

Micro-Credentials Guidebook

Version 1.0

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This document provides departments, colleges, and units with a foundational overview of micro-credentials and digital badging at Michigan State University. It includes definitions, enterprise-level resources, quality standards and best practices about how to launch and manage micro credentials and digitals badges at MSU.

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1. What Are Micro-Credentials?

A micro-credential is a short, focused learning program that verifies mastery of a specific skill or competency. Completed in days or weeks, they offer a fast, cost-effective complement to multi-year degrees. Upon completion, learners receive verifiable digital badges they may showcase on professional profiles like LinkedIn, their résumé/CV, or a professional portfolio. It's evidence of a discrete achievement that results from fulfilling a specific set of measurable requirements. Unlike a degree or traditional certificate, a micro-credential is designed to be focused on a single competency, skill, or area of knowledge rather than a broad program of study.

Micro-credential (MSU formal definition)

A verifiable record of achievement, whether instructional, experiential, or professional, that has been assessed and validated against a defined benchmark. Micro-credentials can stand alone or stack into more complex credential pathways.

Examples of Achievement

MSU can recognize a wide range of achievements, such as:

- Instructional achievements: completion of a course, workshop, or structured learning experience
- Competency validation: demonstrated mastery of a defined skill or knowledge area through assessment
- Professional development participation in faculty/staff training, orientation, or leadership programs
- Experiential achievements: internships, research projects, community service, or diversity activities

Stackability

Micro-credentials are designed to be stackable. Individual credentials can be combined into more complex pathways. A stack of combined micro-credentials is known as a **collection**; a defined sequence within a stack is called a **pathway**.

Key principle

A micro-credential *must* involve some **activity** on the part of an individual that has been both **assessed** and **validated** as having equaled or surpassed an established **benchmark**. Participation alone does not qualify.

2. What Are Digital Badges?

Digital badges package information about a single recognition or achievement, such as an earned micro-credential, skill, competency, or degree. MSU's micro-credentials are issued using a mature and internationally accepted interoperability standard. Our badges display a visual token and have a rich, defined metadata structure. This makes MSU's micro-credentials displayable as information-rich visual tokens of verifiable achievements, earned by recipients, that can be shared electronically.

What is metadata? Metadata embedded in the badge describes who earned it, who issued it, and the criteria required. Badges can even contain evidence and demonstrations of the relevant skills, such as a link to an artifact in an online portfolio or institutional repository.

Digital badge

An electronic credential presented as a clickable icon image, embedded with verified metadata about the achievement it represents. Each badge carries a unique Credential ID and URL for verification, ensuring that only the official digital badges issued by MSU can be verified in this way.

What a Digital Badge Encompasses

Badges are meant to be shared on LinkedIn, email signatures, and résumés. When a person (and their tech) reads the badge, they can see the full verified metadata recorded, including what the recipient did to earn it.

Metadata field	Description
Badge name	A short, specific title describing the achievement
Issuing unit	The MSU college, department, or unit that authorized and issued the badge
Description	A summary of what the badge represents in 2–3 sentences

Earning criteria	What the recipient did to earn the badge: activities, assessments, duration, learning objectives, and competency benchmarks
Skills/knowledge	The specific skills or knowledge the recipient demonstrated
Issue date	When the badge was awarded
Expiration	Whether the badge expires and, if so, when
Verification	Unique Credential ID and encrypted URL that allow anyone to verify the badge is authentic and current in real time

What Digital Badges Are NOT

- Badges are not programs. The correct framing is “a program of study in X that results in earning a digital badge”, not “a badge program in X”.
- Badges are not participation certificates. Learning-related badges should not be awarded for attendance alone. There must be a validated competency or assessed outcome.
- Badges are not interchangeable with certificates. A digital badge is a verified electronic micro-credential with metadata. Most certificates are documents intended for print, in an analog world of yesteryear. Both can be issued for the same achievement but serve different purposes.

3. Why Micro-Credentials May be of learners' interest?

Micro-credentials are gaining significant traction in higher education and the labor market. The data and frameworks below reflect a broad shift in how employers, learners, and institutions think about micro-credentials.

Three Purposes: Why Institutions Issue Badges?

Digital badges serve three distinct institutional purposes. Departments should identify which purpose or purposes their proposed credential primarily serves, as this shapes the design, earning criteria, and audience.

Purpose	Description
1. Highlight knowledge and skills gained	Micro-credentials can encourage participation and showcase specific skills or knowledge developed in existing courses and programs, providing a granular view of competencies that support academic or professional pursuits. This allows recognition at a more detailed level than traditional course grades or degrees.
2. Articulate learning from co-curricular experiences	Badges capture and validate learning through co-curricular activities such as structured programming for internships, research, community engagement, diversity programming which encourages reflection on the connections between formal and informal learning and helping learners articulate their skills to potential employers.
3. Complement formal degrees and professional development	Micro-credentials offered by disciplinary experts help learners access a more comprehensive range of competencies, aligning their portfolios with future skills for industry and scholarship. This can improve learners' career readiness and post-baccalaureate preparation.

Benefits for Learners

- Flexible pathways: shorter, more accessible routes to recognized achievement without committing to a full degree.

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- Verified proof of competency: shareable, clickable credentials that employers can verify instantly, with a unique Credential ID and URL.
 - Career momentum: 89% of students report increased motivation when coursework leads to industry-recognized credentials (Coursera, 2026).
 - Mastery recognition: competency-based credentials that demonstrate mastery rather than just completion (NEA).
 - Stackability: individual credentials build toward larger goals, making progress visible and achievable.

Benefits for Departments and Colleges

- New enrollment revenue reaches learners who would not pursue a full degree program.
- Employer alignment: co-designed credentials strengthen relationships with industry partners
- Program relevance: credentials can be updated more quickly than degree programs to reflect market changes.
- Granular competency signaling badges provide a more detailed view of what learners know and can do than course grades alone.

Benefits for MSU as an Institution

- Revenue diversification: new income streams through fee-based non-credit programming.
- Workforce development leadership positions MSU as a credentialing leader in the Big Ten.
- Degree pipeline: credit articulation pathways feed micro-credential learners into full degree programs.
- Visibility: Every badge shared on LinkedIn is an organic marketing touchpoint for MSU.

4. MSU Credential Taxonomy

MSU organizes its micro-credentials along two dimensions: the type of achievement being recognized, and the rigor or complexity of that achievement. Understanding where a proposed credential fits in this taxonomy is the first step in the badge design process.

Credential Spectrum: Four Levels of Rigor

Credentials exist on a spectrum from unstructured participation to fully validated achievement. MSU digital badges should aim for the Validation or Certificate levels in most cases, as these reflect the competency-based, mastery-oriented standards that give badges value with employers. (Source: [Credly, 2026](#))

Level	Description
Experience	Unstructured, not formally assessed. Recognize participation in an activity, event, or experience. Appropriate for co-curricular recognition. Practical application and real-world demonstration. Project-based learning initiatives, structured programming.
Learning	Structured educational programs. Not assessed for mastery. Recognizes completion of a course or workshop without requiring a demonstrated competency outcome. Includes formative assessments, such as quizzes and knowledge checks. Comprehensive mastery is not formally assessed.
Validation	Measured and validated learning outcomes. Recognizes demonstrated mastery of a specific competency, validated through summative assessment, an exam, project, or portfolio. Target level for most MSU professional badges.
Certification	Structured, assessed, and sequenced. Recognizes completion of a defined pathway of validated achievements, industry-recognized, often resulting in a formal professional certificate.

Recognition	Formal acknowledgement of service, achievements, or contributions. Examples include volunteer activities, speaking engagements, mentorship roles, service milestones.
Membership	Active participation in professional organizations or associations; requires fulfillment of membership criteria which may require payment and formal application processes.

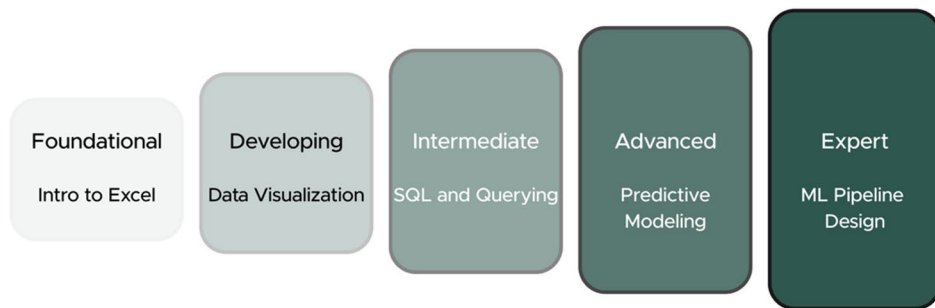
Audience Domains

MSU badges can be issued across three broad audience domains:

Audience	Description and examples
Students	Undergraduate and graduate students earn badges for academic, co-curricular, or experiential achievements. Examples: internship completion, research project, diversity activity, career readiness program.
Faculty & Staff	MSU employees earn badges for professional development, workshops, training, or institutional service. Examples: continuing professional development workshops, compliance training.
Lifelong Learners	Alumni, working professionals, and community members earn badges through non-credit continuing education programs. Examples: professional certificates, workforce upskilling, pathway programs (non-credit or for-credit), online courses.

Badge Levels: Foundational to Advanced

Within any credential domain, individual badges can be assigned to one of five relative achievement levels: **Foundational, Developing, Intermediate, Advanced, or Expert**. The appropriate level depends on how the badge fits within the sequence of credentials in that industry or professional domain, not on a universal university-wide scale. The example below demonstrates five badge achievement levels progressing from left to right.



Increasing rigor and complexity within the domain

Important note on levels

Level labels are relative to the domain and pathway and are not comparable across disciplines. Each issuing unit determines appropriate levels for its own credentials in consultation with Academic Development Innovation.

5. Platform & Technology

MSU's micro-credential program operates across five interconnected systems. Understanding how these systems work together is important for departments planning to issue badges.

The MSU Technology Stack

System	Role in the micro-credential workflow
Credly	MSU's digital badge platform. Handles badge issuance, metadata storage, recipient notification, and sharing. Issues badges on the Open Badges 3.0 standard, making them portable and verifiable across platforms including LinkedIn.
D2L Brightspace	MSU's learning management system. Used for course delivery and badge trigger on course completion.
cart.next.msu.edu	MSU's registration and payment system for catalog of non-credit programs. The \$5 Credly badge fee is bundled into program pricing.
MSU Next	Learner-facing website for non-credit program discovery (coming fall 2026).
TDX (Team Dynamix)	MSU's help desk and ticketing system. All non-credit support requests flow through TDX.

How Badges Are Issued: End-to-End Flow

1 Learner completes the program

The learner finishes all required activities, assessments, and earning criteria. Completion is recorded in D2L Brightspace.

2 Completion triggers notification

D2L sends a completion signal to department staff. Issuance requires D2L integration to be configured for the course. Will need staff to support badge issuance.

3 Badge issued via Credly

The issuing department authorizes badge issuance in Credly.

4 Recipient notified

The recipient receives an email from Credly with a link to claim their badge. They can share it on LinkedIn, by email, or embed it in a résumé or email signature.

5 Badge shared and verified

When an employer clicks the badge icon, they are taken to a Credly page showing the full metadata, the issuing institution, and a unique Credential ID confirming the badge authenticity.

Open Badges 3.0 Standard

All MSU digital badges are Credly issued on the Open Badges 3.0 standard, maintained by the 1EdTech Consortium. This standard ensures that badges are portable across platforms, contain all relevant metadata, are cryptographically signed to prevent counterfeiting, and verifiable by anyone in real time.

Fee Structure

All administrative fees are behind-the-scenes and not visible to participants. Program non-credit registration pricing must account for the full fee stack. This structure does not apply to for-credit, tuition-based courses.

Fee component	Amount
MSU Revenue Account fee	3% of gross revenue

Credit card processing	~3% of gross revenue
D2L non-credit course fee	\$2 per user
NCR System Admin fee	10% per registration, capped at \$50 (or \$500+ course fee)
NCR System Licensing	1.2% of gross revenue
Credly Digital Badge fee	\$5 per badge (all courses, including free courses)

6. Quality Standards & Best Practices

A digital badge is only as valuable as the achievement it represents. MSU is committed to issuing badges that are meaningful, verifiable, and respected by employers.

Three Pillars of Quality

Pillar 1: Common language

Define types and levels of knowledge and skills, so the relationship between credentials is explicit and understood. Every badge title should communicate a specific, externally meaningful achievement. Good example: “Persuasive Communication in Professional Settings.” Avoid: “Communication.”

Pillar 2: Industry alignment

Credentials developed alongside employer or industry partners carry the most weight. 82% of employers place greater value on credentials co-designed with industry (Coursera, 2026). Wherever possible, engage employer partners in the design of earning criteria.

Pillar 3: Modular milestones

Design badges as steppingstones along a larger pathway. Make the path to a higher credential visible and achievable. Research shows that awareness of stackable pathways increases learner persistence and completion rates.

Badge Design Best Practices

- Be specific with badge titles: avoid broad terms like “Leadership.” Use “Voluntary Team Leadership in Project Settings” or similar.
- Require validated achievement: badges should not be awarded for attendance alone. There must be an assessed competency outcome: exam, project, portfolio, interview, or demonstration.
- Write clear earning criteria: describe exactly what the recipient did to earn the badge, including duration, activities, assessment methods, and performance benchmarks.

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- Make skills and knowledge explicit list of the specific skills or knowledge the recipient demonstrated. This is what employers use to evaluate the badge.
 - Consider expiration carefully: some credentials should expire and require renewal; others should remain permanently valid.
 - Plan for stackability: before finalizing a badge, consider whether it could logically stack into a higher credential and document the pathway if one exists.

7. Governance Structure

MSU's micro-credential governance follows a decentralized coordination model: ADI establishes and enforces central standards, while individual colleges, departments, and units retain authority over the design and criteria of their own credentials.

Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Description
Administrator (ADI)	Oversees the registration system and Credly platform, badge standards. Provides onboarding and training. Reports to the Vice Provost.
Issuer	Any MSU college, school, department, or administrative unit that sponsors badge awards for its programs. Responsible for designing credentials and verifying recipients have met earning criteria.
College Micro-Credential Committee	A group appointed by the Dean or Director of each Issuer unit to provide oversight of that unit's badge programs. Can be a responsibility added to the charter of other standing committees.
Issuing Staff	Designated staff from each Issuer unit who have access to Credly to issue badges.

Central Guardrails

- MSU brand standards: wordmark usage, badge graphic configuration, co-branding rules
- Badge taxonomy: types, levels, and domain categories
- Credly platform: all badges must be issued through MSU's Credly account
- Metadata requirements: all badges must include the required fields listed in Section 2 (above)
- Fee structure: the \$5 Credly badge fee and registration fees apply to all programs
- Other than the issuing record in Credly, the University will NOT keep central record of micro-credentials earned by participants

College / Unit Decisions

- The specific credentials the unit wants to offer
- The competencies, skills, and earning criteria for each badge
- Whether credentials are standalone or stackable
- The internal approval process for micro-credential proposals
- Which professional standards or external frameworks apply to their domain

8. Getting Started: A Guide for Departments

If your department or unit is interested in developing a micro-credential program, the following steps will guide you through the process. ADI is available to support you at every stage.

1 Identify the opportunity

Start by identifying a specific achievement your unit wants to recognize. Ask: What competency, skill, or experience are we validating? Who is the intended audience? Does this credential have value for external employers or institutions? What level of rigor is appropriate?

2 Contact ADI

Reach out to the Academic Development and Innovation to begin the onboarding conversation. The Interim Director of Continuing Education will walk you through the badge standards and help you determine how your proposed credential fits within the MSU taxonomy.

3 Identify Issuing Personnel

Designate department employees to serve as your unit's Issuing staff and points of contact with ADI. These people will use Credly to issue micro-credentials to participants that have earned them.

4 Configure the program in the system

ADI's Credly Administrator will configure the badge in Credly. Your unit will set up the course in D2L and prepare descriptions and administer registration and enrollment in sections using the non-credit registration system to be featured on cart.next.msu.edu.

5 Train your team

ADI will provide training for your Issuing personnel, including how to submit issuance requests and use Credly analytics.

6 Launch and issue badges

Begin enrolling your first cohort, deliver the program, and issue the inaugural badges. Track badge claim rates, sharing rates, and recipient feedback through Credly's analytics dashboard.

7 Review and maintain

Badges should be reviewed annually. Ask: Are earning criteria still current? Has employer feedback suggested changes?

What ADI Provides

- Guidance on badge design, earning criteria, and taxonomy placement
- Credly account configuration and badge setup
- Coordination with fiscal officer, non-credit registration system access, and our online catalog of learning experiences that markets to the public.
- Issuing staff training and onboarding materials

9. Frequently Asked Questions

Can we issue a badge for a free program?

Yes. The Credly badge fee (\$5 per badge) applies to both free and paid courses. For free programs, your department must budget the badge fee based on anticipated audience size.

How is a digital badge different from a certificate of completion?

A certificate is a document. A digital badge is a verified electronic credential with embedded metadata and a unique Credential ID and URL. When someone “clicks on” a digital badge, they see the full verified record of what was earned, how it was earned, and confirmation of its authenticity — none of which a certificate can provide.

Can a non-credit badge stack into a credit-bearing program?

Potentially, yes. This requires explicit agreement from the academic unit responsible for the credit-bearing program. Non-credit micro-credentials must demonstrate equivalency in participant effort, contact time, quality of assessment, and learning outcomes.

Who designs the badge graphics?

ADI will provide a Canva template to brand and design resources to create badge graphics for all university units following MSU brand guidelines. You will not need to provide your own design.

What happens if a recipient should not have received a badge?

Badges can be revoked by the issuing unit at any time. A revoked badge will no longer display as valid when clicked.

How do we know if our badges are being used?

Credly provides an analytics dashboard showing badge claim rates, sharing rates, platform destinations, and employer views.

Does a badge expire?

Expiration is optional and set on a badge-by-badge basis. Time-sensitive credentials (e.g., safety compliance) may be set to expire; foundational or degree-level achievements typically do not. You specify expiration policy during the badge application process.

What language should we use to describe our micro-credential program to learners?

See Section 1 for the audience-specific definition table. For learner-facing marketing, emphasize practical skills, flexibility, and the career advancement value of earning a credential with less time and financial commitment than a degree.

10. Sources & Further Reading

The following sources informed the development of this document and are recommended for departments seeking a deeper context.

Source	Description
Coursera (2026)	Micro-Credentials Report 2026. Survey of 3,500+ higher education leaders, employers, and students worldwide. coursera.org
Everhart, D. & Ganzglass, E. (2016)	Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials. American Council on Education (ACE). acenet.edu
IMS Global Learning Consortium (2023)	Open Badges v2.1 Final Release. The open standard for digital badge portability and verification. imglobal.org
University Business (2026, June 12)	Can micro-credentials drive new demand for higher education? universitybusiness.com
University of Colorado Boulder (2025)	What Are Micro-Credentials? Center for Teaching & Learning. colorado.edu/center/teaching-learning
University of Maryland, TLTC (2025)	Digital Badging @ UMD. Teaching and Learning Transformation Center. tltc.umd.edu/about-us/digital-badging-umd
Oregon State University	Micro-Credentials program description. Ecampus oregonstate.edu
NEA (National Education Association)	What's a Micro-Credential? Micro-credential framework and definition. nea.org
UPCEA & Modern Campus (2023)	State of Continuing Education 2023. moderncampus.com
Strada Education (2021)	Examining the Value of Nondegree Credentials. stradaeducation.org
AACRAO (2022)	Alternative Credentials: Considerations, Guidance and Best Practices. aacrao.org

Credly	Digital badge platform documentation and issuer resources. credly.com
Cumberland et al. (2023)	Research on micro-credentials and granular competency views https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-06-2022-0067
Workcred & UTS (2023)	Research on micro-credentials creating credentialing pathways https://workcred.org/Our-Work/Creating-Credentialing-Pathways.aspx