



What is it?

A microcredential—often called a digital badge—is a formal, digital form of documentation that a person has earned some kind of achievement. Because “open” microcredentials are created and stored on a digital platform that conforms to widely recognized standards, it is very difficult to fake the issuance of a microcredential. And because their authenticity is guaranteed, no matter where they reside, anyone who might be interested in seeing what microcredentials a person’s earned—such as a prospective employer or graduate school—can see them directly, without having to, for example, make a request to a college registrar or former employer.

A microcredential can be issued to recognize something as simple as attendance at a conference or workshop, or as complex as learning a programming language.

How do they work?

One system that can support microcredentials is Moodle, so let’s see how it would work there. An instructor could devise a series of criteria necessary for earning a badge and then create activities within a Moodle site where the accomplishment of those criteria can be documented. That documentation could be made automatically, by passing an online quiz or clicking on a document, or manually, where the instructor would check off a box after a student submitted an assignment. When all of the required criteria had been met, the badge would automatically be awarded to the student, who could see it on their Moodle profile page. If they wanted, they could create an account on the Mozilla Backpack platform and display the badge there, for others to see. From there (and after jumping through a few hoops), they could display it on other platforms, such as their LinkedIn profile page.

How are they being used in higher education?

Typically, microcredentialing is used in colleges and universities to document a student’s mastery of some skills that are either outside of, or a component of their coursework. Students can then refer prospective employers or others to those credentials. Microcredentials have been awarded for information literacy and for volunteering. In each case, the microcredential can be considered to be verified in a more robust way than a mere mention in a résumé.

MIT awards microcredentials as evidence of having completed online courses. A Purdue graduate program offers them for the completion of summer mini-courses on software such as Adobe Premiere, Evernote and Poll Everywhere. Harvey Mudd College has created a badge for participation in each of its scientific computing workshops, and a badge for completing the whole series.

But microcredentialing isn’t just for students. At Texas Wesleyan, it’s used to document a faculty member’s participation in faculty development programs. It could also be used with non-academic staff, to document skills related to job advancement.

How are they being used at Vassar?

Our first foray into microcredentials was not an academic one, but illustrates the range of uses that they can have. In 2017, ACS worked with the Office of Residential Life to create a system for credentialing students who were authorized to host parties in residence halls. The criteria are simple: a student goes to the Moodle site, reads the policy documents and takes an online quiz. Instantly upon passing the quiz, they're awarded the Party Host badge. Thereafter, whenever that student applies to host a party, Residence Life staff can easily check to see if they have been credentialled.

In spring 2019, ACS is working with Prof. Abby Gunnels to create microcredentials associated with her Video Art course. In order to earn a badge for video editing, her students must meet 3 criteria: submit evidence of having received relevant training, e.g. in the course or in a workshop; pass an online (automatically graded) quiz; submit evidence of having incorporated the skills learned into an academic project or assignment.

How else could they be used at Vassar?

By comparison, a college degree might be considered a “*macrocredential*.” When issued by a respected, accredited institution, the degree implies a range of skills and traits attributed to a graduate. Graduate school admissions officers and prospective employers have general impressions of what it means to be a Vassar College graduate. Something further can be conveyed by the student’s major(s), correlates, GPA and transcript. If the institution also awarded microcredentials for specific skills and accomplishments, that reviewer wouldn’t have to infer a student’s skills from the diploma or transcript, because they would be explicitly stated.

Much of the focus on microcredentials in higher education is on how they could help a student after graduating. But perhaps they could be useful before that. Are there courses that include specific, demonstrable skills among their prerequisites, such as lab operations or proper research citation? Could digital badges be used to meet the prerequisites? Maybe one or more microcredential could be required in order to complete a particular course.

How can I get started using microcredentials?

If you’d like to explore the use of microcredentialing in your work, think about the criteria that might be required and what evidence would be suitable to demonstrate the required skills or accomplishments. Then reach out to ACS at acs@vassar.edu and we’ll work with you to develop a badge.

