Micro-Credentials and Faculty Professional Development: Stories from the Field

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Abstract

Professional development is always a relevant topic in academic research and professional circles. Even though it can present a strain on faculty, it truly is the primary mechanism for maintaining professional currency. Over the last 10 years and with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, micro-credentials (MC) have surfaced as a potential solution to many of the problems time-based professional development activities create, while providing faculty the autonomy to choose a focus for their PD that is both self-directed and competency-based. The authors of parts one and two of this opinion piece explore their work with MCs as a form of meeting PD requirements and offer advice to potential adopters on the utility of MCs for community college faculty.

Keywords: micro-credentials (MC), faculty professional development (PD), self-directed learning (SDL)

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Over the last 20 years, institutions have placed an incumbent, but necessary, burden on their faculty to maintain currency as educators through documented professional development (PD) activities (Watts & Hammons, 2002). These activities typically fall within one of two categories: conference attendance and credential attainment. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the traditional mechanisms by which faculty could engage with these activities, forcing many educators and administrators to explore new, often uncomfortable,

changes. Professional conferences have been transitioned to a hybrid or entirely virtual format. Further, given the complications involved with inviting guest speakers to visit during a pandemic, colleges have struggled to provide access to on-site training and have needed to find new, creative ways to implement PD practices (Eddy et al., 2021). In light of the difficult PD landscape facing faculty, staff, and administrators, we believe these challenges have created an opportunity to take advantage of a system seemingly built for the pandemic era: micro-credentials (MC).

For the uninitiated, micro-credentials are accessible chunks of training content that require the participant to show competency in a particular subject, with an assessor who scores tangible evidence of that competency. Authors of MCs include nonprofit institutions, grant funded agencies, and corporations that specialize in educational research. Although not part of mainstream PD at the community college level, we believe that current events are providing a fantastic opportunity to supplant time-based, mandatory PD with competency-based alternatives that allow faculty to self-direct their path through a curriculum that best fits the needs of their classroom and their students.

My Micro-Credential Journey, Part One (Tyrel Winebarger)

Anecdotally, it seems to be human nature that we are tempted by any opportunity to "phone it in," even when we know and understand why it is important to put forth our best effort toward an endeavor. I have experienced this in my professional

career at conferences that, in spite of providing fantastic opportunities to learn, grow, and improve my abilities in the classroom, also provide the opportunity to simply sit back, listen, enjoy the free food, and not take anything meaningful back to my classroom or to my colleagues. Self-directed learning in the form of micro-credentials removes this temptation entirely and, although I don't get to travel to faraway places, evidence suggests that teacher-directed PD will make the most impact in my instruction (Knight, 2011). Being able to choose my PD topics allows me to use my experiences with students to inform my training in the most effective way, along with providing evidence to my administrators that I have actually gained a skill that can be implemented in my job. Furthermore, self-directed PD is more conducive for successful engagement with professional learning communities within my institution, a critical strategy when attempting to improve the teaching quality across a local community (Stewart, 2014).

This past February, I completed a micro-credential titled Understanding Types of Poverty, with the goal of exploring different forms of poverty and identifying the most prevalent types of poverty amongst students in my classroom. Analysis of the available data suggests that the high cost of living in my area is an extreme burden on students who support themselves, and this type of poverty is known as *relative poverty*. Compared to surrounding areas, my students are more likely to work longer hours, face more detrimental levels of stress, and be less likely to persevere through the challenges of their education due to their financial situation.

This exercise helped to inform me of the challenges that students face outside of the normal classroom experience, and it created an impetus to implement changes in my classes to help alleviate financial burdens. As part of the evidence of my understanding, I was required to discuss my findings with colleagues and administrators, which culminated in an initiative to adopt open-source textbooks and software. For many years, I have felt that vendors of school resources like these have been predatory in their pursuit of profits by overcharging students for limited access to a generic product, so I was elated by the opportunity to abandon these textbook and software publishers in favor of cheaper, but equally effective, alternatives.

As a result of completing this MC, I was award-ed a certificate of completion that I can now share with my administrators as evidence of competency. This was by far the best experience I have had with professional development, and I plan to continue honing my skills through self-directed, competency-based micro-credentials.

My Micro-Credential Journey, Part Two (Caleb Marsh)

The leadership career trajectory can make anyone feel overwhelmed, and my experience was no different. I recently took a position as a director for a center for academic excellence charged with, among other things, leadership of the center and overseeing all academic coaching efforts. Although I had experienced aspects of both in my career, it proved challenging. Recognizing this, I chose to apply my required 30 hours of professional development in areas related to coaching in the digital age and managing change. Below are some thoughts regarding the role of MCs in this journey and my motivations to engage with this form of professional development.

I first found a micro-credential facilitated by the NC State Friday Institute titled Coaching in the Digital Age. The ultimate goal of this MC was to provide evidence of competency in the form of a coaching action plan that addressed how I would use my new skills in coaching others. The content ranged from coaching capacities, the difference between setting goals and setting big hairy audacious goals (BHAG), coaching conversations, self-reflection, the TPAK (technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge) model, partnering with faculty, and digital citizenship. I found this information to be critical to my work over the coming months and was able to use the final coaching action plan as a blueprint for my coaching practice.

My second MC was offered through Digital Promise and was titled Change Management. This MC did not require as much of a commitment of time, but it was just as fulfilling. Through this MC, I learned about the Knoster model for change management and studied the Kubler-Ross model for managing change. This MC allowed me to step back from any potential organizational change and to carefully plot a pathway to successful implementation while anticipating reactions from those experiencing the change. I showed competency for this

MC by submitting evidence of my application of this knowledge to a situation I was currently navigating.

In all, I have completed seven MCs in the last two academic years. My experience with this form of professional development has made me a better coach and leader. Although the time commitment was challenging, it was manageable within my schedule since I had the ability to work at my own pace. I would emphatically recommend both MCs as a great way to direct one's own learning while maintaining currency as a working professional.

Authors' Note

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