlap. However, we recommend beginning with Phase 1 before moving to other phases.

Phase 1: Partnership Inventory

Start with what the institution has; start with who and what the institution knows.

Conduct an internal inventory of employer or industry-based partnerships within and across the institution. Talk to the president, chancellor, provost, workforce development, career services, advancement and development, continuing education, online education, academic division or department leaders, etc.

Key questions to ask include:

- *What organizations already work with us?*
- *What is the nature of each of these partnerships?*
- *What organizations might we be able to or wish to partner with, and for what purpose?*
- *What organizations might we want to avoid, or avoid at this time?*

Once the inventory is complete, identify categories that may help the analysis. For example:

- *What organizations could be grouped by disciplinary or industry areas?*
- *What organizations could be grouped by location?*
- *What might the possibilities be for partnerships? (e.g., offering microcredentials to upskill their employees, offering existing learners opportunities for work-based learning, establishing a partnership to support their organization's need for future talent, etc.)*

Continue to engage across the institution in constructing, reviewing, and modifying the inventory to help identify where existing partnerships might be enhanced for the purposes of developing microcredential initiatives.

Phase 2: Leverage Insights and Data

Ensure the partnership design is data informed.

Using data-rich and data-informed resources, such as local or regional labor market needs analyses, helps ensure that there will be value to learners who complete microcredentials as well as to prospective employer or community-based partners. Ideally, the institution's microcredential partnership strategy aligns with workforce needs.

Questions to explore regarding employer insights and labor market data include:

- *What is the labor market need now and in the future?*
- *What does our local, regional, or state workforce needs data convey?*
- *Where are the present, future, and anticipated areas of need?*
- *What are the specific skills, competencies, and experiences employers are or will be seeking?*

- Consider convening employer and institution meetings to ensure a shared understanding and alignment of microcredential skills, competencies, and experiences.
- Consider how these insights can help you design a microcredential program that can extend beyond one specific employer's needs but could be adapted to other employers.

Phase 3: Analyze Alignment with Existing Institutional Strengths

As possibilities begin to emerge from the institution's partnership inventory and the collection of insights and data, assess the alignment with existing institutional offerings, talent, subject matter expertise, and institutional mission and strengths.

Questions to consider include:

- What programs, courses, or faculty might we be able to tap to lend expertise?
- Who from the institution needs to be at the partnership design table (e.g., academic programs, enrollment management, instructional design, career services, records/registrar, technology, billing, student services, etc.)?

If the institutional alignment is unclear, consider:

- If there is not alignment, what would it take to move toward alignment? (e.g., engaging external subject matter expertise?)
- Might there be a better alignment elsewhere that we could recommend? (e.g., another institution instead of ours?)

Phase 4: Determine Desired Impact and “Future State”

Determining the desired impact of microcredential partnerships and what the “future state” might look like for everyone involved allows for dialogue among internal and external collaborators, including potential employer or community-based partners, and will help define the goals and outcomes for the programs.

Questions to consider include:

- What kind of impact is the institution seeking through establishing a microcredential partnership?
- What are the goals and outcomes of a partnership?
 - » Are they explicit or implicit?
 - » Are they shared by all parties of the partnership?
- What is the future state our institution is desiring from a partnership?
- What is the future state our potential partners might desire?
 - » Do all partners share an understanding of the future state?

The desired impact of the partnership needs to be collaboratively defined and could include:

- Attracting new learner populations.
- Serving labor market and employer needs for skills and talent
- Serving community needs (e.g., healthcare workers)
- Advancing strategic institutional goals
- Developing new models to build external institutional reputation in the community

Phase 5: Plot to Determine Potential

Based on the analysis your institution has completed, place potential partnerships in the grid below based on their characteristics



Phase 6: Consider What Partnerships may be Able to Move to Another Zone

While certain partnerships may initially fall into the consideration or avoidance zones, they do not need to stay there.

Determining and specifying the requirements, conditions, and timeline for movement either up or down the zones will be helpful when continuing the development and adjustments to your microcredential partnership strategy.

Questions to consider include:

- What would be needed for the institution to move a partnership from avoidance to consideration?
- What would be needed for the institution to move a partnership from consideration to target zone?
- What circumstances – internal or external – could trigger a target Zone partnership to move to Consideration or Avoidance?

See HLC 2025

Appendix B:
Questions from EPPC for TIPS

1. The potential impact of microcredentials on student enrollment and degree programs.
2. Evidence that microcredentials generate new revenue and/or attract new students.
3. Student and employer perspectives/expectations of microcredentials.
4. The value of a badge vs. a degree.
5. The motivation behind offering microcredentials.
6. The resources to support microcredentials (development, administration, delivery).
7. The differentiation of content and experiences for microcredential seeking students vs. degree seeking students as related to expectations of faculty.
8. Cost, quality, and support for microcredential students.
9. Assessment practices/expectations for microcredentials.
10. The enrollment (admission) process for microcredential seeking students vs. degree seeking students.
11. Tracking and verifying badges.
12. Benchmarks evidenced in practice or research that CU Denver aspires to.

Appendix C: Partial Literature Review on Microcredentials

Journal Articles & Conference Papers:

Funa, A. (n.d.). Digital badges as rewards in science education: Motivational effects and student engagement. Semantic Scholar.

Reid, A., & Paster, M. (n.d.). Digital badges in undergraduate composition: Effects on student motivation and learning outcomes. Semantic Scholar.

Stefaniak, J., & Carey, K. (n.d.). Instilling purpose and value in the implementation of digital badges in higher education. Semantic Scholar.

Educational Technology Journal (2023). The role of microcredentials in education and workforce development. SpringerOpen.

News & Media Sources:

Inside Higher Ed. (2024, March 5). Microcredentials are knocking: Will higher education answer? [Podcast].

Lederman, D. (2024, January 9). Microcredentials not a strategic priority for many institutions. Inside Higher Ed.

McKenzie, L. (2024, February 6). Assessing the quality of microcredentials is difficult. Inside Higher Ed.

Organizational & Policy Reports:

Higher Learning Commission. (2024). First step toward identifying quality microcredential organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.hlcommission.org/learning-center/news/leaflet/first-step-toward-identifying-quality-microcredential-organizations/>

Higher Learning Commission. (2024). Credential Lab 2. Retrieved from <https://www.hlcommission.org/learning-center/credential-lab-2/>

Higher Learning Commission. (2025). Microcredential Partnership Planning Tool. Retrieved from https://download.hlcommission.org/MicrocredentialPartnershipPlanningTool_2025_INF.pdf

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